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War and Peace

Only two kinds of authors write about war. One kind maintains that war cannot be explained to anyone who has not experienced it. They are aware that readers who read about the horrors experienced have an unbreachable bias, but they know that they cannot understand it because their horizon of expectations has never given them the tools to allow them to experience a universe from which they have been, until then, protected. These writers attack this enormous task aware that war cannot be written about without making evident the peace that it perturbs—one cannot exist without the other. It is not even possible to define “peace” without having experienced what its negation means. One must, then, narrate a terribly complex world of dichotomies in order to ensure that whoever reads a text can, even remotely, understand what war means for a man, a family,

an entire country, a culture. This kind of writer displays an unimaginable creative vigor that would have to be classified as profoundly epic, and their literature, as we can see, becomes internationally famous.

Leo Tolstoy is undoubtedly the most representative of this kind of writer. His death left world literature with only the second kind of writers: those who take up the theme of war and its aftermath almost as an obligation; those who, with greater or lesser success, manage to inform readers of everything that has happened in a specific conflict, the vicissitudes of a hero or the circumstances in which those on the losing side succumbed, or, how those on the winning side had to sacrifice their lives for the “ideals” of those who sent them there—ideas they often did not even share. However, Tolstoy did not seem to want to “inform” about the Russians’ war against Napoleon, as though that were merely an event that should be reported on for future generations. Of course, it was an event worthy of been narrated and remembered. But, par-

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adoxically, Tolstoy seems to start from the universal premise that life is precisely that: war and peace. That both are part of a determinism that makes the characters in his novel experience their circumstances as a kind of heroic destiny that embraces them for the simple reason that they were born in Russia.

To narrate war and peace, regardless of which ones, something is required that functions as a condition of possibility, something that makes it possible for those two extremes so typical of human nature to exist: a world. A world cannot be merely “enunciated.” A world must have or must participate in all the virtues of a specific culture, of a specific place, of a language, of a people, of its collective virtues and defects, as well as in the complex trifles that make it picturesque, worthy of being identified and narrated, with each and every thing that makes it different from the others. This world is so important because, without it, it is not possible to communicate what war means to that people; an armed clash is not experienced in the same way in the Russia of the Napoleonic invasions as in twenty-first-century Ukraine. It does not happen that way because the values are different, because life has another meaning, and because honor has another dimension.

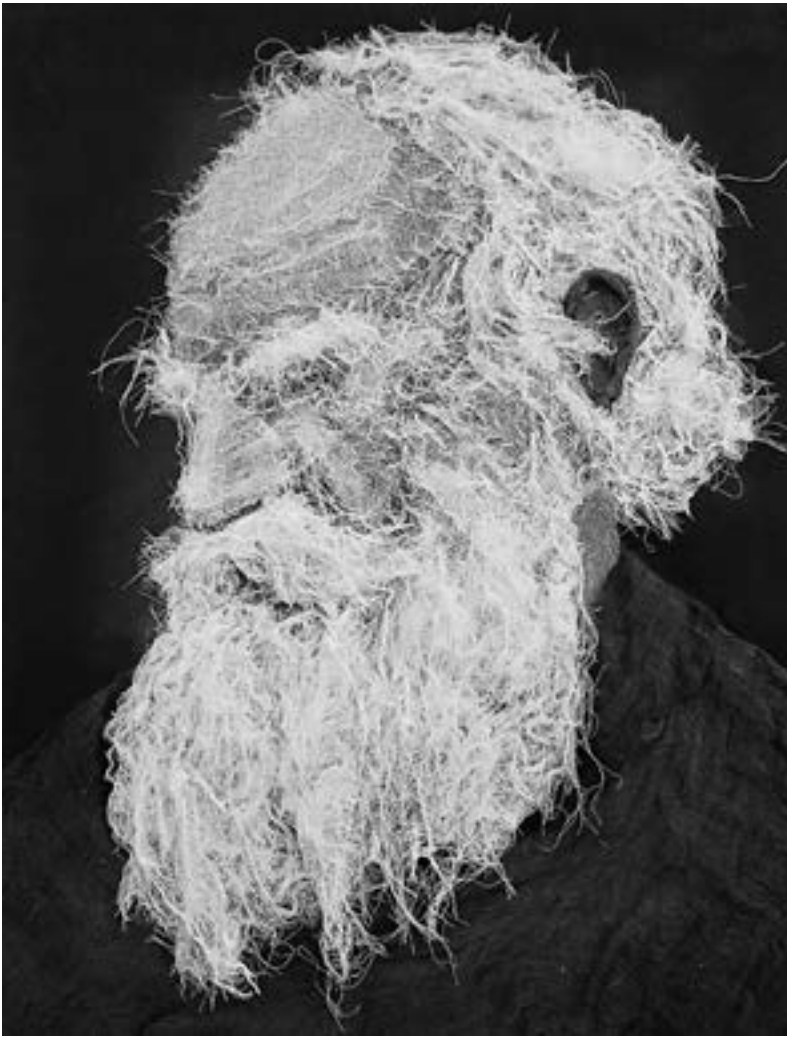
It is precisely this very specific world of Tolstoy’s novel that makes *War and Peace* a book that is read with a totally different rhythm. It is not a novel that you simply read, but rather a novel that accompanies us for almost a whole lifetime, a novel that we can forget for years but that we remember when something happens to us and forces us to revisit it, to reflect upon it; it transports us again to that very specific world and, magically, means that when we return to our own world, we no longer think as we did before. It is that powerful a work.

Since its publication in 1865, *War and Peace* has been one of the most discussed, honored, analyzed, and disseminated novels in Western letters. Tolstoy inaugurated in fiction a series of elements and tools that more prop-

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erly belong to the psychology that remits us to Bakhtin and his theory of dialogism in Dostoevsky’s novels. That is, war and peace not as a complete awareness, but as an interaction of several consciousnesses without one being the object of the other: Napoleon, Alexander I, General Kutuzov (historical figures); the frustrated consciousness of Andrei Bolkonsky (who is wounded not while attempting to save a compatriot, but a Russian standard—the novel is full of symbolisms—); the duality of Pierre Bezukhov, who perhaps feels he must pay penance by marrying Hélène, a woman he does not love and that he knows will be unfaithful to him; the fragility of Natasha Rostova. All these are internally conflicted consciousnesses; we could even use the cliché and say “at war with themselves,” and at war also with the awareness of another war that is going on outside, the battle of Austerlitz. An aristocratic world that, faced with the war with Napoleon, seems anachronistic but persists because it knows how to situate the war within its rules of functioning. The war does not become something opposite to peace, but perhaps an element of its possibility.

Perhaps it would be appropriate to do an experiment to assess the multiplicity of voices and points of view so typical of the Russian novel, but that are mainly essential in *War and Peace*. We could bring back to each of the main characters the focal point of the novel in each of several readings. I mean that we could read the entire novel from the point of view of Pierre Bezukhov, who is willing from the start to share the Napoleonic ideals and who speaks out against a conflict that his homeland is about to be involved in. This character wages his own internal wars when he must face a duel with his wife’s lover, though he has never felt close to her, and ends up by joining a Masonic lodge. This character’s struggle is always spiritual, but not for that any less bloody, and, in the end, he attempts, perhaps like Tolstoy himself, to reconcile an acceptable moral life in a world that is ethically condemned. He never achieves anything important; he does not experience tragic conundrums, but neither are they pathetic; I would even dare to say that he is a magnanimous mediocre man (an adjective that is no minor thing in a world that offers no spaces for those who are contemplative). Even if he had attempted to assassinate Napoleon himself, he would never see his efforts transcend; he was destined to be an anonymous hero in a universe that does not allow for anonymity. Seen through this char-



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acter, the entire novel shows a very particular world; a war not waged for ideals, but for necessity. Conflicted between the burden that war implies when another war is being waged internally, Pierre does not know which side he is on. Does he want to be the aristocrat he already is or to fight to create better conditions for the working class? War and peace no longer depend here on Napoleon and Alexander I, but on Bezukhov's internal dichotomy.

We now can undertake a second, new reading, but focused on Andrei Bolkonsky, a dashing, brave ideal of Russian manhood, who is wounded in the battle of Austerlitz and who, near death, realizes that all his convictions have gradually been losing meaning. When a whole life is led romanticizing war as the road to glory; when life is undertaken with the conviction that he is defending the right side —Bolkonsky never doubted as a young man the ethical value of it—; when he suffers personally

the horrors of war and little by little understands the damage he has done to himself, to his dead wife, and to the only son he has left; when he discovers that there is a private world, a circle of people he never noticed because he was looking outward toward a greater objective, which has now collapsed, his convictions abandon him. Andrei Bolkonsky may well be Emil Cioran's

favorite character. Here, war and peace become the conflict of a single man and the moral code we are shown is the uselessness of a fight when both parties have ended up defeated.

Many more readings can be done, as many as the novel has characters: Natasha Rostova's loving flightiness; Princess Maria Bolkonskaya's submission; Nicolai Rostov's idealism. All of them are different paths that gradually converge to a single point: the battle of Borodino and the burning of Moscow.

Is there a common denominator in all these readings? Perhaps: the idea that history is not constructed with heroic events, the fruit solely of the will of figures that have become famous for their feats. Here, history is not "made" by Julius Cesar crossing the Rubicon and changing the destiny of a whole empire. History is built with an almost infinite—or at least incalculable—number of anonymous wills, whose actions and decisions together

sketch the outcome of every nation. Each person, each individual, moved both by necessity and their own drives, weaves together the historic fabric of an entire people. It is not Napoleon, or Alexander I, or General Kutuzov who hold up history, but completely unknown characters who become the true protagonists. That is why the critics did not know where to situate this novel: Is it fiction or is it history?

Tolstoy did not think of the novel as a genre for entertainment. Rather he considered it a tool for educating and changing ourselves psychologically, a tool that could be used to magnify our humanity and tolerance. This last is an increasingly urgent need in our time. The philosopher and literary critic Federico Álvarez Arregui used to say that he had not known anyone who thought in the same way; that is, anyone who had not radically changed his/her horizons of ethical expectations after reading *War and Peace*.

This struggle was not alien to Tolstoy himself, as he participated as an artillery officer in the Crimean War. Many of those who will read this article undoubtedly belong to my generation, a generation that, even today, had felt alien to war, at least trench warfare. But we are also a generation that thought it was anachronistic and that, unfortunately, is now facing a reality that shows us the opposite: our country is going through a war against organized crime and drug trafficking. Eastern Europe is going through the eighth month of a war that, until now, seems to be a binational conflict, but whose ominous consequences already seem to affect other democracies, like that of Poland. War is daily becoming something that cannot be ignored. This is where a work like Tolstoy's becomes an indispensable tool; it is a kind of manual for forging character. The author did not believe in the idea of art for art's sake. Perhaps one of Tolstoy's most important traits is precisely that he argued for an art that would fulfill the function of making us less moralistic and prejudiced and would strengthen our thinking, something ignored by today's critics. If we looked carefully at other people's lives, at their desires and frustrations, if we could understand what motivates them, they would never be able to seem one-dimensional or frivolous to us. It would seem that the author always wants us to understand the character that has the most traits to be repudiated.

After Oscar Wilde said that conflict makes all conversation impossible, Bakhtin argued that conflict is part of or

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one of the forms of conversation and that that conversation is part of what characterizes human beings as creators of culture. Here, each of us is part of a culture or we are willing to accept the language and convictions of the other, or we learn to accept the ideas and proposals of those who are or consider themselves different. As a result, we build bridges even in difficult conditions for communications or we condemn our cultures to failure and destruction.

Finally, I want to mention another common denominator that each of *War and Peace's* characters shares, something that Tolstoy transmits and before we read it was not so clear: the ethical act and its responsibility. Responsibility within the ethical act is not a legal term, nor is it sanctioned in any body of laws. Rather, it is a kind of compulsion that, through every action, links humanity to the world and with the other that he/she has right in front of him/her, the awareness that "I am not for me if I cannot be for the other." Being part of the world commits you; living is a dangerous task that exempts no one from the possible clash with the other. Understanding that other is the condition that makes possible existence itself. After reading Leo Tolstoy, you no longer say "I am." Rather, you say, "I also am," an affirmation that individualizes me but that, above all, presupposes one thing: dialogue.

This is where the genius lies, the enormous beauty and the magnanimity of a work that has transcended centuries and that will be a reference point for many centuries to come. It is the miracle involved in narrating a single historic event through an enormous polyphony of voices, of wills, of desires, of positions, each of which is as complex as the work itself. The result of war with the French would not have been the same if a single character had acted differently. What one can do from one's unique place in the world cannot be done by anyone else, but I can do nothing without the participation of the other: that is where the paradox lies in the ethics of dialogue.

Tolstoy teaches us that individual dreams are not built without having understood the dream of the other. ■■■