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David Mudd

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Simplicity is the Spice of Life (and Art): Reading Early and Late Tolstoy for Moral and Artistic Value

David Mudd
Dr. Molly Hiro
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“This is what I mean by calling their [human] nature good...benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom are not welded to us externally. We inherently have them. It is simply that we do not reflect upon them.”

- Mengzi

Mohandas Gandhi, at the outset of one of the 20th century’s most significant careers in activism, opened up an idealistic commune in South Africa called simply: Tolstoy Farm (Zubacheva). He did so to honor the Russian writer whose ideas had influenced him profoundly (Annad). After reading Tolstoy’s 1893 philosophical work *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, he wrote that “before the independent thinking, profound morality, and the truthfulness of this book, all the books given me...seemed to pale into insignificance” (“An Autobiography,” 162). As Tolstoy’s works helped him to “realize more and more the infinite possibilities of universal love” (“Collected Works” 131), the peacefulness and non-violence that Tolstoy’s worldview demanded (in cooperation with numerous other influences) became an essential part of what became known as *satyagraha*: holding onto truth as a means of countering the injustices afflicting the world (Britannica). Indeed, Gandhi even wrote an article in *Indian Opinion* called “Tolstoy’s Satyagraha” showing the consequences of the writer’s worldview and ultimately concluding that one could only find true freedom in following such ideals (Gandhi). And for Gandhi, as it was for Tolstoy, the “nearest approach to Truth was through love” (“Truth is God,” 13).

I put the spotlight on this connection not to set the stage for an extensive examination of the relationship of these extraordinary men with world-shaping influence, but rather to bring into focus the intensity of Tolstoy’s moral beliefs and the incredible impact they had on the world. As Tolstoy became more and more a social critic and activist, the influence and awe he commanded grew and grew. As many have noted, by the end of his life the saying went that there were to Tsars in Russia – Nicholas II and Leo Tolstoy – and of the two, Tolstoy was by far the more respected (Kaufman, “Give War and Peace a Chance” 7). William Jennings Bryan, himself a man of powerful

moral beliefs and captivating presence (before the Scopes Monkey Trial, at least), was so taken by Tolstoy after meeting him that he *wrote to the Tsar of Russia to postpone their meeting* scheduled for the next day (7). Which is, to put it mildly, a bold strategy. The same moral force that shone in his interactions with others shines throughout his literature. In this paper, we will examine how the process of coming into love and embodying Truth plays out in his early and late works, arguing that the moralistic processes adds to, rather than detracts from, the beauty of his literary talent.

Born into immense privilege as a member of the Russian nobility at the ancestral family home, Yasnaya Polyana, Count Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy began his career as a writer only after dropping out of the University of Kazan, gambling compulsively, failing to manage his own estates, and following his cousin Nikolai into the Russian army, fighting in the Russian conquest of the Caucasus and the Crimean War (Frank 64-67). After, he began to follow the advice of his aunt to pursue a literary career, writing the so-called “autobiographical” trilogy (1852-1856), the *Sevastopol Sketches* (1855-56) which chronicled his involvement in the ill-fated Crimean War, as well as the novellas *Family Happiness* (1859) and *The Cossacks* (1863). With the encouragement of his family, he then set about writing the work that would turn him into the “second tsar” of Russia: *War and Peace* (Kaufman 7). The writing would take him almost eight years, and publication would turn him into an international celebrity – an act that he followed up with his “first true novel” and the almost-equally beloved *Anna Karenina*. While he published nothing else of the same size and scale as these two titanic works of Russian literature, the last decades of his life – after a severe bout of depression and suicidal ideation described in *A Confession* – saw the publication of novellas and short stories, most importantly *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, *Hadji Murad*, and *Resurrection* but also short stories like “Father Sergius,” “Master and Man,” and even parables, such as “What Men Live By.” He also picked up his pen as a polemicist to share his ideas on religion, morality, and aesthetics, putting out

“What is Art?” and *The Kingdom of God is Within You*. Such was his career that his contemporary Anton Chekhov wrote,

“when literature has a Tolstoy, it is easy and gratifying to be a writer. Even if you are aware that you have never accomplished anything and are still not accomplishing anything, you don’t feel so bad, because Tolstoy accomplished enough for everyone. His activities provide justification for the hopes and aspirations that are usually placed on literature.” (Chekhov)

Yet clearly, Chekhov’s deification of Tolstoy as a paragon of writers begs the impossible-to-answer question: what is it exactly that makes Tolstoy’s writing so compelling, and so worthy of re-read after re-read? What is it that justifies “the hopes and aspirations invested in literature”?

This paper will argue that any answer must include an appreciation of Tolstoy’s moral worldview, demonstrated through his characters. But first, we should turn to a brief overview of that worldview, the attributes of his writing, and what scholars before us have made of them.

Morality, Art, Beauty: Getting Value from Tolstoy’s Writing

Tolstoy’s concern with morality and how we should act in the world undergirds his fiction. A gloomy and tortured inner life went hand and hand with his literary career, contributing to his literary fixation with psychological realism and morality. As a young man, he swore to follow strict rules for life inspired by reading Benjamin Franklin (Kaufman 10). Yet he ultimately failed to maintain any of them, ironically commenting in his diary that “the first rule which I prescribe is as follows: No. 1 *Carry out everything you have resolved...*I haven’t carried out this rule,” (qtd. in Kaufman 16). This drive for moral perfection would undoubtedly form the building block of characters like Pierre Bezukhov and Stepan Kasatsky. At the same time he began to evaluate his role as a moral agent to himself, he also began to take a closer look at his role vis-à-vis the state and its effects, writing after witnessing a beheading in Paris that, “the truth is that the State is a conspiracy designed not only to exploit, but above all to corrupt its citizens...henceforth, I shall never serve any government anywhere” (Wilson 140). As he moved into middle age, this analytical, moralistic impulse kicked into overdrive. Even after following arguably the greatest work in world literature up

War and Peace with *Anna Karenina*, arguably the greatest work in world literature, he found himself questioning the very foundations of his life. Posed the question of what his life meant, he realized that he had no answer whatsoever, and concluded that it had meant nothing at all (Kaufman 10). On the verge of suicide, he tried to answer the question of, as he put it in *A Confession*, “What will come of what I am doing today or shall do tomorrow? ... Why should I live, why wish for anything, or do anything? ... Is there any meaning in my life that the inevitable death awaiting me does not destroy?” (21). This drive both to ask the “big questions” about what drives our lives, and the accompanying drive to find the answers, is one of the hallmarks of Tolstoy’s writing.

But what answer to this “big question” does Tolstoy arrive at? As Russian historian Dmitry Mirsky notes, the conflict within Tolstoy is the conflict between “conscience and the appetites; reason and the vital impulses; order and life” created by humanity’s self-consciousness (Mirsky 78). Likewise, scholars have noted that Tolstoy’s conflict arises from a sense of what Heidegger would describe as “unheimlich”: uncanny, not at home in the world (Irwin 17). As he sat mired in the mire of melancholy, trying to square his understanding of himself with his relationship to God, love, and death, he decided that trying to do was both ultimately futile and the cause of his existential despair. Instead, he came out of his bout with suicidal depression with a devout commitment in the message of the Gospel and spent the much of the remainder of his life producing works that explicitly reflected what he viewed as the truth of Christianity. As Nekhliudov expresses the sentiment in *Resurrection*, “mutual love is the fundamental law of life” (qtd. in Kaufman 211). But this sentiment was not a new discovery to him – we can see the same approach to understanding the world, and the human process of “coming alive” throughout his literature. Nekhliudov’s sentiments echo Pierre’s at the end of *War and Peace*, believing that “God is here, right here, and everywhere” (Tolstoy 1103) an approach to life inextricably bound up with love, in this case for Natasha Rostov. Or we can turn to his writing in the *Sevastopol Sketches* that, “the hero of my tale, whom I love with all the power of my

soul, whom I have tried to portray in all his beauty, who has been, is, and will be beautiful, is Truth” (qtd. in Kaufman 13). These questions were both personal and universal. And Tolstoy always associates the search with religion – “God” and “holiness” often stand in as watchwords for the many different virtues that compose his broader vision, such as simplicity, honesty, acceptance of suffering, and love most critically.

It would be foolish to deny that Tolstoy changed over the course of his life, or that these changes encompass not only his manner of living but also his style of writing. Likewise, it would be foolish to not admit that Tolstoy often contradicts himself and shows many different sides to his personality. Richard Gustafson, for instance, divides Tolstoy into the Resident and the Stranger, the former at home and in love with the world while the latter desperately desires a love he can never find (21). But what to make of this division, contradiction, and moralism? Scholars have come to very different answers. For starters, some see Tolstoy’s attempts to convey moral meaning as a detriment to his writing. This argument goes all the way back to the criticism of the 19th century, which we can see in Turgenev’s harsh criticism of Tolstoy’s philosophy but love of his “artistic genius” (Berlin 6). More recently, in “The Hedgehog and the Fox,” Isaiah Berlin’s influential essay on Tolstoy, he writes that,

“Tolstoy’s life is normally represented as falling into two distinct parts: first comes the author of immortal masterpieces, later the prophet of personal and social regeneration; first the aristocratic writer, the difficult, somewhat unapproachable, troubled novelist of genius, then the sage – dogmatic, perverse, exaggerated, but wielding a vast influence, particularly in his own country – a world institution of unique importance” (9-10)

For Berlin, Tolstoy’s art and Tolstoy’s ideas work are in tension, and the latter damages the former with dogmatism and exaggeration. Andrew Kaufman, despite explicitly disavowing the notion of “two Tolstoys” in *Give War and Peace a Chance*, nonetheless heaps criticism on “the author of the later didactic fiction and moral treatises” because “they do not ‘force people to love life in all its innumerable, inexhaustible manifestations,’” quoting a letter of Tolstoy’s from 1865

(“Understanding Tolstoy” 22). Instead, he claims that Tolstoy is at his best when he invites the reader to seek out authentic meaning of their own without forcing a meaning down their throats (“Give” 12-13). Yet by doing so Kaufman makes it seem like Tolstoy the author of *War and Peace* did not have an opinion of how we should live in the world, and that that text did not reflect that understanding. Tolstoy’s fiction can never be free from what Kaufman describes as didactic, because Tolstoy always integrates his understanding of love and morality into his art. Valorizing as he does how Tolstoy depicts “the norms and continuities of human behavior by means of grand narratives that expand slowly over time and against the backdrop of vast natural tableaux” and contrasting it with Dostoevsky’s focuses on the “crises, cracks, and explosions of the human soul,” (“Understanding” 24) he places one part of Tolstoy’s aesthetic as the pinnacle while ignoring how often Tolstoy addresses the same subject as Dostoevsky, and the importance it has for his work as whole, especially later in life.

On the other hand, some scholars have seen a unity to Tolstoy’s writings in his search for moral truth. As already mentioned, Weir interprets Tolstoy’s career as a continuous process of authorial revision, ending with a belief that language ultimately cannot encapsulate the vision he wanted to express (7). The pinnacle moments for him were when characters could “grasp the truth” intuitively, “without having to reflect” (4). Likewise, Richard Gustafson writes that, “in Tolstoy’s fiction there is only one plot event: all works embody and reveal the way to love” which replaces discord with harmony and unity (205). While Tolstoy certainly wants readers to take a journey of spiritual discovery and renewal, there is an answer he wants us to arrive at – and his work is better for that answer. The basic end goal sought by characters in *War and Peace* is the same as with his latter works. Tolstoy’s writing demonstrates a harmonious view of the world based on the idea that “mutual love is the fundamental law of life,” and through his characters shows us the psychological process of bringing our “true selves” from a barely recognized, internal whisper to external

actualization in compassionate engagement with the world.¹ Almost always, Tolstoy conceives of this process as a movement from an inauthentic, dishonest view of the world, clouded by ideology that perverts a natural way of being-in-the-world, to a shattering of that vision, to an authentic life synonymous with love. The journey of “awakening to love” comes to fruition in moments of reflection like Weir describes as characters see themselves and their ideals reflected in the world around them that makes them intuitively understand the “fundamental law” of the world. This aesthetic forms an inherent and critical part of Tolstoy’s poetics, and the manner he portrays it changes as he continuously re-invents himself. But rather than detracting from, the moralistic way he presents this process adds to his artistic merit.

To show this moral vision and the way that it takes place within us Tolstoy uses a realist aesthetic, but his relationship with realism is more complicated than it may seem. Tolstoy strives to depict the world through words and capture the interior motivations of his characters along with the vivid detail of their environments. Especially in his earlier works, Tolstoy’s style of writing shows the world in incredible, beautiful detail, as the realizations of his principal characters reflect themselves in the beautiful natural world around them. To fit this focus on a moral life that must be both felt earnestly as well as lived honestly – internal, and external – Tolstoy uses realist detail to suggest our process of moral development takes place in harmony with the world and arises intuitively as we embrace that harmony. Becoming a better person by living in accordance with the fact that “mutual love is the fundamental law of life” comes as a natural consequence of the details of the world. But as he ages, this aesthetic changes. Moving away from the vast interconnectedness of *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, where characters act in symphony with each other in a grand drama, late in life Tolstoy increasingly moves internal, accompanied by a pushback against realism. Rather than vivid, flowing detail, Tolstoy instead gives us small, seemingly disconnected portraits of the mind couple

¹ This came to me in a dream.

with terse, short descriptions. As Weir writes, this change “reveals Tolstoy’s growing fear that language is no longer capable of disclosing and conveying immutable truths about oneself and about the world,” through which he criticizes “received realist paradigms in ways that we have come to associate with modernism” (144-145). Even still, this change in style still serves as a means of communicating his broader vision of Christian Truth. In “Father Sergius,” for instance, we see the eponymous character coming into his own not through harmonizing with the world at large, but through harmonizing with ideal human action.

Fittingly, Tolstoy’s emphasis on moral truths takes shape in the primary characters in his works, all the way from his first novel (*Childhood*) to the posthumously published novella *Hadji Murad*, his last. Each of the major characters encounter both challenging personal circumstances as well as the social ones endemic to Russia’s chaotic 19th century and seek to find some kind of solution to their predicament. Almost always, this solution involves recognizing a higher moral purpose of truth, though the scale of this realization would range over his career. While many of his primary characters are “searchers,” as Andrew Kaufman describes (18), a few of the most important drew direct inspiration from the facts of the author’s own life. Consequently, these select few characters – Pierre in *War and Peace*, Konstantin Levin in *Anna Karenina*, Butler in *Hadji Murad*, Olenin in *The Cossacks* – become what Soviet critic Lidiia Ginzburg referred to as “auto-psychological heroes” (Ginzburg). The very fact that these characters bear such an astonishing resemblance to their creator helps reveal the extent to which they serve as the vehicle for Tolstoy working his own answers to the big questions of life. Justin Weir refers to the process of Tolstoy using his art to invent and re-invent not only himself but his approach to art as a “narrative alibi” that frequently manifests itself in such characters (1). Over and over again, the answer that they arrive at finds its design in Tolstoy’s life-affirming worldview, from Pierre borderline pantheism, to

Ivan Ilyich's realization of his own failings through the simple humility of his peasant servant, to Sergius' recognition of his own brutal humanity and need to shed all pretensions.

In this paper, we will examine the moral journeys of three of Tolstoy's characters to discover the inherent unity of his moral vision: Andrei Bolkonsky in *War and Peace*, Stepan Kasatsky in "Father Sergius," and Alyosha in "Alyosha the Pot." Doing so we can see that while the stylistic tack that Tolstoy takes differs, each ultimately serve to bring their characters closer and closer to the that relatively constant ideal by showing their process of self-reflection that leads to an authentic, intuitively loving approach to the world. I have explicitly chosen these two lesser-known stories from his later career because they are lesser known, in an attempt to show the continuity in Tolstoy's writing.

The "Clear Blue Sky," and the Journey to Love: Andrei Bolkonsky in War and Peace

"You have waited, you always wait, you dumb, beautiful ministers, . . .
We fathom you not – we love you – there is perfection in you also,
You furnish your parts toward eternity,
Great or small, you furnish your parts toward the soul."

- Walt Whitman, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry"

The journey of Prince Andrei Bolkonsky – one of the principal three characters of *War and Peace*, along with Pierre Bezukhov and Natasha Rostov – takes him from a dishonest to an honest understanding of the world in tune with this "fundamental law" by struggling to put into practice the transcendent feeling of joy he experiences after being seriously wounded in battle. How Andrei's relationships with his friends, family, and comrades in arms change over the course of the novel is the best example of how his changing understanding of his place in the world changes the way he approaches life. In this section we will examine Andrei's growth by looking at his most important relationships: with the world at large, his family, and himself. As the text progresses, each of these relationships change to become significantly more authentic, a process marked by Andrei's increased

honesty with himself, a clearer understanding of how the world works, and compassionate, selfless action. These moments of realization, key to any of Tolstoy's texts, are in *War and Peace* both quietly intimate and transcendently emotional, reflecting the psychological process of moral development that most experience in one way or the other.

First, we must start by obtaining an understanding of the distorted manner of Andrei's life at the text's beginning. As the curtain rises on Moscow in 1805, Andrei's maladjusted sense of the world expresses itself in his faith in the aristocratic military institution and his dreams of military glory. By dreaming of his own glory rather than thinking of others, Andrei approaches life selfishly, looking only for what he stands to gain. In the first scene – a soiree held at the home of a member of the Russian high society – Andrei exalts the French Emperor Napoleon like a schoolboy idolizing an NFL superstar, saying that Napoleon “was a great man on the bridge of Arcole, and in the Jaffa hospital, when he shook hands with the plague victims” (21). Andrei idolizes Napoleon for his purported “greatness,” a quality he associates with Napoleon's brilliant successes. He wants to emulate him, explicitly thinking that he goes to war to seek his own “Toulon” – the battle that catapulted Napoleon from an artillery captain to a leading general. But Andrei's fantasies of himself in the Emperor's metaphorical clothing only serve as a cover for his own selfishness. He dreams of how in his first battle he will impress the Russian and Austrian Emperors and the generals with the “correctness of his thinking” leading to his appointment as the commander-in-chief of the Russian army, thereby gaining his “moment of glory, of triumph over people, for love from people I don't know and will never know” (265). Andrei's assumption that military success equals moral virtue equals power comes from the aristocratic-military ideology that serves as a built-in, but false, schema for understanding the world. But in this instance it also reveals Andrei's selfishness, which comes from the fact that he only considers the self in his decision-making. With his desire to “triumph over people,” the text really shows how Andrei aims to assert “his own agency and mastery of the world”

(Kaufman 84-85). By describing these desires as “dreams” – a constructed, inaccurate depiction of the world – the text implies the distortedness of Andrei’s thinking, echoed by how Andrei waves away Napoleon’s vanity and dictatorial tendencies as though they don’t matter one bit (21).

Andrei’s selfish way of thinking prevents him from establishing a genuine human connection based on love, seen in his mocking of both his wife Lise and his sister. Andrei treats any distractions from his goal of finding his “Toulon” as a hindrance, causing his relationships to suffer. After the soiree mentioned above, Andrei remarks that he “cannot understand” his wife’s fears over both his departure and staying with her in-laws during his absence (26). When Andrei gaslights his wife by chalking up these fears as a need for more sleep, Lise challenges her husband with angry tears, asking “what have I done to you? You’re going into the army, you have no pity for me” (27). Despite Lise’s clear communication of her concerns about the loss of her husband and her confinement in the countryside with her in-laws Andrei repeatedly refuses to take her perspective. Rather, he exhibits explicit disregard for her own intelligence and ability to see the problem in their marriage by attributing it up to a biological need for sleep. This echoes a later scene at his family estate where his sister, a devout Orthodox Christian, attempts to bid him goodbye by blessing him with an icon, leading him to joke that he would wear it “if it doesn’t weigh a hundred pounds and pull my neck down.” (107) Andrei’s natural predisposition towards disregarding of religion leads his jesting over something his sister cares very about, demonstrating as before an inherent selfishness. While the text doesn’t begin to suggest Andrei is all bad – he is truly touched by his sister’s gift, and “instantly repents” when he sees he hurt her (107) – both examples demonstrate his disregard of other and prioritizing of himself.

Likewise, Andrei’s clouded view of the world prevents him from a deeper understanding of himself, specifically from grappling with the imminent possibility of his own death. Now out on campaign with the Russian Army, as he fantasizes about the glory that will come to him “another

voice” in his head asks him, “and death and suffering?” Yet, “he does not respond to that voice and goes on with his own successes” (264). Andrei at this point only allows himself to consider what could bring him power over others and rejects even the mere possibility of an alternative wholly incompatible with his selfish approach to life. By doing so, the text demonstrates his distorted view of both the world and himself. Instead of treating the world with honesty and accepting how his actions may well have very serious consequences, Andrei maintains his fantastic and false views that serve his own interests. His “waving away” echoes his previous disregard of Napoleon’s less-than-savory characteristics and his wife’s opinions. These actions bring into focus how Andrei’s desire to approach life for his own benefit has become so ingrained that the possibility of any kind of failure seems utterly foreign. But more importantly, it demonstrates Andrei’s failed relationship with himself. Most would agree that a well-developed, honest person needs the ability to deal honestly with themselves, an action associated with self-love and compassion. Because Andrei refuses to do so, we see how he refuses to unconsciously treat himself with the love that he consciously refuses to his friends and family in the pursuit of his self-serving end.

Though Andrei begins *War and Peace* with this distorted understanding of the world and his place in it, a series of events, both intimate and transcendently magnificent awaken a true understanding within him. While external events spur these realizations, the process always takes place internally, a fact already prefigured by the voice in his head asking him to consider the reality of his own death. Rather than undergoing forced change, which isn’t really change at all, these events “awaken something best in him” that he must bring to the foreground. These changes begin in a small way, as despite his unyielding Russian patriotism he begins to understand the dishonest nature of the military and the state through the unrewarded criticism that the military gives a heroic officer. During a small battle, Andrei works with an artillery officer known as Tushin to cover the Russian army’s retreat only for that same officer to

receive a harsh reprimand for leaving behind expensive pieces of cannon (198). He thinks to himself that “all this was so strange, so unlike what he hoped for” (198-199). Andrei’s commitment to the military ethos depended upon its ability to bring his greatness through heroic deeds on the battlefield. Yet, the brass rewards Tushin’s heroism with criticism, attacking Andrei’s belief of what the military could do to help achieve mastery over his peers through battlefield glory. Indeed, Tushin only escapes explicit punishment because of Andrei’s intervention, telling his commander that those present owed their survival to Tushin’s actions. Standing up for Tushin’s heroism, Andrei goes directly against the military that he believed would bring him glory. By doing so, he risks an aristocratic faux pas that could cost him his own position in order to stand up for an ideal. Consequently, Andrei demonstrates a healthy dose of selflessness and honesty in the face of injustice out of compassion for Tushin, demonstrating the beginnings of a shift of Andrei’s behavior.

A similar scene plays out when Andrei attends a council of war just before the disastrous Battle of Austerlitz and recognizes the callous way that the generals treat the lives of their soldiers. While there, he witnesses the politics of the Imperial Russian state on full display as generals jockey for power and control with only reputation, sucking up to the Tsar, and settling personal grudges in mind. Watching the generals, who theoretically represent the best the army had to offer, he questions, “was it really impossible for Kutusov to speak his mind directly to the sovereign? Can it really not be done otherwise? Can it really be that, for court and personal considerations, tens of thousands of lives must be risked – and my own, *my life?*” (264). The assumptions Andrei had about the military as an appropriate means to achieve his goal of “greatness” and power over his peers begin to completely crumble. With his view of the world that prioritizes greatness, success had become equivalent to moral virtue. Yet, by treating soldiers as chips to stake by the “thousands” on personal grudges rather than Russian men

deserving of respect, the institution that previously appeared virtuous reveals a cold, inhuman logic. But at the same time, Andrei begins to think beyond himself. Bared to the naked immorality of the war, he begins for the first time to think beyond his own interest – contrasted with his earlier rejection of his wife and sister. Importantly, this process takes place through Andrei’s recognition of the inhumanity he sees as contrasting with a yet-unspoken ideal within him, thus suggesting that goodness simply lay dormant within him. Rather than a “bang,” Andrei begins to change through the small whispers in his soul.

Likewise, Andrei also comes to understand the interconnected nature of the world through a near-death experience that shows him the contrived nature of his understanding of the world. If the internal conflict within Andrei between what he expects out of the military and the injustices he witnesses begins to crack at Andrei’s view of the world, his nearly fatal wounding shatters it entirely. After he attempts to seize glory by grabbing a fallen Russian standard and rallying the troops to charge a French artillery battery, the narrator tells us that it seems that “one of the nearest soldiers, with the full swing of a stout stick, hit him on the head” (280). In confusion Andrei does not realize either how his wounding takes place or the severity of the injuries that leave him “bleeding profusely and...letting out soft, pitiful, and childlike moans” (290). But in his stupor he sees,

“the lofty sky, not clear, but immeasurably lofty, with gray clouds slowly creeping across it. ‘How quiet, calm, and solemn, not at all like when I was running,’ thought Prince Andrei, ‘not like when we were running, shouting, and fighting, not at all like when the Frenchman and the artillerist, with angry and shouting faces, were pulling at the swab – it’s quite different the way the clouds creep across this lofty, infinite sky. How is it I haven’t seen this lofty sky before? And how happy I am that I’ve finally come to know it. Yes! Everything is empty, everything is a deception, except this infinite sky. There is nothing, nothing except that. But there is not even that, there is nothing except silence, tranquility. And thank God...!’” (281)

Kaufman considers this the key moment of Andrei’s spiritual trajectory throughout *War and Peace* (“Understanding” 82). Contrasted to the chaos of the battle represented by the “Frenchman and artillerist...pulling at the swab,” where Andrei concerned himself chiefly with achieving personal

glory for himself, the “infinite” sky allows Andrei to see “the totality that lies out there” (Kaufman 82). Unlike the way that Andrei had selfishly approached life for personal glory, the “clear blue sky” forces him to consider what lies beyond him and brings out a harmonious vision of the world dormant in his self that causes him joy. Consequently, Andrei undergoes a form of ego-death which obliterates the sense of self that had driven him thus far through the story, seen here by how the devout skeptic thanking God suggests a turn towards think outside himself.

This realization lets him see clearly the artificial nature of his quest for glory, suggesting that a clearer, more accurate understanding of the world. As Andrei lay dying, his idol Napoleon by chance happens to run across him as the Emperor surveys the battlefield. Napoleon demonstrates the same perverted relationship that puts glory above humanity with his soldiers as the Russian commanders when he exclaims that the dead were “fine men!” (291) But now, Andrei thinks that Napoleon is a “small, insignificant man” whose words were like “the buzzing of a fly.” Unlike his previous obsession with fame and hierarchy, it “was all completely the same at that moment who was standing over him or what was said about him” as long as he was able to embrace a life “which seemed so beautiful to him, because he now understood it so differently” (291). Andrei understands the vanity of Napoleon because it contrasts against an innate sense of life’s beauty, in the same way that under the clear blue sky he says that “everything is a deception, except this clear blue sky.” Frank writes that this encounter with Napoleon shows how Andrei “becomes aware of the unimportance of glory and military triumph and feels all earthly ambition to be dwarfed by the contemplation of the mystery of nature and of human life” (78). This encounter marks a complete reversal in the pattern of his life, rejecting the artificial social constructs which he previously relied on in favor of a worldview that celebrates inherent beauty.

From the radiant moment of the “clear blue sky” on, the text shows us Andrei’s struggle to internalize and live out the life-affirming, loving vision of the world he has glimpsed. By implication,

War and Peace – much like Tolstoy’s later writings – suggests that the process of moral development takes place in trying to understand the loving nature of the world internally and bring that understanding to bear in our outward action. We can see the beginning of this process taking place in his thoughts as he converses with his friend Pierre at his childhood home, Bald Hills. While Andrei has withdrawn from the world since Austerlitz because he sees only “the falsity and inadequacy of life” (Kaufman 83), Pierre challenges him that it is impossible not to believe in God, virtue, and truth, and that consequently, “we must live, we must love, we must believe” (389). By expressing an optimistic view of the world as essentially a thing of beauty aligned with love, and that the world’s beauty demands our engagement in it, Pierre echoes the same sentiments that Andrei felt under the “clear blue sky.” While Andrei outwardly refuses to accept this point of view, something begins to change deep inside him. The narrator describes how,

“it seemed to Prince Andrei that this splash of waves made a refrain to Pierre’s words, saying: ‘It’s true, believe it’...for the first time since Austerlitz [he] saw that high, eternal sky he had seen as he lay on the battlefield, and something long asleep, something that was best in him, suddenly awakened joyful and young in his soul.” (389)

The text’s own drive towards the life-affirming, love-inducing point of view seen in Pierre refuses to let Andrei’s story be one of pessimistic denial of the possibility of a better future. Through Pierre’s challenging optimism and love of the world, the “high, eternal sky” seen earlier at Austerlitz becomes visible once more, suggesting that Andrei needs to understand how that same life-affirming beauty present within him and easily found in the transcendent moments can also be found in the simplicity of life’s quiet moments. Moreover, the text describes this point of view as mirroring the external world and awakening that what “was best in him,” establishing that the process of development Andrei undergoes means bringing that perspective forward and working in harmony with the established goodness of the world. By stepping out of the ferry, and thus out of the waters of the river, he metaphorically becomes re-born into a world that he only subconsciously recognizes

the beauty of. Consequently, the text increasingly places reconciling this lofty ideal with the minute details of life the ultimate goal of its characters.

As Andrei's internalizes the loving vision exemplified in the "clear blue sky," the relationships that had previously been distorted begin to reflect the reality of love. For example, we can look at how Andrei's understanding of the world evolves from the previously seen selfish mindset based on glory to a focus on loving interconnectedness, exemplified acutely in his piercing view of the intrinsic perversion of war and the military caste. Seven years after his moment with Pierre, Andrei rejoins the Russian military to defend his homeland from the now-invading Napoleon with a greatly different understanding of the meaning of his actions. On the eve of the Battle of Borodino, Andrei castigates war to Pierre as not "courtesy" but "the vilest thing in the world, and we must understand that and not play at war" (775). By doing so, Andrei implicitly rejects his previous faith in aristocratic military service and glory because it. Instead of ameliorating the pain of conflict, he takes practices like military glory, taking prisoners, and respect as self-defeating lies endemic to the whole rotten institution. Sitting around the campfire, he notes how the aims and means of war – lies, deception, murder, sabotage, the complete restriction of freedom – contrast with the esteem of the military estate, where

"all kings except the Chinese wear military uniforms, and the one who has killed the most people gets the greatest reward...they come together, like tomorrow, to kill each other...and then say prayers of thanksgiving for having slaughtered so many people (inflating the numbers), and proclaim victory, supposing that the more people slaughtered, the greater the merit. How does God look down and listen to them!" (776)

One would be remiss to not make comparisons to modern times. While this specific realization is only a small part of the journey of one character in a fourteen hundred page novel, Andrei's insight that the self-preserving logic of social institutions like the military and the state corrupts our human nature, and that we ought to find something greater about our humanity and God beyond it, is an essential element of Tolstoy's art that contributes to its beauty. Andrei rejects war, other than as a

means of defending his homeland and family, because of the discord that it sews amongst people. Through describing the nature of war as disgusting because it encourages the elite to kill as many as they can and “say prayers of Thanksgiving” for it, Andrei and the text (now working in harmony) imply that war works in a manner contrary to human nature and the nature of the world. By implication, they both demonstrate a belief in the intrinsic value of humans and that human relations are naturally harmonious.

As the crescendo reaches its apex, we see how Andrei’s distaste for the petty vanity displayed by the officer corps at Austerlitz that stems from his changed understanding of the world goes hand-in-hand with selfless action that stems from his working in alignment with “the fundamental law of life.” By doing so, *War and Peace* suggests that a right understanding of the world can never be removed from right actions. Andrei condemns the officers and marshals that he had aspired to become in years previous, saying “if anything depended on instructions from the staff, I’d be there giving instructions, but instead I have the honor of serving here in the regiment...” (773). While Andrei previously thought of himself, his abilities in battle, and the glory it would bring to him, he now rebukes military officers for the same failings. Instead of the precise instructions and formulations of the elite (and especially the Germans), success in the “hundred million of the most varied possibilities” of the battle rested solely on the resolve of the common Russian soldier – a soldier, Andrei believes, that would fight to defend his home, and a soldier that Andrei feels honored to serve beside. Instead of fighting selfishly for his own “Toulon,” Andrei sees himself as only one of “a hundred thousand” Russian soldiers, showing the disregard for himself inherent to selfless action. Indeed, Andrei explicitly tells us that he fights now for his own gain but for others, saying that in Russia he defends he has “a father, and a son, and a sister” (774). In a sense, Andrei’s initial faith in his worldview has been replaced with his own exalted view of himself and in the aristocratic military class, and in turn with faith in nationalism. But in doing so, he moves closer

and closer to the integrative truth of Tolstoy's ideal because that ideal is based on working on the behalf of others without regard for himself. Indeed, this time Andrei teaches Pierre about the truth of world rather than the other way around, as he nods along: "‘Yes, yes,’ said Pierre, gazing at Prince Andrei with flashing eyes, ‘I agree with you completely, completely!’" (775)

The motif of Andrei's nearly-fatal experiences leading to a "true" understanding of the world and in turn to magnanimous action reaches its crescendo at the moment of his death, demonstrating the interrelated nature of understanding and action. Held in reserve for eight hours while waiting for the order to advance, Andrei's regiment holds a formation for almost eight hours while under constant fire from the French artillery, losing almost a third of their men in that time (808-809). Andrei himself very nearly falls victim to the artillery, thinking to himself as he stares at a smoking, spinning cannonball that nearly missed him that, "I can't, I don't want to die, I love life, I love this grass, the earth, the air..." (810-811). Immediately after he recovers, the impact of another cannonball nearby sends him flying, leaving him fatally wounded. Andrei's reluctance and inability to face his own death represents another attempt to impose his own control on the world. Once he realizes that death is inevitable, this barrier falls. As he dies, Andrei finally manages to internalize and live out the vision he saw long ago at Austerlitz and the text reflects that fact in his actions. In the field hospital, he begins to feel "a bliss such as he had not experienced for a long time" as the best parts of his life come back to him (813). At that exact moment, he recognizes the soldier beside him as Anatole Kuragin, the man who had seduced his fiancée Natasha, and forgives him before weeping tears of joy and pity on his behalf. By doing so, Andrei performs an incredibly magnanimous action that moves in accordance with the love feels in his heart at that moment, the same love he felt under the sky of Austerlitz and with Pierre, and a love created by the reflection of his own sense of self in Anatole. And as Frank notes, this action cannot be removed from his final realization that, "love is God, and to die – means that I, a part of love, return to the common and eternal source" (984). As

he dies, Andrei's soul "returns, as it were, to that eternal sky that had always intervened to lift him above the vanity of his earthly cares and ambitions" (Frank 79).

War and Peace operates on the level of an epic drama to communicate a profoundly intimate moral ideal. Returning back to art vs. morality conflict the serves as the impetus of this analysis, Kaufman asks the lay reader "how, after all, can you 'agree' or 'disagree' with *War and Peace*? You can't, for what Tolstoy gives us in that novel is not so much a set of *answers* to life's every challenge as an *attitude toward living*" ("Give War and Peace a Chance" 12). But that attitude toward living *is* an answer to how to deal with the problems of life, and both the answer and the question are essential parts of *War and Peace* and Tolstoy's writing more broadly. Through the interconnected workings of the world – or as Tolstoy put it, the "endless labyrinth of linkages" – Andrei manages to put aside his selfishness and distorted understanding of the world and instead live in a way that reflects the reality of love, before dissolving at death into the eternal whole. Rather than Andrei's death demonstrating his inability to live in the accordance with the Tolstoyan ideal which contrasts with Pierre's ultimate spiritual victory, Tolstoy elicits meaning through juxtaposition with both stories, as "just as Prince Andrei's ego dissolves as he moves toward death, Pierre's ego dissolves as he moves to new life" (Rosen 115).

Vainglory, Freedom, and the Ceaseless Drive for Perfection: Kasatsky in "Father Sergius"

"When you give alms, do not blow a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets to win the praise of others. Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right is doing, so that your almsgiving may be secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you."

- Matthew 6:2-4

As mentioned previously, after the publication of *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy had a profound spiritual crisis that deeply impacted the direction of his personal life. He mostly withdrew from society and began more and more to devote his life to long philosophical essays and books advancing his beliefs about proper moral behavior, religion, and politics. But what changes in

his artistic style? It would be incorrect to say nothing. His writing style began to change as well, as his stories became shorter and more fast-paced (Pevear xviii). At times, he experiments with parable. It is exactly this simpler, economical, moralistic writing that critics describe as the “other Tolstoy.” Kaufman, for instance, despite calling the later Tolstoy a “fixed, furious warning beacon” chastises these stories as “didactic fiction” for leaving behind the “endless labyrinth of linkages” seen in his larger, detailed fiction in favor of what he calls a “circumscribed, hortatory worldview of the artist-as-preacher” (“Understanding” 22). It’s certainly true to say that Tolstoy leaves behind the immense dramas of *War and Peace* and *Anna*, where a variety of different characters, each with their own motivations, undergo their own development in connection with others. Instead, Tolstoy’s later work show us the insides of usually one character in isolation as they go about their own process of purification. But the end result is the same: an understanding of the reality of love that must be lived out through selfless action and union with others. To see this, we will look at the lesser-known short story “Father Sergius,” which shares a great many characteristics with the story of Andrei Bolkonsky in *War and Peace*.

But this latter story does differ in tack from the transcendent experiences of *War and Peace*, which through extravagant detail shows how the otherworldly radiance of world awakens “what is best” in Andrei. Instead, “Father Sergius” remains an intensely psychological portrait of the titular character, one Stepan Kasatsky, seeking to understand in the midst of confusion what life he was meant to live. In essence, Andrei’s story is the challenge of trying to realize an ideal in the non-ideal world; Kasatsky’s struggle is to separate the wheat from the chaff to discover what that ideal is. Seen this way, “Sergius” bears a resemblance to Hawthorne’s murky characters with their “secret sin” who must make the internal match the external in order to live life to the fullest. The ideal Kasatsky arrives at by the end of the story remains the same as with Andrei: an authentic experience of life that reflects the same values of selflessness and compassionate engagement. But rather than simple

didacticism, “Sergius” confounds the reader with the same murk as its main character, rendering it deceptively difficult. While it might seem like a simple story to espouse the virtues of humility and selflessness, on closer inspection we get a sense of the struggle and confusion that comes about when trying to lead “the good life,” and one’s complicated relationship with institutions and social norms that are supposed to make our lives better. Kasatsky struggles to free himself from the mountainous pride and membership in the military and religious institutions that cloud his ability to live an authentic life. As he comes closer and closer to what is “true,” Kasatsky becomes increasingly capable of freely choosing his path in life. In this section, we will examine the effects of how pride and social institutions cloud his freedom and his spiritual renewal at different points in his life, before delving into Kasatsky’s own “clear blue sky.” The constant change of names that the narrator uses to describe him, from the aristocratic Prince Stepan, to the mystic Father Sergius, to the simple servant of God Kasatsky, reflects the instability of his sense of self; for this reason, I will follow the same naming progression. For Kasatsky to live in accordance with love, he must be able to recognize that he is no different from anyone else.

Much like Andrei, Prince Stepan begins the story with his involvement in the military clouds his ability to see life honestly, exemplified by Stepan’s naïve devotion to Tsar Nicholas II. Placed in a highly-regarded military academy after the death of his father, the narrator describes how whenever the Tsar visited the academy, Stepan would experience “the rapture of a lover, the same that he experienced later when he met the object of his love...he wanted to show him his boundless devotion, to sacrifice something to him, even his whole self” (256). For someone encased wholly in the intertwined realms of the state and the military, the Tsar becomes the highest symbol of perfection. Less a lover than a living god, Stepan desires union with the Tsar in much the same way he would later desire union with God – because it represents the apex of perfection for that world. But just as dreams and fantasies signify the distorted nature of Andrei’s world, the fact that Stepan

loves not so much a man but the role shows the perversion of aristocratic-military ideology. Because Stepan has so embedded himself in this ideology and its way of understanding the world, he cannot see the world and its beauty authentically.

At the same time, his prideful belief that he exists above others, seen in his ceaseless drive for perfection harms his ability to see the world honestly. Because of his faith in the greatness of the military and the state, his pride initially takes shape in his desire to become the ultimate officer and gentleman, an ideal he ultimately cannot maintain. After graduating and receiving a highly placed post his career as a “most ordinary brilliant young guards officer” seems a lock, yet “inside him complex and intense work was going on (257). Much like Andrei’s struggle to reconcile high ideals with his lingering trauma and rejection of the world, the narrator calls attention to the misalignment of Stepan’s internal and external focuses. His internal life, we’re told, consists “in attaining perfection and success in every task that came his way, earning people’s praise and astonishment,” working “until he was praised and held up as an example to others” (257). Despite the fact that this drive for perfection, motivated by “enormous self-esteem” and a desire for the acclamation of others appears to be paying dividends, the narrator suggests that something is not quite right under the hood. As he attempts to become the perfect officer, so too does Stepan attempt to elevate his station in society. The narrator tells us that he pursues marriage with a high-placed lady not out of love, but because “he was used to being first, and in this case he was far from being so” (258). Though he does come around to truly love his fiancée, he leaves her after she fails to live up to the “ideal, heavenly purity” demanded of aristocratic women by revealing a past love affair with the Tsar, and would have killed her lover had he not been “his adored Tsar” (261). Paradoxically, Stepan seems to act as though the Tsar had cheated on him even though no infidelity has occurred on any part. But what this moment does is reveal to him the supposed “impurity” of the world around him by showing the fallibility of that which he holds dearest.

After Sergius leaves the military he enters the monastery, and from here after the ill-effects of the religious, rather than governmental, institutions take center stage, showing us how as a monk, a hermit, and a religious celebrity the church clouds Stepan's judgment. Despite the change in the circumstances of his life, the text continues to show us how Stepan's prideful to desire to show his superiority over others by becoming "perfect" clouds his judgement. To do so, Tolstoy uses a rather uncharacteristic dose of firm verbal irony to demonstrate Stepan's continued vainglory. As he flees the world after his fiancée's quasi-infidelity, his sister accurately estimates his emotions, thinking that "by becoming a monk, he showed that...he had risen to a new height, from which he could look down on the people he had envied before" (261). True to form, Stepan enters the monastery in order to demonstrate how much purer he is than the rest of the world. Entering the monastic life on the Orthodox feast of the Protection, Kasatsky "found joy in the monastery in attaining to the greatest outer as well as inner perfection...as a monk he strove to be perfect: always hardworking, abstentious, humble, meek, pure not only in deed but in thought, and obedient" (262). Indeed, "the interest of life did not consist only in an ever increasing submission of his will, in an ever increasing humility, but also in the attaining of all Christian virtues, which at first had seemed easily attainable" (262). While "Sergius" dwells in psychological murk in a way likely unrivalled by much of Tolstoy's writing, a sense of contradiction immediately becomes apparent: how can someone strive for humility while also basing their whole *raison d'être* on achieving complete and utter perfection? Clearly, something is wrong here. This paradox becomes apparent even more so as Tolstoy tells us that "humility before his inferiors was not only easy for him, but gave him joy" (262). True humility would not recognize any kind of social distinction, or that one person was worse in quality than the other. Instead of relinquishing his vainglory, Stepan has merely changed out the kind of perfection and glory he desires, driving for the attainment "of all Christian virtues" rather than a highly-prized appointment as an Imperial Adjutant and in the process failing at each.

Fitting his military education, Stepan continues to rejoice in complete obedience to authority that deprives him of needing to take responsibility for his actions. As the narrator tells us, he would have been burdened by the “length and monotony of the church services, and the bustle of the visitors, and the bad qualities of the brothers” as well as “the same prayers several times a day,” were it not for the complete obedience demanded of monks (262). Instead, he rejoices in them, since “any possibility of doubting anything at all was removed by the same obedience to the elder...joy was given by the consciousness of humility and the unquestionableness of his actions, which were all determined by the elder” (262). Like his previous infatuation with the military and the state, Stepan now gives over control of his life to the rigors and dictates of his monastic order. Rather than experiencing a genuine transcendent, life-affirming feeling brought about by religious ritual, Stepan’s joy comes from obedience; in a sense, he’s only going through the motions with the intent to be seen to be reverent by others. Such a life could hardly be said to be authentic and loving since his commitment to discipline replaces his capacity to determine his own course.

One could be forgiven at this point in the story for thinking that Sergius’ being is all vanity and pride, and his dramatic conversion an unconscious show. But, as he goes into the monastery, the omniscient narrator tells us that “there was in him another, genuinely religious feeling...which, bound up with the feeling of pride and the desire for preeminence, guided him” (261). By describing the “genuine” feeling within Sergius as something bound up inextricably with his pride, with the implication that it must be separated in order for him to find relief, the text sets up the key conflict of the story. Additionally, the narrator continues the Tolstoyan motif, already seen in Prince Andrei, of intrinsic goodness and love being something always interior, that must be discovered intuitively and reflected in our interactions with the world and others. We can also see Sergius’ drive for holiness in his abandonment of the monastery for the life of a secluded hermit. After furiously challenging his abbot for summoning him to re-acquaint himself with his old commander and seeing

their “self-satisfied” faces he departs to take over the cell (that is, “a cave dug into a hillside”) of a recently deceased recluse so that solitude may “humble his pride” (265-267). Here the story jumps ahead six years (267). From the time-gap, we can again infer a genuine desire for goodness and holiness on the part of Sergius; no one would spend six years (and more) in a cave for the sole purpose of overcoming pride through prayer and contemplation otherwise. His attempts to banish his doubts about God and religion demonstrate the same internal drive for goodness. Once he arrives in the cave he comes to be plagued with incessant doubts “which he had not expected” (269). Finally freed from the demands of the military and monastic life under an abbot, Sergius is free to come to his own decisions about life. Without no one to interact with and the constant quest for perfection, whether military, social, or spiritual still guiding his life, Sergius resorts to unconvincingly reciting biblical passages to drive back his doubts (270). As Tolstoy tells us, he steadies “his faith on its shaky pedestal and carefully stepped back so as not to knock it over” (270). Extending the metaphor, we see that Sergius is left without anything to support the identity that had for so many years rested on the affirmation of others yet carries on all the same. Rather, he goes about his quest for goodness in the wrong way – prioritizing rational thought and reflection than an intuitive understanding.

Mirroring Andrei’s own moral development, which takes place as a sequence of big and small events that awaken “what is best” in him and bring about a change in his worldview, Sergius comes into his own freedom as he realizes how his pride and the church has stifled his intrinsic thirst for goodness. Like Andrei, these events are both big and small they bring the moral core at Sergius’ heart to the forefront. Oddly enough, the first of these moments occurs when Sergius dramatically removes his own finger, which grants him temporary freedom from the lust that plagues him. During his sixth year of solitude, a woman from the town named Ms. Makovkin seeking to “upset it all, overturn it” (268) tries to seduce him. In a deviation from the rest of the

story, we enter her head for several pages as she enters Sergius' cell and attempts to seduce him by feigning distress in the cold Russian night and seeking refuge, before undressing to dry off (274-275). Like Sergius himself during his time as a soldier, Makovkin has placed her own faith in something external to herself; in this case, her ability to stir things up and cause excitement that will make her known in the nearby town. Stepping back into Sergius' head, he decides to quash his powerful lust first by sticking his finger into a flame, and then by chopping off his own finger with the axe he uses to split wood (275). To the audience, this scene is justifiably odd. But within the logic of the story, it makes perfect sense. It is one of the first times in the story we see Sergius make an authentic choice to do something to consciously further his desire for goodness. Additionally, it is one of the first times he acts entirely free of vanity, as he considers only his need to free himself from the lust that plagues him. Indeed, the moment happens quickly, as Sergius instinctively understands the need to free himself from spiritual distractions. As Gustafson notes, Sergius' "moment of freedom from his desires releases the charity within" (418). Astonished by this behavior and the "quiet, joyful light" in Sergius' eyes, Makovkin enters the monastery herself, and years later Sergius would look back on the moment as a pinnacle of his life.

Just as Andrei initially fails to internalize the meaning of the "clear blue sky" and find the same transcendent beauty in his daily life, the monastic institution stifles Sergius' inner life and prevents him from replicating this moment in the mundane. But instead of remaining complacent, this stifling causes Sergius to begin to see these institutions for what they really are. Ultimately, Sergius finds himself unable to progress any further towards the "purification" that he seeks without casting the church aside entirely. As news of Makovkin's seemingly miraculous conversion spreads, Sergius becomes renowned throughout the surrounding countryside. Once he prays over a small child who later makes a full recovery from a serious illness, he becomes a full-blown religious celebrity throughout all of Russia, sought for his purported ability to heal the sick. But for Sergius,

this development heralds a spiritual disaster. After the monastery where his cave is located realizes the potential of his celebrity, they “surrounded him with conditions in which he could be of the greatest use” (278). Sensing a possibility for prestige and profit, the monastery reminds him of his duty to fulfill “Christ’s law of love,” and gives him everything he might possibly need, an anteroom for the convenience of his visitors, only asking that he not turn away anyone (278-279). By placing all of these luxuries at his disposal, the monastery increasingly predisposes Sergius to give in to his weaknesses. Seeking to preserve their own interests which Tolstoy shows to be not of the “real” world, the monastery – kept faceless to emphasize the institutional, rather than personal logic driving the proceedings – contradicts the Christian spirit that they profess. Indeed, rather than accepting the children of God equally (as they urge Sergius himself to do) the monastery fills his visitors with merchants and members of the upper class (280). Like the previous condemnations of the military as ultimately self-obsessed and self-serving, Tolstoy presents membership in mass institutions and spiritual fulfillment as mutually exclusive. Sergius cannot live a life that seeks to treat others and himself as God intended and be a part of the church at the same time.

Like Stepan faced structural and personal obstacles to his spiritual awakening, his own pride once again accompanies Sergius’ challenges to finding the way forward. This time, Tolstoy portrays the struggle against pride as a misalignment of internal and external which must be resolved. As his fame increases, he feels that “the internal was turning into the external, that the source of living water was drying up in him, that everything he did was done more and more for people and not for God” (279). Contrasted with his self-denying act with Makovkin where Sergius’ interior life was entirely in sync with his actions which allowed him to make a great change in the world, this focus on the internal and the external bring attention to Sergius’ pride. While ostensibly in his interactions with other people – the external – Sergius helps other people by comforting and consoling them, these actions are out of step with his internal thoughts. The notion that the “internal was turning

into the external” shows this dynamic – instead of living based on his own conscience, more and more his life has centered around the actions of others. The text shows that his own ego, as before, has caused this dilemma, as when he thinks about the good he does for others, “he could not help rejoicing over it...he thought of himself as a shining light, and the more he felt that, the more he felt the weakening, the dying out of the divine light of truth burning in him” (279). By constantly thinking about the good he does for other people, Sergius falls back into Stepan’s old sin of pride. Placing himself above others now as the holy mystic rather than the successful, aristocratic officer, he once again “goes along with the motions” out of a desire for perfection.

Like how Andrei’s story concludes with the dissolution of his own ego on his deathbed that leads him to compassionate engagement in the world, Sergius’ final piercing of his pride happens because of his despair at his own sinfulness. In a direct contrast to the earlier episode with Makovkin, in the midst of this spiritual malaise Sergius gives into temptation and sleeps with the daughter of a butcher who comes to him for aid (287). Presented yet again with a shattered ideal, he declares to himself “there is no God” and considers taking his own life. But driven by a sudden dream of his cousin Pashenka, he decides to seek her out for aid (287). After he journeys almost two hundred miles through Russia on foot, she greets her famous cousin in awe, exclaiming, “It can’t be! Styopa! Sergius! Father Sergius!” (290) The progression of these names have significance. The first, “Styopa,” is the diminutive Russian form of his given name, corresponding to his idyllic childhood. The second and third correspond to his time in the monastery, which lead to his fame as a mystic; by referring to him with each in turn, Pashenka “clothes” him in the institutions that have stifled him. He corrects her in despair: “Yes, himself...only not Sergius, not Father Sergius, but the great sinner Stepan Kasatsky, a lost man, a great sinner. Take me in, help me” (290). Crying out, Kasatsky symbolically strips himself of his involvement in these institutions and places himself not as an exalted man but as a “poor sinner,” just like anyone else. For the first time in the story,

Stepan/Sergius acts not because he desires to perfect himself and place himself above others but simply out of the very human drive for help and comfort. Consequently, it also represents a moment when Kasatsky thinks whole intuitively rather than rationalizing his situation, becoming more human as a result.

Like Andrei, this spiritual help can only happen through interacting and sharing his life and his struggles with another human being, suggesting that the peace that Kasatsky (as the story now refers to him as) has ultimately sought can only take place in community. For Kasatsky, his cousin Pashenka serves as the ultimate example of virtuous action which drives him to live the holy life he has unconsciously sought since the beginning of the novel. Describing her character, the text tells us that Pashenka is “almost physically unable to endure unkindly relations between people” (289). Speaking with her, Kasatsky investigates how life has treated her since they saw each other as children. Curiously, we learn that she has suffered from an abusive, alcoholic husband, an alcoholic son-in-law, and almost complete poverty. Yet, she unconsciously continues to see the best in her family, taking care of her grandchildren and teaching the village children to play the piano while constantly denying her ability to do anything whatsoever. The text is not saying that Pashenka has become virtuous due of her suffering and abuse; rather, Pashenka stands as an example of the Tolstoyan Ideal because she meekly accepts everything that comes her way and tries to do her best because it’s all that her nature knows. She embodies selflessness in the same way Stepan/Sergius embodies selfishness, as she has never, not once, thought of herself while by always seeking perfection Stepan has with few exceptions only thought of himself. Inspired, Kasatsky thinks to himself that,

“Pashenka is precisely what I should have been and was not. I lived for people under the pre-text of God, she lives for God, fancying she’s living for people. Yes, one good deed, a cup of water given without thought of reward, is worth more than all my benefactions for people” (295)

In turn, each represents the intuitive nature of the process of awakening to love: Pashenka because she cannot live any other way but full of love, and Kasatsky because Pashenka serves as a moral exemplar that immediately pierces the veil of misunderstanding. Finally seeing clearly how his desire to “serve God” has been “soiled, overgrown by human glory” he travels the countryside helping others but not sticking around for a reward, preaching the Gospels such that they sound “new and at the same time long familiar,” before being deported to Siberia where he lives out his life peacefully caring for children and the sick (295-296). Much like Andrei needed to, but struggled to achieve the ideal of clear blue sky by lovingly involving himself in the world, Kasatsky is only able to live the life he had been seeking by totally forgetting about any thought of reward, whether that be material or self-aggrandizement, and going about trying to help other people at all times.

With different means, Tolstoy in “Father Sergius” invites us into the same reality and process of coming to love the world and everyone in it as he does with Andrei Bolkonsky in *War and Peace*. Just like with Andrei, Tolstoy shows us Stepan’s highest highs and the lowest lows, balancing the transcendent with the immanent to show how our human nature must be lived out in the everyday. In the process, he honestly depicts with the stroke of a fine brush the deepest despair and highest consolation that humankind experiences – despite the fact that Tolstoy, through Weir’s narrative alibis, also excises his own personal demons along the way. Even if “Father Sergius” does not make us “love life in all its innumerable, inexhaustible manifestations,” it still challenges us to love that life more deeply by showing the beauty in the process.

Style, Simplicity, and Virtue: Alyosha in “Alyosha the Pot”

“‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers –
That perches in the soul -
And sings the tune without the words -
And never stops - at all -”

- Emily Dickinson

The five-and-a-half page short story “Alyosha the Pot”, written in 1905 only five years before his death, is a perfect example of this kind of late Tolstoy that purportedly comprises artistic merit for didactic preaching. A dramatic change from the world-encompassing detail of *War and Peace*, “Alyosha” depicts two years in the life of a simple peasant boy who comes to work in for a merchant in town on the behalf of his father and his brief period of struggles, culminating in his death in an accident. Compared to the saga of Andrei or the tale of Kasatsky, Alyosha is something else entirely. Instead of depicting the manifold struggles and deep psychology of the main character and showing his moral development over the course of many years, Alyosha begins the story the same way he ends it: a “holy fool” who exemplifies the worldview that Tolstoy sought but was never able to reach (Pevear xviii). Such “holy fools” have a long tradition in Russian literature, designated as “holy” because their foolish or mad behavior, indecipherable or unconceivable to the average person, exists in order to bring others around them closer to God and holiness (Thompson 245-246). Instead of a long, drawn out purification that lasts the course of many years, Tolstoy frames “Alyosha” around a central problem: how do we respond to things not going our way? From the tension inherent in this question, Tolstoy uses Alyosha to illustrate what someone acting in accordance with the “fundamental law of life” would look like.

Short and terse, “Alyosha” revels in the absolute simplicity of its titular character by showing how he accepts whatever comes his way with equanimity. This dilemma of theodicy remains present from the very beginning of the story, as we learn that Aloysha received his nickname “the pot” for falling and shattering one of the family’s pots on an errand, leading to a beating from his mother and the torment of his classmates. Through his name, Alyosha becomes marked undeservedly, consigned to having his nickname remind him of something not even his fault that ought to have been left in his past. But Alyosha’s bad luck intensifies over the course of the story. Sent to work as a house servant in a merchants shop after the Russian military drafts his brother into the army, his master’s

family constantly berate him with tasks: “All one heard was ‘off you run, brother,’ or ‘Alyosha, take care of this.’ ‘What’s the matter, Alyosha, did you forget or something?’ ‘Look out you don’t forget, Alyosha’” (369). Stacking each of these quotes on top of each other, we the reader get no room for breath, giving the impression of Alyosha receiving these commands at a manic pace. Like the “pot” moniker, this treatment, including accusing him at one point of “forgetting” something, is wholly undeserved. Even still, it would not be all that he would suffer from as his misfortunes continue, with his father taking all his wages and forbidding him from marrying the peasant cook, Ustinya, that he falls in love with after “learning, to his amazement, that besides relations between people that come from their need of each other, there are also quite special relations... a person just needs another person for no reason” other than to be nice to them before he accidentally mortally wounds himself falling from his master’s icy roof (370-373).

Alyosha goes along the same ontological and psychological process as Andrei and Sergius, but in a blink-and-you’ll-miss-it way that expresses the fullness of Alyosha’s goodness. In every instance, the tragedy that befalls Alyosha does not reflect his hardworking and honest character. Yet, Alyosha’s responses to these tragedies, like Andrei’s transcendent experiences or Kasatsky’s profound expression of human suffering and need for others, constitute the “meat” of the story’s merit. For an example, we can turn to how Tolstoy treats Alyosha’s crushed plan to marry his sweetheart Ustinya. As we’ve already seen, this relationship has a special significance for him, a significance created out of the irrevocably human mutual need and dependency we could all relate to in the best and worst of time. But because the master of the house refuses to keep a married couple in his employ, Alyosha’s father orders him to break things off. Tolstoy describes their interaction by saying that, “the father spoke a lot. Alyosha stood and signed. When the father finished, Alyosha smiled. ‘Well it can be given up.’ ‘That’s the way’” (372). Likewise, he breaks the news to the rest of the house, telling his would-be fiancée, “How can I disobey him? Seems we’ll have to drop it” (372).

And when the merchant's wife confirms that he's followed through, we see him again: "'Seems I have,' said Alyosha, and he laughed and all at once wept" (372). Alyosha's abandonment of the engagement does not satisfy for modern readers, and rightfully so. It's not that he feels nothing for his fiancée: he weeps and laughs all at once when thinking about her. But pay attention to what Tolstoy leaves unsaid, namely, the process of grief and seriousness hidden behind the lines "Alyosha stood and sighed." Realizing that he and Ustinya both need the job else they will both starve as well as accepting and grieving that loss happen so quickly and opaquely that we get the impression it could not be otherwise. In this "cascading breakdown of language" (Weir 173), we see the belief that words cannot ultimately express the beauty of a Christian life. Even still, Alyosha manages to rejoice and love the world, mixing his sorrow with laughter, adding to the beauty of his story.

Tolstoy's writing style, so different from *War and Peace* almost forty years earlier, expresses this determinism of compassion as well. Keeping with his devoutly Christian world view, Tolstoy reveals the goodness of Alyosha's character by showing him what he does, rather than what he thinks. When the narrator tells us that his peers mocked him or his father scolded him, we see nothing about what happens inside his head, only that he "said nothing or else laughed" with the other boys and "said nothing and listened" to his father (368). Contrasting with the intense introspectiveness and self-flagellation of Andrei or Father Sergius, we almost never see Alyosha's inner world. Instead, everything we know about him the narrator reveals by describing his actions and his responses to the world around him, evoking the old parable that "actions speaking louder than words." Alyosha's words speak volumes, as despite his constant haranguing by his master's family he "did not forget, and had time for it all, and smiled for it all" (369). Instead of soliloquizing his situation, he rejoices when he saves money to buy a simple red woolen coat (370). As he lays dying with a priest and his would-be fiancée, he comforts her, saying "Thank you, Ustyusha, for pitying me. You see, it's better that they told us not to get married otherwise it would have come to

nothing. Now it's all for the best" (373). Unlike Tolstoy's earlier work in *War and Peace*, the beauty of "Alyosha" comes from its restrained simplicity and perfection of putting every part of the story right where it needs to be to make us admire this simple peasant. Rather, in this case, than seeing Andrei's transcendent emotions driven by his own ego and doubt about the meaning of the world, we see the peasant who wears every emotion on his sleeve but whose very nature is honesty, selflessness, and kindness, mirroring the intuitiveness of Pashenka and Kasatsky. Tolstoy sums this up best when describing how Alyosha,

"prayed with the priest only with his hands and his heart. And in his heart was this: that, as it is good here, provided you obey and do not hurt anyone, so it will be good there.

He spoke little. Only asked to drink and kept being surprised at something

He got surprised at something, stretched out, and died" (373)

Alyosha is not as good of a character as Andrei or Kasatsky in the sense of dimensionality, but "Alyosha the Pot" isn't really about Alyosha as much as it is about the beauty of the life Alyosha represents. Compare Alyosha's death with Andrei's, which Tolstoy describes by saying,

"Yes, that was death. I died – I woke up. Yes, death is an awakening.' Clarity suddenly came to his [Andrei's] soul, and the curtain that until then had concealed the unknown was raised before his inner gaze. He felt the release of a force that previously had been as if bound in him and that strange lightness which from then on did not leave him." (986)

Andrei's death happens as the function of an inner realization that brings about a newly-found truth, but Alyosha's stays short and simple. Alyosha does not need the sudden revelations that drive Andrei and Sergius – through a simplicity and love reflected in the simplicity of Tolstoy's writing, we see how he's already met the goal living in accordance with love. Drawing on Weir's suggestions that language ultimately becomes inadequate for Tolstoy to communicate his meaning, (1, 144) we can understand the Alyosha passage, versus the equivalent section of *War and Peace*, as relying more on the reader's own understanding of what Alyosha's situation would look like. By contrasting what we would expect from Alyosha based on this understanding – i.e., fear and panic at the prospect of death – with what we see, Tolstoy brings his vision into clearer focus. The struggle of Tolstoy's

characters is how to internalize high and lofty ideals to make one's internal life and external appearance work in perfect symphony. This is why we see nothing of Alyosha's internal thoughts. The substance of the work, which always assures us that Alyosha works hard and treats others with kindness, makes it impossible for it to be any other way.

Conclusion

Indeed, as Gustafson notes, Tolstoy does only have one driving part of his plot: the soul's continuous quest to achieve union with God by coming to live in accordance with love, a process that he delves into again and again. By doing so, Tolstoy's characters come to live more honest, virtuous lives, making their own internal goodness match the external workings of the world. Personally, I like Kaufman's description of Tolstoy as a "fixed, furious warning beacon." The compelling nature of his morality stems not only from the way it affirms the intrinsic value of life, but from simplicity. If we want to preserve our sense of the world and ourselves as loving and just, that morality demands that we take radical action to reflect that in both the transcendent and the immanent, in much the same way that the basic facts of COVID (and you thought I could go the whole paper without talking about the pandemic!) demand, with no ifs, ands, or buts, courageous action on the part of the whole community. The same plots seen in Andrei's "clear blue sky," Kasatsky's brutal recognition of his own common humanity, and Alyosha's enjoyment of the small, beautiful moments of life despite immense suffering can be found in Ivan Ilyich's realization that "the barely noticeable impulses he had felt to fight against what highly placed people considered good" were "the real thing," (88) Pierre's understanding of accepting and loving the wonderfully mundane nature of the world achieved through a simple gift of a potato while he starves, and throughout Tolstoy's worldview. The internal causes of the virtues displayed by Tolstoy's characters, namely, their own trials on the road to purification, cannot be removed from their external actions once they achieve this moment of realization that brings them in step with God. Tolstoy's God is

not the Supreme King of the Universe but Aquinas' *ipsum esse subsistens*, being existing of itself with no outside causes, the "great font of being in and through which all finite things subsist and act," (Barron) a being and manner of living in the world synonymous with love, communalism, and unity.

All too often with art we, driven by our Formalistic urges, associate that which tries to teach us with that which is lesser. Instead, Tolstoy's art gains meaning and artistic value through a complicated interplay of artistic style and moral worldview. These works of art become beautiful because of, rather than in spite of, the author's "heavy-handed" ideology and belief in the value of compassionate engagement with the world. But consider some of the other great "moralistic" pieces of art. Was *The Christmas Carol* bad because Scrooge has a complete change of heart? Does *Les Misérables* fail because it focuses on Jean Valjean's Christianity and intrinsic goodness? In the realm of popular media, the most famous and well-loved moments in *The Grinch* are when the titular curmudgeon's hearts "grows three sizes that day," and the denizens of Whoville come together to celebrate each other despite their misfortunes. Art speaks on the level of empathetic connection, and the reader can only interpret art by using their own understanding of life as a referent point, a fact that the simplicity of Tolstoy's later writing reflects. Tolstoy does this by portraying the essential drive towards goodness and spiritual wholeness by using his psychological realism to reveal what we think and feel about our own lives even though we may not consciously understand those emotions at all. Because of this, reading Tolstoy – for myself, at least – gives the same radiance as when I first discovered my love of writing, and exploring myself through other worlds. Likewise, Tolstoy is at his best when his description of the soul's quest for goodness shines a light on ourselves, making us discover places of ourselves we scarcely thought we had. In his writing early and late, Tolstoy explores the individual's journey to mystical union with God, which brings us closer to vision of the world united in mutual love and universal brotherhood. That vision gave Tolstoy his incredible moral influence and power, and we should all be so lucky to see the same in our own lives.

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