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# Existential Quest and Artistic Possibility in Tolstoi's *The Cossacks*

ANDREW D. KAUFMAN

'I am convinced that art represents the highest task and truly metaphysical activity of this life.' Nietzsche<sup>1</sup>

WHEN Tolstoi published *The Cossacks* in 1852, both the Caucasus as a geographical region and the Cossacks as a cultural community had already become significantly marked themes in nineteenth-century Russian literature. The Caucasus was a favourite venue for Romantic writers to celebrate their love of exotic cultures and places, and to revel in their fascination with the fresh, expansive nature of the south, which was often contrasted with the constriction of civilized culture of the northern Russian cities. Among the earliest and most famous of the works of Russian literature dealing with this theme were Pushkin's narrative poem, 'The Gypsies', published in 1824, and Lermontov's narrative poem, 'Izmail-Bey', completed in 1832.<sup>2</sup> Both of these works, as well as Tolstoi's personal experiences as a soldier in the Caucasus,

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Preface to Richard Wagner', quoted in Walter Kaufmann (ed.), *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, New York, 1992, p. 31.

<sup>2</sup> Many excellent works of Slavic scholarship have been devoted to the issue of Russian Orientalism. See, for instance, Harsha Ram, 'Russian Poetry and the Imperial Sublime', in Monika Greenleaf and Stephen Moeller-Sally (eds), *Russian Subjects: Empire, Nation, and the Culture of the Golden Age*, Evanston, IL, 1998, pp. 21–49; Susan Layton, *Russian Literature and Empire: Conquest of the Caucasus from Pushkin to Tolstoy*, Cambridge, 1994 (hereafter, *Russian Literature and Empire*); Katya Hokanson, 'Empire of the Imagination: Orientalism and the Construction of Russian National Identity in Pushkin, Bestuzhev-Marlinsky, Lermontov, and Tolstoy', doctoral dissertation, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, 1994 (hereafter, 'Empire of the Imagination'); and Monika Greenleaf, 'The Foreign Fountain: Self as Other in the Oriental Poem', in eadem, *Pushkin and Romantic Fashion: Fragment, Elegy, Orient, Irony*, Stanford, CA, 1994, pp. 108–55.

were influential in the writer's creation of *The Cossacks*.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the myth of the vital, free Cossacks was firmly established in the Russian cultural imagination in the writings of Pushkin and Gogol' before Tolstoi entered literature in the 1850s. Judith Kornblatt has shown how the Cossack myth was a way for Russian writers to express their ideas on subjects as wide-ranging as social equality, political and artistic freedom, and Russian national identity.<sup>4</sup>

In spite of its subtitle, *Kavkazskaia povest'* ('A Caucasian Tale'), Tolstoi's *Kazaki* is a different sort of Caucasian tale from the one with which Tolstoi's readers would have been familiar. It represents in many ways a debunking of the Romantic treatment of the Caucasus in Russian literature, as scholars have often noted. Susan Layton, for instance, reads the novel as an illustration of the problems of cross-cultural communication and as Tolstoi's response to his Romantic predecessors.<sup>5</sup> Katya Hokanson reads the novel as a *Bildungsroman*, in which Olenin comes 'face to face not with the Caucasus or the Cossacks or the Chechen *abreks*, but with himself — with himself as other, with the other as himself'.<sup>6</sup> Hokanson's insights have contributed to my thinking about the psychological aspects of Olenin's experience of the Caucasus. The arguments of Layton and Hokanson have their partial roots in a critical paradigm first offered by Boris Eikhenbaum, who argued that Tolstoi's intention in *The Cossacks*, as well as in his other early Caucasian tales, was to debunk the tradition of literary Romanticism in Russian *belles lettres*.<sup>7</sup> While Layton and Hokanson concentrate on the literary Caucasus as a cultural construct, Eikhenbaum is more interested in the question of poetics. He writes: 'Tolstoi follows in the footsteps of the Romantics with the conscious intention of thoroughly destroying their poetics. He happens to be in the Caucasus for the

<sup>3</sup> Tolstoi's initial work on the novel took place at a time when he was fascinated by the romantic image of the Caucasus as a land of freedom and poetic inspiration. In 1854 Tolstoi reflected on his personal experience in the Caucasus in light of his reading of Lermontov's 'Izmail-Bey' and thoughts about Pushkin's 'The Gypsies': 'I found the beginning of "Izmail-Bey" very good. Perhaps it seemed all the more so to me because I'm beginning to love the Caucasus with a deep, though posthumous love. That wild region in which two such completely opposite things as war and freedom are so strangely and poetically blended is really fine. In Pushkin I was struck by "The Gypsies", which, strangely enough, I hadn't understood till now.' *L. N. Tolstoi, Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 90-kh tomakh*, in *Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury*, Moscow, 1960–65, vol. 47, p. 10. Translation mine. Unless otherwise stated, all translations of Tolstoi's extra-literary writings are my own.

<sup>4</sup> Judith Kornblatt, *The Cossack Hero in Russian Literature: A Study in Cultural Mythology*, Madison, WI, 1992 (hereafter, *The Cossack Hero in Russian Literature*).

<sup>5</sup> Susan Layton, 'Revolt Against Romanticism', in *Russian Literature and Empire*, pp. 233–51.

<sup>6</sup> 'Tolstoi's *The Cossacks*: Back to the Natives', in Hokanson, 'Empire of the Imagination', p. 246.

<sup>7</sup> Boris Eikhenbaum, *The Young Tolstoy*, ed. Gary Kern, Ann Arbor, MI, 1972.

apparent purpose of confronting Marlinsky and Lermontov, exposing their "untruth and liquidating the romantic contrivance".<sup>8</sup>

There also has been a growing body of research which recognizes within Tolstoi an unresolved tension between an attempt to debunk the Romantic myth of the Caucasus and an equally strong tendency to participate in that myth. Carol Anschuetz writes, 'When Tolstoi parodies the romantic situation of the European among savages, he merely disguises his ideological affinity, if not for the individual romantics he parodies, at least for the myth of exile to which the traditional romantic situation corresponds'.<sup>9</sup> Judith Kornblatt maintains that 'Tolstoi uses irony only to question, not to discard, the myth [of the wild Cossacks]. Eroshka is vital to Olenin's spiritual development in the story; only through the Cossack and the world he claims to represent can Olenin glimpse the richness of life'.<sup>10</sup> One scholar, Anthony Anemone, shows persuasively that the mystification versus demystification problematic in the novel has been accepted, implicitly or explicitly, by most major Western scholars of the work.<sup>11</sup> Anemone intriguingly suggests that *The Cossacks* artistically attempts to transcend the mystification versus demystification paradigm altogether:

The contradictory presentation of Rousseauian motifs in *The Cossacks* should not be seen either as the sign of the author's artistic or philosophical immaturity, or of the unresolved struggle in Tolstoi's early works between Romanticism and Realism. Rather, it should be read as Tolstoi's heroic attempt to think through, and even to transcend, the limitations of the philosophical and linguistic culture into which he was born.<sup>12</sup>

Like the interpretations of Anschuetz, Kornblatt and Anemone, the reading offered here emphasizes Tolstoi's tendency both to debunk and participate in the myth of the Caucasus. The article attempts to show that, like Rabelais, whose use of the grotesque and carnivalesque served the purpose of a spiritual and artistic renewal, Tolstoi deforms certain thematic and linguistic aspects of the literary Caucasus in order to resurrect that region for his readers and inject into it fresh artistic vigour.<sup>13</sup> Tolstoi's 're-writing' of the Russian Caucasian tale, then, does not lie merely in the writer's demystification of his hero's Romanticized perceptions of the region. Tolstoi's uniqueness also lies in the way in

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>9</sup> Carol Anschuetz, 'The Young Tolstoy and Rousseau's Discourse on Inequality', *The Russian Review*, 39, 1980, 4, pp. 401-25.

<sup>10</sup> Kornblatt, *The Cossack Hero in Russian Literature*, p. 95.

<sup>11</sup> Anthony Anemone, 'Gender, Genre, and the Discourse of Imperialism in Tolstoy's *The Cossacks*', *Tolstoy Studies Journal*, 6, 1993, pp. 47-63.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>13</sup> The concept of artistic renewal arising out of the celebration of the carnivalesque aspects of life is a paradigm taken from Bakhtin's classic study of Rabelais. See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helen Iswolsky, Bloomington, IN, 1998.

which the author penetrates his hero's inner world, and shows how that world is filled with idealistic strivings and philosophical contradictions.

This extension of the theme of civilized man in search of a primitive ideal to the realm of philosophical reflection and psychological realism has its roots in Russian literature in Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time*, a work that Tolstoi said had a 'very big influence' on him when he was young.<sup>14</sup> Tolstoi's Olenin, however, tends to be more intent on his search for truth and moral goodness than Lermontov's Pechorin.<sup>15</sup> This is one of Tolstoi's important contributions to the tradition of the literary Caucasus in Russian literature. In its artistic exploration of the universal philosophical problems of truth, morality, and existential meaning, Tolstoi's novel becomes a rich universe of artistic thought.<sup>16</sup>

The artistic richness of the work lies partly in its capacity to combine two contradictory philosophical attitudes towards life in a single creative vision. These opposing attitudes are Tolstoi's unflinching sense of the immutable, objective nature of things, on the one hand, and his awareness of the possibility of human subjectivity and creative self-expression, on the other.<sup>17</sup> Tolstoi does not claim primacy for one or

<sup>14</sup> N. N. Gusev, *Letopis' zhizni i tvorchestva L'va Nikolaevicha Tolstogo, 1828–1890*, in *Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury*, Moscow, 1958, p. 34.

<sup>15</sup> Boris Eikhenbaum traces the character of Olenin to a social type prevalent in Russia in the 1850s during the reign of Nicholas I. This type was not yet in existence in the 1830s, when Lermontov published his novel. See Boris Eikhenbaum, 'L. Tolstoi na Kavkaze (1851–1853)', *Russkaia literature*, 4, 1962, pp. 48–76.

<sup>16</sup> Donna Orwin's work on Tolstoi has demonstrated just how deep and rich is Tolstoi's thinking in his fiction. See Donna Tussing Orwin, *Tolstoy's Art and Thought, 1847–1880*, Princeton, NJ, 1993. Sergei Bocharov's work on *War and Peace* is an example of how that depth and richness may be explored through a close analysis of the 'endless labyrinth of interlinkages' in Tolstoi's fiction. My approach to *The Cossacks* has been inspired, in part, by Bocharov's model. See Sergei Bocharov, *Roman L. N. Tolstogo 'Voina i Mir'*, in *Khudozhestvennaia literatura*, Moscow, 1987.

<sup>17</sup> Both the twentieth-century Russian literary scholar and linguist, Mikhail Bakhtin, and the nineteenth-century Russian existentialist philosopher, Lev Shestov, seem to have misunderstood this paradoxical aspect of Tolstoi's artistic universe. Focusing on Tolstoi's poetics, Bakhtin argues that the essence of Tolstoi's poetics is 'monologism', which implies a totalizing authorial perspective on the world: 'A second autonomous voice (alongside the author's voice) does not appear in Tolstoi's world. For that reason, there is no problem of linking voices, and no problem of a special positioning for the author's point of view. Tolstoi's discourse and his monologically naive point of view permeate everywhere, into all the corners of the world and the soul, subjugating everything to its unity.' Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson, Minneapolis, 1984, p. 56.

In fact, there is a substantial amount of dialogue between the narrator and his hero in *The Cossacks*. This dialogic relationship serves the purpose of 'opening' up the artistic universe in the novel, allowing for a playful interaction between narrator and hero. This is precisely the sort of relationship that Bakhtin sees as the essence of Dostoevskii's art but absent in Tolstoi's. About Tolstoi, this article shows, Bakhtin is not entirely correct. Lev Shestov also mistakenly sees in Tolstoi's art a purely deterministic universe. Discussing Tolstoi from a philosophical point of view, Shestov argues that the writer does not sympathize with his characters in the way that Zola, Turgenev and Dickens do. Readers, therefore, 'reproach him for his coldness, insensitivity, and hardness [. . .] To many readers this attitude appears so incomprehensible and revolting that they are even inclined to deny

the other of these two realms in the novel. Instead, he combines both realms, the objective and the subjective, into a synthetic artistic vision that unites these opposing poles of human experience. Objective reality *and* personal creative vision interact in the work. Tolstoi's first novel may be philosophically ambivalent, but artistically its worldview achieves metaphysical completeness.<sup>18</sup> These philosophical and artistic strivings are most subtly communicated through the poetic fabric of the text itself. For this reason the chosen method of analysis is a close reading of seven key passages: the novel's opening and close, Olenin's departure from Moscow, his discovery of the mountains, Lukashka in the cordon, Olenin in the stag's lair, and the battle scene. Taken separately, each of these scenes reveals a different aspect of Olenin's search for identity and meaning. Taken together, they point to a progression within the work as a whole towards an ever more unified aesthetic and philosophical vision of life.<sup>19</sup>

### *The novel's opening and its close*

Beginning with the novel's opening words, 'Vse zatikhlo v Moskve' ('All has become silent in Moscow'), the narrator takes the reader from the quiet streets of Moscow inside Chevalier's restaurant, into a single room in that restaurant, and finally into the turbulent inner world of one of that room's inhabitants. "I don't want to defend myself", Olenin says to his two acquaintances, "but I should like you at least to understand me as I understand myself, and not look at the matter superficially" (4, 86).<sup>20</sup> Olenin goes on attempting to justify himself, but the reader begins to get the sense that what was supposed to be a conversation between Olenin and his colleagues is, in fact, an internal debate within Olenin himself: "But why shouldn't the man love too? . . . Why shouldn't one love? Because love doesn't come . . . No, to be

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Tolstoy's genius [. . .] And, from their point of view, these readers are only too right [because] Tolstoy, who manifests no humane feelings, frightens such people'. Lev Shestov, 'The Good in the Teaching of Tolstoy and Nietzsche: Philosophy and Preaching', in idem, *Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Nietzsche*, trans. Bernard Martin, Athens, OH, 1969, pp. 20–21.

Contrary to Shestov's interpretation of Tolstoi's art, this article argues that in *The Cossacks* the spirit of philosophical determinism co-exists with a sense of artistic play and a recognition of the possibility for positive moral choice in the world.

<sup>18</sup> Jeff Love recently has made a similar point about *War and Peace*: 'Narrative triumphs over exclusively rational discourse because narrative combines the warring elements of contradiction in a new, synthetic whole.' Idem, 'The End of Knowing in *War and Peace*', *Tolstoy Studies Journal*, 15, 2003, p. 46.

<sup>19</sup> This Tolstoian quest for a higher aesthetic experience and unified philosophical vision is discussed in an excellent article by Gina Kovarsky: 'Musical Metapoiesis and Metaphysics in *War and Peace*', *Tolstoy Studies Journal*, 12, 2000, pp. 18–33.

<sup>20</sup> Henceforth, the first number refers to the page in *L. N. Tolstoi, Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 90-kh tomakh*, Moscow, 1960–65, vol. 6, which is the volume containing *The Cossacks (Kazaki)*. The second page number refers to the English translation in Leo Tolstoy, *Great Short Works of Leo Tolstoy*, trans. Louise and Aylmer Maude, New York, 1967. My quotations are based on the Maude translation, with some amendments.

loved is a misfortune.”’ A moment later, admitting that he deceived himself about being in love, Olenin asks himself: “‘Am I to blame for my inability? What was I to do?’” (4, 86). One of his acquaintances gives a perfunctory response, while ‘lighting a cigar to master his sleepiness’ (4, 86). Olenin continues aloud: “‘Ah well! What’s the use of talking? I’ve made an awful mess of life! But anyhow it’s all over now; you are quite right. And I feel that I am beginning a new life.’” To which his second acquaintance responds, while playing absent-mindedly with his watch-key: “‘Which you will again make a mess of’” (5, 87). By the novel’s end the reader realizes that the words ‘which you will again make a mess of’ do contain at least as much truth about Olenin’s fate as the hero’s own stated promise of self-renewal.

Olenin thus becomes the object of irony on the part of both his interlocutors and the narrator, at the very moment when he most wishes to be taken seriously. There is a touch of artistic cruelty in this, but there is an equally strong sense of artistic liberation. The irony affords a degree of playfulness and comic relief at the same time that the novel begins to reveal a weightier, more tragic truth about the hero’s life: that in his attempts to transform himself, Olenin will confront again and again the stubborn fact that his human nature is just as powerful a force as his human will.<sup>21</sup> The truth the novel communicates lies neither in Olenin’s idealism nor in the cynicism of his acquaintances, but somewhere in between, in a realm in which idealism and realism co-exist in creative tension.

The complex implications of Tolstoi’s use of irony in the novel were often misunderstood by contemporary critics who attacked the novel for its rejection of civilization and celebration of the savage state. In an 1863 article in *The Contemporary* (*Sovremennik*), which accused Tolstoi of ‘lighting the fuse and singing the praise of the savage Cossack’, the reviewer said about Tolstoi’s representation of Olenin:

When we first become acquainted with Olenin it appears that the author was about to regard his hero ironically, that he would even be somewhat scornful toward his naïveté and extreme emptiness, and that in the end he would lay bare the falseness of his thinking and the silly confusion of his feelings. But as soon as the incessant exclamations began about the beauty and grandeur of Nature and of primeval woman, and as soon as intimate

<sup>21</sup> Soviet criticism of the novel emphasized this point, although in a Marxist context. According to such readings of the novel, Olenin is an example of an ‘unenlightened’ Rousseauan idealist, who does not understand that he cannot change his character by an act of personal will, since his character is necessarily determined by his class and the economic forces of his age. See, for example, L. D. Opulskaja, ‘Povest’ L. N. Tolstogo *Kazaki*, in *L. N. Tolstoi, Kazaki*, Moscow, 1963, pp. 341–51.

themes developed, we guessed that the author was taking his hero seriously.<sup>22</sup>

The reviewer is, of course, disappointed in the direction the novel takes after the initial ironic treatment of Olenin. His position is consistent with one of the reigning ideological trends in Russia at the time: a preference for socially progressive values over aspirations to return to the simpler ethos of the Rousseauian natural man. Although Tolstoi may have set out initially to celebrate the ideal of natural man in the novel, the final work transcends that original ideological conception. The Russian critic seems to have read the novel largely in the context of the heated political debates of his time rather than as a complex work of art full of internal contradictions.

Tolstoi's subtle manipulation of the narrative voice thus reveals something of the author's own philosophical stance towards the hero. While he holds up Olenin for good-humoured laughs, Tolstoi also views Olenin's efforts at self-transformation as noble and courageous. Tolstoi does, in the end, make value judgments, and he prefers the exuberant, pro-active Olenin to his lifeless, world-weary acquaintances. One of the ways Tolstoi shows this is in the way his narrator subtly distinguishes Olenin's character from that of his acquaintances by associating Olenin with an old woman who, in the novel's opening paragraphs, is entering a church, and with workmen, who are off to their labours. Like the old woman and the workmen, Olenin is on his way somewhere, literally and figuratively. Olenin's conscience is alive in the moral-spiritual sense (which links him metaphorically to the church-bound woman) and in the sphere of social conscience (which associates him obliquely with the labourers). Olenin's acquaintances, on the other hand, are on their way nowhere. Their physical stasis is mirrored internally by their moral-spiritual stupor and by their lack of any of the pangs of social conscience, which Olenin possesses in abundance in the novel. Tolstoi knows that Olenin's self-contented acquaintances may be wiser than the hero in the ways of the world, but he also shows that they lack Olenin's sensitive and soaring inner life. That rich inner life is what makes Olenin intriguing, perplexing, and often attractive to those who encounter him. His powerful internal vibrancy gives him a certain heroic grandeur in the novel, a kind of robust, mythic presence, equal in weight to, if different in spirit from that of the mythically large Cossacks themselves.

The work closes much as it opens, with multiple levels of irony combined with an overarching sense of artistic order. Olenin's avuncular Cossack friend, Daddy Eroshka, filches a gun from Olenin,

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in B. Eikhenbaum, *Tolstoi in the Sixties*, trans. Duffield White, Ann Arbor, MI, 1982, p. 88.



while ‘sobbing quite sincerely’ about his friend’s departure. Vaniusha, Olenin’s lackey and a shrewder judge of character than his master, remarks: ‘“What a lot you’ve given the old fellow . . . he’ll never have enough! A regular old beggar. They are all such superficial people”’ (149, 242). Vaniusha is, of course, in part correct. Eroshka is greedy, and Olenin does not recognize that Eroshka has taken advantage of him. But Vaniusha misses the mark when he generalizes that all the Cossacks are superficial. The text, in fact, shows just the opposite. In their resourceful and improvisational ways, the Cossacks possess a unique depth of their own: the ability to live spontaneously in the moment, unshackled by the weight of moral conscience or self-indulgent intellectual reflections. Tolstoi thus winks ironically at Vaniusha, in the same way that Vaniusha ironizes Olenin in this final scene.

But that closing wink is not all play. In it Tolstoi also communicates something serious and certain about the world. The novel’s final sentences leave the reader with a sense of the unsentimental truth about the objective nature of things: ‘Olenin turned round. Daddy Eroshka was talking to Marianka, evidently about his own affairs, and neither the old man nor the girl looked at Olenin’ (150, 243). The stark simplicity of these words reinforces the immutable truth they contain: that Olenin is, in the end, a passing curiosity for the Cossacks, never a permanent fixture in their world, and that the internally free Cossacks represent, for Olenin, a human ideal he will never fully realize. The Cossack *stanitsa*, which Olenin once believed with sincere conviction to be his true spiritual home, becomes but a stopover on the hero’s never-ending journey to self-discovery. Robert Louis Jackson writes: ‘If one can conclude anything from Olenin’s journey to and from the Caucasus, it is that the artist Tolstoy’s answer to life’s problems lies in no single “revelation”, no single striving, but in the ensemble of “contradictory strivings” of human nature, in the recognition that man is fated by his very nature unceasingly to experience the tension between these strivings and, in the moral realm, unceasingly to strive.’<sup>23</sup>

Tolstoi’s ironic sense of life may be fruitfully contrasted with the ironic worldview, which René Wellek sees as central to the art of the German Romantics. Referring to the writing of Friedrich Schlegel, one of German Romanticism’s great ironic minds, Wellek writes: ‘Irony is his [Schlegel’s] recognition of the fact that the world is in its essence paradoxical and that an ambivalent attitude alone can grasp its contradictory totality.’<sup>24</sup> Tolstoi’s irony, too, stems from an ambivalent

<sup>23</sup> Robert L. Jackson, ‘The Archetypal Journey: Aesthetic and Ethical Imperative in the Art of Tolstoj’, *Russian Literature*, 11, 1982 (hereafter, ‘The Archetypal Journey’), p. 410.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Peter L. Thorslev, Jr., *Romantic Contraries: Freedom versus Destiny*, New Haven, CT, and London, 1984, p. 163.

attitude towards life; Tolstoi, too, strongly senses paradox. But Tolstoi's irony never devolves into mere philosophical relativism or pure textual play. The novel transmutes paradox into creative unity. The work subsumes contradictory philosophical worldviews into a single organizing consciousness, which always reaches for existential clarity and order. Wellek's formulation, while illuminating, is also limiting for an interpretation of Tolstoi's prose. *The Cossacks* represents not only life's 'contradictory totality'. The novel also imparts a higher artistic meaning to that totality.

*Olenin's departure from Moscow*

Tolstoi never permits the reader's sense of life to become ossified in the novel. The author continually teases the reader by creating a world of artistic playfulness and openness, even as he is convinced of the verisimilitude and necessity of the narrated plot line. One of the ways Tolstoi achieves this effect is in the way he creates a dynamic relationship between the narrator's objective view and Olenin's subjective sense of things. An example of this relationship can be seen in the second chapter. Here the narrator is speaking about Olenin:

On leaving Moscow he was in that happy state of mind in which a young man, conscious of past mistakes, suddenly says to himself, that was all not the real thing, that everything that went before was accidental and unimportant, that until then he had not really tried to live, but now with his departure from Moscow a new life was beginning — a life in which there would be no mistakes, no remorse, and certainly nothing but happiness. (8, 91)

A page after this passage, when the reader is told that Olenin was recalling his entry into society, he also learns that Olenin had heard a voice that always whispered: 'That's not it; that's not it' (9, 91). By placing these words so near the passage quoted above, Tolstoi is suggesting a connection between the narrator's description of how youths like Olenin will say that everything is 'not it', *ne to*, and Olenin's actual utterance of these words. The implication here goes deeper than a mere confirmation of the accuracy of the narrator's prediction. Olenin's repetition of the narrator's words is a verbal echo, a recreation, and ultimately an expansion (Olenin repeats *ne to* twice) of the narrator's voice.<sup>25</sup> The rhetorical function of the repetition here, to establish a dynamic relationship between the narrator's and Olenin's voice, therefore exists in tension with its more direct role: to corroborate

<sup>25</sup> I am indebted to the work of Natasha Sankovitch for calling attention to the rhetorical and thematic significance of repetition in Tolstoi. Dr Sankovitch argues that repetition is a rhetorical technique used by Tolstoi to create a sense of the world in which unity and diversity of experience coexist. See Natasha Sankovitch, *Creating and Recovering Experience: Repetition in Tolstoy*, Stanford, CA, 1998.

an already known fact about Olenin's character. A tension exists here between a narrative consciousness that is both superior to Olenin, that knows the hero is deluding himself, and one which exists at the same time in dialogic relationship with Olenin's own consciousness. The closed world of inevitability, whose master is the all-knowing narrator, thus coexists with the open world of creative possibility, embodied in the playful dialogue between narrator and character.

The dialogic quality of the text of the novel mirrors the dialogic quality of Olenin's inner world. One of the techniques frequently used by Tolstoi in the novel to depict his hero's inner world is the technique of 'interior monologue'.<sup>26</sup> An example of this technique can be seen when, just after Olenin muses about the submissive young woman he will meet and educate in the Caucasus, the hero thinks to himself: "Akh, kakoi vzdor!" ("Oh, what nonsense!") The text continues:

But here they reached a post-station and he had to change into another sledge and give some tips. But his fancy again began searching for the 'nonsense' he had relinquished, and again fair Circassians, glory, and his return to Russia with an appointment as aide-de-camp and a lovely wife rose before his imagination. 'But there's no such thing as love', he said to himself. 'Fame is all rubbish. But the six hundred and seventy-eight rubles? . . . And the conquered land that will bring me more wealth than I need for myself. I shall have to distribute it. But to whom? Well, six hundred and seventy-eight rubles to Cappele and then we'll see.' (12, 94)

In this passage Olenin's thoughts begin to gather up, as it were, the stray bits and pieces of his consciousness, which have been posited in various other places throughout the text. The 'lovely wife' refers to the maiden that Olenin had been imagining previously. The reference to the 'conquered land' refers to Olenin's dream of himself as a warrior who will slay the hillmen. The 'six hundred and seventy-eight rubles to Cappele' refers to Olenin's earlier reflections about his debts to Cappele the tailor. And the lines 'But there's no such thing as love' and 'fame is all rubbish' echo the narrator's lines from the previous page:

He had come to the conclusion that there is no such thing as love, yet his heart always overflowed in the presence of any young and attractive woman. He had long been aware *that honors and position were nonsense*, yet involuntarily he felt pleased when at a ball Prince Sergius came up and spoke to him affably. (8, 90) [My emphasis — A.D.K.]

<sup>26</sup> Nicholai Chernyshevskii, in an 1856 article on Tolstoi, was the first critic to use the phrase 'dialektika dushi' ('dialectic of the soul'), to refer to a characteristic aspect of Tolstoi's representation of the inner world of his characters, and 'vnutrennyi monolog' ('interior monologue'), to describe the artistic technique used by Tolstoi to describe that inner world. See N. G. Chernyshevskii, 'Detstvo i otrochestvo. Voennye rasskazy', *L. N. Tolstoi v russkoi kritike*, in *Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury*, Moscow, 1952.

Having been forewarned here by the narrator about Olenin's internal confusion, the reader will recognize Olenin's own quoted words when they appear a few pages later: 'But there's no such thing as love', and 'Fame is all rubbish'. Olenin's words will corroborate what the narrator already told the reader he is thinking. Why, then, would Tolstoi need this added detail; why not simply have either Olenin or the narrator tell the reader? What is going on in this interplay between narrated language and Olenin's speech is similar to the dynamic discussed above between the narrator's *ne to* and Olenin's *ne to, ne to*. Olenin's speech does not merely repeat the narrated speech, it also alters and expands on the narrator's voice both by removing it from the realm of omniscient third-person, and by shifting around the syntax and original meaning of the narrated speech. Olenin's words are, therefore, not an exact repetition. They are more like an echo, an oblique reference. Olenin's words subsume the narrated text into a new subjective consciousness, Olenin's consciousness, in which the narrator's language and Olenin's prior words are synthesized in a fresh context. The overall feeling for the reader is one of *déjà vu*, a sense that he has heard these words before, but not in quite the same way. The reader has the feeling when he reads this text that he is in an artistic world that, like Olenin's own inner world, is richly vibrant, continually expanding, constantly destabilizing and recreating itself anew.

*Olenin discovers the mountains*

Most readers of the novel agree that Tolstoi demystifies Olenin's romantic illusions about the Caucasus by showing that the reality of the region does not square with Olenin's imagination of what he will find there. But it is not explained how the image of the Caucasus acquires such poetic force in *The Cossacks*. Tolstoi demonstrates that there is indeed something grand and romantic about the Caucasus. That grandness, however, is shown to lie not in dreamy abstractions. The poetry of the Caucasus is shown to be a poetry of the concrete, ever-changing specificity of the natural surroundings and of each individual person living in those surroundings. Tolstoi thus demystifies the poetry of romantic abstraction and replaces it with the uniquely Tolstoian poetry of the ungeneralized and the specific. For Olenin, the poetic quality of the region is often associated with abstract images that he has taken from the popular literature about the Caucasus widespread in his day: 'All his dreams of the future were mingled with pictures of Amalat-Beks, Circassian women, mountains, precipices, terrible torrents, and perils. All these things were vague and dim, but the love of fame and the danger of death furnished the interest of that future' (11, 94). Tolstoi's narrator emphasizes that these images are 'vague and dim' ('smutno, neiasno'), not only in order to contrast them with the author's

own more concrete rendition of the Caucasus, but also to contrast them with Olenin's state of mind when he begins to recall specific details from his past:

As soon as he pictured anything definite, familiar Moscow figures always appeared on the scene. Sashka B fights with the Russians or the hillsmen against him. Even the tailor Cappele [to whom Olenin owes a debt of 678 rubles] in some strange way takes part in the conqueror's triumph. If amid these he remembered his former humiliations, weaknesses, and mistakes, then these recollections were not disagreeable. It was clear that there among the mountains, waterfalls, fair Circassians, and dangers, such mistakes could not recur. (11, 94)

Thus, the future is associated in Olenin's mind with the abstract, the general, and the ideal; the past with the concrete, the specific, and the real. The narrator shows that Olenin's desire to escape his past is also a desire to replace that which is real and specific in his life with the vague possibilities associated with an unknown future. By the end of the novel Olenin will recognize that this vaguely ideal future he had once imagined for himself is replete with the same imperfections as the past he had wished to overcome. But even then, even after Olenin's disillusionment, the hero does not fully discover the higher truth offered by the novel. Olenin ultimately gives up his search for that elusive 'it' as hopeless chimera, but the novel shows that 'it' is not entirely an illusion never to be realized, but that it exists precisely in the concrete and specific realities of the world that surrounds him, not in general and abstract musings.

This, among other things, is what the reader is intended to see in the scene in which Olenin first encounters the Caucasian mountains. When Olenin expects to see the mountains as he had imagined them based on stories told by others, he fails to appreciate them:

He could find nothing beautiful in the mountains of which he had so often read and heard. The mountains and the clouds appeared to him quite alike, and he thought the special beauty of the snow peaks, of which he had so often been told, was as much an invention as Bach's music and the love of women in which he did not believe. So he gave up looking forward to seeing the mountains. (13, 96)

The first time Olenin sees the mountains, he expects something of them. He expects them to correspond to a mental image of Caucasian mountains that the hero has gleaned from the stories told by others, stories which are themselves influenced by previous literary sources. When Olenin gives up his mental expectations, the mountains come to him, as it were. They present themselves to him in all their surprising and beautiful specificity. Olenin 'suddenly' sees 'pure white gigantic masses with delicate contours, the distinct fantastic outlines of their summits showing sharply against the far-off sky' (13, 96). Significantly,

the narrator does not use the word 'mountains' here to name what Olenin sees. Instead, the reader, like Olenin, is shown the highly specific features that make up the mountains: 'delicate contours', 'distinct fantastic outlines', 'summits showing sharply'. By referring to the mountains by means of synecdoche, Tolstoi thus makes a distinction between the mountains as they are experienced by a fresh, unexpecting eye — that is, in the specific features that make them up — and the generalized concept of 'mountains', which existed in Olenin's mind as a pre-fabricated and abstract mental construct the first time he encountered them on the previous day.

If the mountain scene in the novel were to end here, then it might be said that the originality of the scene *vis-à-vis* earlier works about the Caucasus in Russian literature lies in its debunking of the abstract and romanticized notions of the natural beauty of the region that come from those works, and which fill Olenin's head. But Tolstoi both demystifies and remystifies at the same time the literary myth of the Caucasus in *The Cossacks*. In accordance with this overall pattern in the novel, no sooner do the old myths about the Caucasus begin to fade in Olenin's mind than they begin to be replaced by a new one. This one, though, is not given to the hero from external sources; it is created from within. Olenin's earlier dreams about the natural beauty of the Caucasus, based exclusively on the images given to him by others, is now being replaced by a new dream, one that is a deeply personal response to the concrete facts before his eyes.

This newly discovered truth about the region gets subsumed by the hero into a fresh personal mythology. When Olenin discovers what is before him, the mountains begin to serve as a stimulus for a newly vitalized perception of the world:

From that moment all he saw, all he thought, and all he felt, acquired for him a new character, sternly majestic like the mountains! All his Moscow reminiscences, shame, and repentance, and his trivial dreams about the Caucasus, vanished and did not return. 'Now it has begun', a solemn voice seemed to say to him. (14, 97)

Olenin subsumes the mountains into his personal worldview by transforming them into a kind of grand new Truth against which the value of everything may be measured anew. Olenin effectively turns the mountains into *his* mountains. They become for him the external manifestation of his expansive, inner self. Everything that takes place in Olenin's inner world — 'all he thought, and all he felt' — now becomes 'majestic like the mountains'. Olenin's inner self and the majestic mountains, with which that self is now associated in his mind, become the centre of the hero's internally created universe. At the centre of that universe is Olenin himself, followed immediately by his

servant, Vaniusha. Hence, the sentence: ‘He looks at himself, at Vaniusha — and again the mountains’ (‘Vzglianet na sebia, na Vaniushu — i opiat’ gory’) (14, 97). Olenin’s act of gazing at himself and then at his servant (and in that order) exists on an even plane with the phenomenon of the mountains themselves.

Beginning in the next sentence, however, the mountains begin to play a different role in the text. The first half of each sentence contains the details of Olenin’s surroundings, relayed to us by the objective narrator. Then there appears the phrase ‘but the mountains’ (*a gory*), followed by an ellipsis. The repeated phrase ‘but the mountains’ bubbles forth as a kind of disembodied presence in the text, existing in opposition to that which comes before it in each sentence:<sup>27</sup>

Two Cossacks ride by, their guns in their white cases swinging rhythmically behind their backs, the white and bay legs of their horses mingling confusedly . . . but the mountains! Beyond the Terek can be seen the smoke from a Tatar village . . . but the mountains! The sun has risen and glitters on the Terek, now visible beyond the reeds . . . but the mountains. From the village comes a Tatar wagon, and women, beautiful young women, pass by . . . but the mountains! (14, 97)

The phrase *a gory* is to be taken as an expression of Olenin’s internal voice, presented to the reader in an interior monologue. That voice comes to us as if from a void. In its use of the contrastive conjunction *a* (‘but’), it poses an implicit challenge to the narrative details that come before it. The mountains, now associated in Olenin’s mind with the mysterious grandness of both the Caucasian landscape and the hero’s own inner self, begin to take over all the other details of Olenin’s surroundings. Olenin’s inner world is beginning to assert itself, subsuming everything external to it into its expansive purview. This process is reinforced in the final sentence of the passage, in which Olenin’s voice effectively merges with and, it might be said, begins to take over, that of the narrator: ‘Abreki ryskaiut v stepi, i ia edu, ikh ne boiut’, u menia ruzhie i sila, a gory . . .’ (‘Abreks canter about the plain, and here *I* am driving along and do not fear them; *I* have a gun, and strength, and youth . . . but the mountains . . .’) [my emphasis — A.D.K.] (14, 97).

Here the reader is given his first glimpse of the emergence of a unique selfhood on the part of the hero. That self emerges as an attenuated interior monologue from within the narrative. The effect of this technique is to enact before the reader the subtle emergence of a

<sup>27</sup> In the Maude translation the ellipsis comes before the phrase ‘*a gory*’ each time, whereas in the original the ellipsis *follows* the repeated phrase. One of *SEER*’s anonymous readers has rightly pointed out that ‘the position of the ellipsis is more effective in the original since it invites the reader to fill in the omission and so draws him into Olenin’s mind and into participating in the narration’.

self that gropes for self-assertion, but which does not yet have anything specific to say. It is a self that is full of youthful vigour and a feeling of endless possibility, but which has not yet discovered an adequate form through which to channel its abundant energies. The mountains, still a large and inchoate presence in Olenin's mind, continue to be for the hero the external manifestation of his expansive, inner self. But in his continued association of his inner world with the external world of nature, Olenin still shows himself lacking in a certain understanding that will come to him only later in the novel, in the scene in which he is alone in the thicket and enters the stag's lair. He still lacks a clear awareness of his particular relationship as a unique, individuated self to the outside natural world. He also lacks the rich creative potential that such a relationship entails.

*Olenin in the stag's lair*

If in the mountain scene Olenin is only just beginning to understand where nature ends and he begins, then in the stag's lair scene this understanding will grow more refined. The stag's lair scene may thus be read as both an echo and an expansion of the mountain scene. Olenin goes from being fully immersed in his natural surroundings to becoming more consciously aware of his distinction from those surroundings. Olenin is finally able to dislodge his sense of himself from all association with the external natural world, and in so doing he begins to achieve an independent, creative vision of his own. It is of intrinsic interest how Tolstoi artistically communicates in the text the subtle process by which Olenin's conscious self begins to assert itself, first as a voice that merges ambiguously with that of the narrator (as in the mountain scene), and then as an actual spoken voice which exists independently of the narrator's. We will trace this process, beginning with the following lines:

Having been covered in the myriad of mosquitoes, Olenin was ready to run away from them and it seemed to him that it was impossible to live in this country in the summer. He was about to go home, but remembering that other people managed to endure such pain, he resolved to bear it and gave himself up to be devoured. And strange to say, by noontime the feeling became actually pleasant. (76, 163)

These lines reveal not merely Hamlet-like doubt in Olenin, but actually an inner world that, in its wavering, is continually moving forward, moving in the direction of some sort of resolution: 'And strange to say, by noontime the feeling became actually pleasant.' The words 'strannoe delo' are not in quotation marks, and yet they seem to belong to Olenin's, and not to the narrator's, consciousness. Olenin's inner experience — the unexpectedness of his movement from discomfort to joy — is externalized and becoming part of the experience of the text



itself. Olenin's consciousness has thus crept to the surface, as it were, and is beginning to exist on an even plane with the narrator's speech.

Two sentences later we read:

These myriads of insects were so well suited to that monstrously lavish wild vegetation, these multitudes of birds and beasts which filled the forest, this dark foliage, this hot scented air, these runlets filled with turbid water which everywhere soaked through from the Terek and gurgled here and there under the overhanging leaves, that very thing which had at first seemed dreadful and intolerable now seemed pleasant. (76, 163)

The length and construction of this sentence is essential to the impression it creates of an emotional experience that is continually intensifying, and of a narrative experience that is moving forward almost with exasperation, as though towards some destination. This impression is created in part by the five-time repetition of the phrase 'to this/these' (*k etoi, k etoi, k etoi, k etomu, k etim*). There is another significant formal aspect to this sentence, in the primary phrase beginning with 'Eti miriady nasekomykh tak shli k etoi dikoi, do bezobraziia bogatoi rastitel'nosti' ('These myriads of insects were so well suited to that monstrously lavish wild vegetation'). This sentence is intended as a continuation of the previous sentence, as an explanation of why Olenin feels the irritation of the mosquitoes is an essential aspect of the entire experience. But is this sentence told from the omniscient narrator's, or from Olenin's point of view? The reader senses ambiguity. The text creates the impression that there is a second consciousness alongside the narrator's, bubbling forth in the text, groping for self-expression.

A few sentences later the reader arrives at the resolution towards which the text has been nudging him. Having discovered the stag's lair, Olenin lies down. 'He felt cool and comfortable and did not think of or wish for anything.' Olenin's complete harmony with his surrounding is suggested by the impersonal construction, 'emu bylo prokhladno, uiutno'. Here Olenin has attained a naive synthesis with the world. No sooner is that synthesis attained than Olenin begins to break it down a few lines later. Olenin's subjective 'I' appears: 'Suddenly, with extraordinary clearness, he thought that here I am, Dmitrii Olenin, a being quite distinct from every other being . . .' Olenin's subjective 'I' is now clearly present, but it is not yet fully individuated. It is still buried within the narrator's voice. But in the next sentence, Olenin's 'I' fully emerges as a distinct voice. It becomes the subject of a sentence placed in quotation marks: 'Here I sit, and around me stand old and young trees, one of them festooned with wild grape vines, and pheasants are fluttering, driving one another about and perhaps scenting their murdered brothers' (76, 164). The language here is very specific, just as the narrator's language has been throughout the passage. It therefore

contrasts with much of the language Olenin used earlier to describe his impressions about the Caucasus during his trip southward. Tolstoi seems to be suggesting that the emergence of Olenin's individuated self also leads him to a heightened awareness of the details in his surroundings, that Olenin's self-awareness leads him to a sharper awareness of everything that lies outside the self:

He felt his pheasants, examined them, and wiped the warm blood off his hand onto his coat. 'Perhaps the jackals scent them and with dissatisfied faces go off in another direction: above me, flying in among the leaves which to them seem enormous islands, mosquitoes hang in the air and buzz: one, two, three, four, a hundred, a thousand, a million mosquitoes, and all of them buzz something or other and each one of them is separate from all else and is just such a separate Dmitrii Olenin as I am myself.' He vividly imagined what the mosquitoes buzzed: 'This way, this way, lads! Here's some one we can eat!' They buzzed and stuck to him. And it was clear to him that he was not a Russian nobleman, a member of Moscow society, the friend and relation of so-and-so and so-and-so, but just such a mosquito, or pheasant, or deer, as those that were now living all around him. (77, 164)

Tolstoi shows here how Olenin's awareness of himself as an individuated being also leads him to an awareness of the individuality of every element in his surroundings. Olenin's transformation from a naive self into an individuated, aware self is thus shown by Tolstoi to be the beginning of a creative, dialogic relationship between the hero and his surrounding world. It may be tempting for the reader to idealize Olenin's unselfconscious, naive state when 'he felt cool and comfortable and did not think of or wish for anything'. To be sure, this is a privileged moment in the novel, as most scholars agree.<sup>28</sup> It is a moment in which all the confusion and contradictions of Olenin's inner world seem to melt away. But Tolstoi shows that there is in this naive subjectivity also an absence of something that will emerge only when Olenin's self-consciousness appears: moral and intellectual awareness.

Olenin's moral awareness, that is, his awareness of his living relationship with, and thus responsibility towards, the other beings around him, emerges only at the moment in which the hero becomes conscious of himself. Olenin concludes that his ultimate goal is personal happiness, but that this goal conflicts with the immutable laws of nature which are indifferent to the wishes of the individual. He resolves this dilemma by concluding that personal happiness lies ultimately not in self-gratification, but in 'living for others'. 'Love and self-sacrifice', Olenin concludes, are the only desires that may be satisfied 'despite

<sup>28</sup> Edward Wasiolek has rightly called it a 'sacramental scene'. See Edward Wasiolek, *Tolstoy's Major Fiction*, Chicago, IL, 1978, p. 54. Robert Jackson calls Olenin's entry into the thicket 'a journey into the core of existence': 'The Archetypal Journey', p. 395.

external circumstances', whereas desires aimed purely at self-gratification are subject to the whims of uncontrollable outside forces and therefore cannot ensure individual happiness.

Olenin, it seems, is incapable of continuing to exist in a state of natural, animal-like awareness of other beings. Rather, he has the need to impart some kind of intellectual *form* to that experience, to explain that experience to himself in terms of a rational theory. Olenin's programme of self-sacrifice becomes the manifestation of that internal need. However noble Olenin's moral aspirations here, Tolstoi will show the contradictions inherent in the hero's attempt at such a systematic morality. When Olenin's theory is moved from the realm of thought and applied to concrete situations, as when he gives Lukashka his horse later that evening, it is ultimately deformed by its contact with the complexity of human interactions to such a degree that it ends up achieving the very opposite end from the intended one. In the stag's lair, when Olenin formulates his theory of self-abnegation in isolation from the realities of human relationships, it appears to be motivated by a genuine desire for self-sacrifice. But as soon as that theory is put into practice, it begins to take on other motivations as well, such as Olenin's desire to be recognized by others:

Olenin expected that Lukashka would go to share his joy with Marianka, but though he did not do so Olenin still felt his soul more at ease than ever before in his life. He was delighted as a boy, and could not refrain from telling Vaniusha not only that he had given Lukashka the horse, but also why he had done it, as well as his new theory of happiness. (86, 174)

Tolstoi is showing that the problem with Olenin's theory of self-abnegation lies in the fact that this theory, like most theories created by Tolstoi's characters, when applied to actual human relationships reveals its own contradictory nature. This is shown to be both a contradiction between the intention and result of the theory put into practice, as well as a contradiction contained within the internal structure of the theory itself. In the sphere of lived experience Olenin's desire to achieve an ideal of selflessness comes up against the reality of human interaction in which purely selfless behaviour seems to be an impossibility. In the sphere of intellectual experience there is a parallel tension between what Olenin wants to express — his expansiveness of spirit, love of the whole world, and desire for self-transcendence — and how he expresses it — through the limiting medium of rationally organized language.

Tolstoi shows a tension between the content of Olenin's inner life — his noble aspiration to a good that transcends the individual self — and the form in which that inner life seeks expression in the world: in the social sphere, through concrete actions, and in the mental sphere,

through language and thought. Tolstoi thus uncovers a more complex dynamic within Olenin than merely the movement from a 'good' naive, unselfconscious state to a 'bad' selfconscious state. Tolstoi shows, rather, the presence of a tension within Olenin, and thus of dialogue, between these two poles of human experience. The emergence of self-awareness within Olenin marks the beginning of this dialogue in its fullest, most distinct form. In the text this moment is represented by the presence of Olenin's quoted speech. This is the beginning of a self that consciously aspires to self-transcendence; of a self that is morally and intellectually alive, and which thus becomes a locus for all the struggles and contradictions that such an inner life entails.

This Tolstoian idea of an aware self that becomes also an internally divided, or 'dialogic', self has its roots in world literature, as Lidia Ginzburg has shown. 'Psychologism', Ginzburg writes in *O psikhologicheskoi proze*, 'was closely connected with moralism from ancient times before Tolstoi. Self-knowledge is a dual act of analysis and evaluation.'<sup>29</sup> In Tolstoi's artistic world, tendencies towards 'analysis and evaluation' are associated with a modern self that has lost its Eden-like spontaneity and wholeness. And yet they are also the very qualities that create the possibility for ethical impulses ('moralism'), intellectual reflection ('analysis') and creative self-expression (writing). Tolstoi's attitude towards the loss of pre-modern wholeness is thus paradoxical in the sense described by Geoffrey Hartman: 'The mind which acknowledges the existence or past existence of immediate life knows that its present strength is based on a separation from that life.'<sup>30</sup>

Olenin's ability to imagine, to create, to enter into a living dialogic relationship with his world, appears only at the moment that he becomes an aware, perceiving subject of that world. It is precisely at the moment when Olenin's subjective 'I' emerges that the hero begins to perceive his surroundings in a fresh and dynamic way. He begins to imagine what the jackals are thinking, what the mosquitoes are buzzing, and to transform himself mentally from a social being ('a Russian nobleman, a member of Moscow society, the friend and relation of so-and-so and so-and-so') into a natural being ('a mosquito, or pheasant, or deer'). He becomes a kind of artist, a human subject capable of reorganizing and even internalizing the external world through creative acts of the imagination. In this moment, Olenin becomes an active co-creator alongside his own creator. Just as Tolstoi often destabilizes and thereby heightens the reader's sense of reality throughout the novel, so Olenin imagines his world here in a fresh, creative way, and in so

<sup>29</sup> Lidia Ginzburg, *O psikhologicheskoi proze*, Leningrad, 1971, pp. 290–97.

<sup>30</sup> Geoffrey Hartman, 'Romanticism and "Anti-Self-Consciousness"', in Harold Bloom (ed.), *Romanticism and Consciousness*, New York, 1970, p. 49.

doing, invites the reader to think differently about the relationship of the human individual to the natural order. In Olenin's capacity to recreate the world through his heightened moral and intellectual awareness lies one of the central ideas of the novel: while there exists an objective order of things that transcends the individual will, the individual mind also has the capacity mentally to reshape and even temporarily transform that order.

In just this moment of reflection, in which Olenin imagines the speech and thoughts of other beings, the hero comes closest to understanding and expressing something that is 'true' in the novel. That is, it is precisely in the moment in which Olenin is acting as a conscious creator, as an *artist*, that he is able to know and say something meaningful about his world. What for Olenin in the prior moment was a mere intuition about the existence of something ineffably great in the world has now been given a creative *form* in which to be expressed. And it is, not coincidentally, a characteristically Tolstoian form. It is that organic, all-encompassing, synthetic form, in which Tolstoi writes each of his novel-masterpieces, and in which he transforms life's paradoxes and inconsistencies into artistic universes more perfect and more ordered than the outside reality they depict. When Olenin transforms this creative, totalistic perspective into an ethical programme a few moments later, the imaginative, synthetic truth of the world the hero has momentarily tapped into will become replaced by a narrowly systematic one. Olenin will then go from being a temporary creative subject of his world to the object, once again, of Tolstoi's ironic eye.

The stag's lair scene illustrates the extent to which Olenin's existential searchings in the novel are associated in the hero's mind with a search for a specifically moral order. There is no particular reason why this should be the case. The novel posits no *a priori* connection between the human search for existential meaning and the search for moral goodness.<sup>31</sup> This linkage, it appears, is the created product of Olenin's mind. It is the result of the hero's inability to imagine an existential order that exists outside moral categories. Indeed, for a brief few moments in the stag's lair the hero experiences what such a supra-moral existential order might look like. This can be seen both in the naive, unselfconscious moment of communion with his

<sup>31</sup> It appears that Rimvydas Silbajoris overemphasizes the extent to which Tolstoi's existential quest was a specifically *moral* quest: 'It is clear from the evidence of Tolstoy's works that they encode an ongoing effort to understand and define art in general while the power of his own art in particular was emerging from what his works could accomplish in the moral dimension.' Rimvydas Silbajoris, *Tolstoy's Art and His Aesthetics*, Columbus, OH, 1991, p. 9.

Morality is one type of existential meaning with which Tolstoi and his characters grapple, but Tolstoi does not necessarily advocate morality as the ultimate existential solution to life's problem, as the analysis here of Olenin in the stag's lair shows.

surroundings *and* in the moment in which Olenin imparts to that experience an imaginative form. The former is an experience of an almost complete loss of self; the latter of a self which comes into being through the creative internal synthesis of the external world. In both cases there is an absence of moral imperative. These moments are fleeting in the novel, precisely because they represent existential possibilities which the hero is still unprepared, or perhaps unable, to realize.

*Lukashka in the cordon*

Tolstoi emphasizes this point in the novel by contrasting Olenin's experience of nature in the stag's lair with Lukashka's experience of nature in the cordon. Both scenes are privileged moments in the novel. They both depict moments in which human beings are engaged in intense communion with nature. But there are some important differences in both content and form between these two scenes, which represent important differences between the two characters. In the stag's lair scene the emergence in Olenin of a conscious self capable of intellectual and moral reflection is partly represented through Tolstoi's manipulation of the narrative. The emergence of Olenin's self-awareness is felt as Olenin's voice first begins to merge with that of the narrator and then ultimately supersedes it. In the scene where Lukashka is at the cordon, there is a very different relationship between the human individual and nature, and Tolstoi's manipulation of the narrative is correspondingly different.

If Olenin is portrayed as a human subject within whom there emerges an aware, perceiving intellect, then Lukashka is described almost entirely as the object of his surroundings when he is at the cordon. Lukashka becomes more of an extension than a perceiving subject of his surroundings. He is described like a wild animal, incapable of moral or intellectual reflection, totally in tune with the rhythms of nature. There is a highly poetic quality to Tolstoi's language in this scene, which reveals traces of one of the earliest intended genres of the work, that of narrative poem:<sup>32</sup>

The rhythmic sounds of night — the rustling of the reeds, the snoring of the Cossacks, the hum of mosquitoes, and the rushing water, were every now and then broken by a shot fired in the distance, or by the gurgling of water when a piece of bank slipped down, the splash of a big fish, or the crashing

<sup>32</sup> For a discussion of this and other matters related to the composition of the novel, see A. E. Gruzinskii, *Istoriia pisaniia i pechataniia 'Kazakov'*, in *L. N. Tolstoi, Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, Moscow, 1960–65, vol. 6, pp. 271–93. For a thorough analysis of the many generic forms Tolstoi considered using for the work, see C. J. G. Turner, 'Tolstoy's "The Cossacks": The Question of Genre', *The Modern Language Review*, 73, 1978, pp. 563–72.

of an animal breaking through the thick undergrowth in the wood. (31, 115)

While in the distance shots can be heard, in the camp there appears to be a complete harmony between the natural and the human world. Both are shown to be mingled in a kind of poetic totality of life that is highlighted by Tolstoi in the rhymed phrases: ‘khrapenie kazakov, zhuzhzhanie komarov’ (‘the snoring of the Cossacks, the hum of mosquitoes’). Tolstoi creates a sense of poetic unity between the Cossacks and their natural surroundings in the rhyming of *kazakov* and *komarov*. Throughout the stag’s lair scene the reader finds many phrases of which Olenin is the subject: ‘Olenin gotov byl’ (‘Olenin was ready’), ‘on uzhe poshel’ (‘he was about to go home’), ‘on zakhotel otdokhnut’ (‘he felt inclined to rest’), ‘on otyskal, on osmotrel’ (‘he searched out’, ‘he examined’). These phrases indicate for the reader the presence of a mentally aware and active subject. However, in the scene describing Lukashka’s presence in nature, nature itself becomes the subject of every sentence in the paragraph quoted above.

That Tolstoi probably intended this scene to be read in juxtaposition with the stag’s lair scene is evident not only in the fact that both scenes depict the only extended moments in the novel in which an individual is alone in nature. The intended comparison is also evident in the nearly identical structure of the opening sentences of each scene. In the case of Lukashka at the cordon, ‘Noch’ byla temnaia, teplaia, i bezvetrennaia’ (‘The night was dark, warm and still’). In the stag’s lair scene: ‘Den’ byl sovershenno iasnyi, tikhii, zharkii’ (‘The day was perfectly clear, calm, and hot’). Lukashka’s privileged moment in the novel takes place in the darkness and mysterious atmosphere of the night; Olenin’s in the full light of day. Lukashka’s association with the night heightens the reader’s sense of his mysterious and ultimately hidden inner nature. Lukashka is a kind of Rousseauan noble savage, a man of primitive sentiment and raw, unreflected action. He is described in this scene almost like a wild animal searching out his prey in the darkness of the night. The reader is given no sense of Lukashka’s inner life in this scene or almost anywhere in the novel. It is as though his inner life does not exist, and when it does appear in the form of a brief thought about his mistress or excited anticipation about his killing of an *abrek*, it is devoid of any of the moral and intellectual awareness that animate Olenin’s inner world in the stag’s lair.

There is no commentary or moral rebuke on the author’s part when describing Lukashka at the cordon, in the same way that Tolstoi expresses in his diaries of the period the need to substitute a Christian ethic of universal love for the supra-moral Homeric poetry of violence

and nature.<sup>33</sup> There is in Tolstoi's description of Lukashka at the cordon just such an expression of this Homer-like poetry of beautiful and essentially immoral nature that Tolstoi was attracted to but also apparently wished to suppress in himself. Robert Jackson has shown the way in which the struggle between Homeric and Christian ethics in Tolstoi is central to Olenin's search for himself.<sup>34</sup> I concur with Jackson and would add that Tolstoi's intention in comparing Lukashka's supra-moral, naive experience of nature with Olenin's self-conscious experience of nature is not to mystify one and demystify the other, but to create within the novel as a whole an internal dialogue between these two poles of human experience, just as these poles exist within Olenin himself and animate much of his inner struggle. In the description of Lukashka in the cordon the reader senses one sort of poetry: the pre-verbal, elemental poetry of natural man in harmony with his surroundings. In Olenin in the stag's lair the reader hears the poetry of a self-conscious, intellectually and morally aware self in dialogue with his surroundings and with himself. *The Cossacks* represents a tension between these two ways of being, and demonstrates that both are essential aspects of an ultimately unified, if never stable or finalized, totality of human experience.

### *The battle scene*

The denouement of the Lukashka-Olenin juxtaposition in the novel can be found in the battle scene in the second to last chapter. The roles played by Lukashka and Olenin in this scene befit their respective characters. Lukashka is the fearless and brash warrior, leading the Cossack troops in their battle against the Chechens, and Olenin is described as the fumbling, if genuinely curious outsider attempting to make sense of an event in which he is clearly out of his element. While Tolstoi's emphasis in the scene is on the differing ways Lukashka and Olenin react to and participate in the battle, the author gives the reader

<sup>33</sup> The battle within Tolstoi between primitive immediacy and a religious, systematic morality in his work on *The Cossacks* seems to be especially sharp in 1857. One illustration of this conflict can be seen in the fact that Tolstoi is torn in 1857 by his simultaneous attraction to two works whose philosophical outlooks represent the two poles of Tolstoi's own divided vision of life at that time: *The Iliad*, with its celebration of the ecstasy of violence, its supra-moral acceptance of the plenitude of life with all of its good and evil, and The Gospels, with their didacticism and religious moralism. In August 1857 Tolstoi goes into ecstasies over his reading of the *Iliad*: 'Read the *Iliad*. That's the thing! Wonderful! Wrote to Ryabinin. I must revise the whole of the Caucasian tale [*The Cossacks*].' See R. F. Christian (ed.), *Tolstoy's Diaries*, London, 1985, vol. 1, 1847-94, p. 141. Two days later Tolstoi repeats this thought: 'The *Iliad* is making me completely rethink *The Fugitive* [*The Cossacks*].' Ibid., p. 141. Less than two weeks later, Tolstoi writes in his diary: 'Finished reading the *unbelievably delightful* ending of the *Iliad* [emphasis in the original]. Read the Gospels, which I haven't done for a long time. After the *Iliad*. How could Homer not have known that goodness is love! It's a revelation! There is no better explanation.' Ibid., p. 142.

<sup>34</sup> Jackson, 'The Archetypal Journey', p. 392.



a small, but highly significant detail which briefly deflects and then refocuses his attention on the Lukashka-Olenin comparison. The cornet, who is described as no less confused and out of place in the scene than Olenin, sees the wounded Chechen who fired at Lukashka. 'The cornet went up to him as if intending to pass by, and with a quick movement shot him in the ear' (145, 238). There is something ignoble and cowardly in the cornet's action. Lukashka's killing of the Chechens, however violent, is shown to be the result of some natural inner force, of an irrational, Achilles-like love of battle. There is a mythic and noble savagery when Lukashka holds the wounded Chechen in his bare hands, shouting 'Don't kill him. I'll take him alive!'. There is in him the presence of that primitive instinct for violence depicted in the cordon scene. That excitement is visceral and beyond moral categories, and it is described by the young Tolstoi with a grand poetic admiration. In contrast, there is cowardice and slyness in the cornet's furtive act of shooting the Chechen in the ear after having pretended to walk by him. This cowardice is highlighted by its contrast not only to Lukashka's boldness, but also to the heroism of the Chechen himself: 'Like a wounded hawk all covered with blood (blood was flowing from a wound under his right eye), pale and gloomy, he looked about him with wide-open eyes and teeth clenched as he crouched, dagger in hand, still prepared to defend himself' (145, 237).

The detail about the cornet in this scene depicts the presence of a moral universe so removed from the poetic and ultimately noble spirit of the fighting Cossacks that the Olenin-Lukashka contrast pales in comparison to the contrast between the cornet and the other warriors. The cornet is, in fact, the only character in the novel who is described with consistent derision. When the author ironizes Olenin, it is with a light and playful humour and with the intention ultimately of humanizing his weaknesses and aspirations. When the author questions the amoral ways of Lukashka, it is always mingled with an admiration for the young man's spontaneous natural vitality. But there is almost no playfulness in Tolstoi's treatment of the cornet. The cornet is beyond the pale of acceptability in Tolstoi's moral universe. His presence in the novel serves to remind the readers that, for all the contrasts between Lukashka's and Olenin's natures, they are ultimately more similar than different when compared with the cornet. Lukashka and Olenin share a mythic grandeur and a fullness of life. Lukashka possesses an abundance of physical vitality; Olenin an abundance of inner vitality. The cornet has neither. In comparison to the two youths, he appears small and petty. The reader is reminded in this scene, therefore, that, alongside the philosophically ambivalent portrait of life in the novel, there exists a subjective authorial consciousness that does finally possess a sense of right and wrong. Characters who embody a fullness of life —

either by means of an unconscious primitive spirit (Lukashka) or through conscious moral strivings (Olenin) — are 'right'. They ennoble human life. Characters, such as the cornet and Olenin's acquaintances at the beginning, who are lacking in primitive authenticity and/or mental vitality, are 'wrong'. They impoverish and deaden life — both within themselves and in others.

*Conclusion: Tolstoi's higher truth*

Viktor Shklovskii calls the period in Tolstoi's life, in which the writer composed *The Cossacks*, the 'years of doubt, self-analysis, diaries, and constant uncertainty in his future'.<sup>35</sup> Shklovskii claims that such internal uncertainty 'all came in useful to Tolstoi when he immersed himself in writing'.<sup>36</sup> The scholar means to suggest that Tolstoi's inner chaos led to creative richness. It can be assumed that Tolstoi's internal disorder during the writing of the novel is also partly responsible for the general ambivalence in the overall design and structure of the work. The novel opens with the depiction of Olenin as an idealistic aristocratic youth who wishes to escape the fetters of civilization in pursuit of the natural freedom of the natives. By the novel's end Olenin becomes a writer-philosophizer who reflects at length on the contradictions of modern existence. On one level, this change indicates artistic inconsistency and ambivalence. On another level, though, it also suggests a forward movement, a distinct progression from particularity to universality of perception. Olenin goes from representing a specific and recognizable Russian literary tradition to embodying the human struggles and contradictions of modernity at large.

If the reader considers all of the scenes analysed in this article, and in the order in which they appear in the novel — the opening, Olenin's departure from Moscow, the mountain scene, Lukashka in the cordon, Olenin in the stag's lair, the battle scene, and Olenin's departure from the Cossack village — then the reader detects a progression from small to large, from particularity to universality of experience. In the novel's opening and during Olenin's departure from Moscow his search for self is beginning. In the mountain scene Olenin's self begins to emerge more clearly. The scene of Lukashka in the cordon points to one possibility for selfhood still beyond Olenin's reach. In the stag's lair scene Olenin's self becomes a fully individuated and creative presence in the text. In the battle scene and in the closing Olenin's search for self becomes subsumed once again into a larger, more permanent Tolstoian truth of life. Continual movement and growth amidst recurrent inner conflict are the defining features of Olenin's internal world, and they

<sup>35</sup> Viktor Shklovskii, *Lev Tolstoi*, Moscow, 1978, p. 187.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

are mirrored in the progression of the work itself. Therefore, alongside the intense dialogue that takes place in the text between the narrator's voice and Olenin's, there also exists an overarching unity between those two voices. Both the narrator and his character are engaged, finally, in a common and ever-expanding search for a higher truth of life. Taken as a whole, *The Cossacks* creates and embodies that very experience of existential order which Olenin incessantly seeks, but which only art, in the end, can achieve.