

TOLSTOJ, THE LOVE FOR REALITY

Translated by Achille Cattaneo



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We begin to get to know young Tolstoj through his diary. He who writes is a restless adolescent, full of contradictory aspects.

Reading his notebook, the young count appears hypersensitive and at the same time impetuous, shy and yet fiery, a lazy person who feels within himself an urge for greatness, a narcissist who loves to describe himself as ugly. He who writes is vain, and at the same time fully aware of being so. He enjoys having been born an aristocrat, dressing well, behaving “Comme il faut.” In the months in Sevastopol, where he served as a second lieutenant during the Crimean War, his greatest concern was not enemy cannon fire but not feeling as elegant and at ease as the other officers. Yet soon this young man, who might have seemed frivolous, would show a unique predisposition to look within himself and discover an almost shamanic ability to become anyone. When he writes, Tolstoj forgets everything, no longer

knows where he is or who he really is, he becomes his characters, lives in their place, sees what they see, feels their pleasure and suffers their anguish.

This happens magically especially in *War and Peace*: his pride, his sense of dignity and duty are embodied in Andrej Bolkonskj; his awkwardness, his feeling of being ugly and inadequate, but also his love for understanding mystery and his sense of compassion become those of Pierre Bezukhov.

Many have spoken of this double identification, his mirroring of parts of himself in two such different characters, but perhaps few have noticed that the character who speaks most of Tolstoj is Natasha. Through this little being, Lev describes what is greatest and most magical in himself: his infinite and irrational rapture in feeling alive, his pan-like ability to merge with and take on the rhythms of nature itself, and the ecstasy and sense of flight that a full moon in a moonlit night can give him in the darkness.

Tolstoj questions death and tries to discover what it is by entrusting himself to writing about it, as if it might reveal itself to his inspiration this way. Bolkonskj and Bezukhov have contacts with the Absolute when near death or in danger.

The Absolute in *War and Peace* is one, but the revelatory experiences seem as different as human beings are different. Bolkonsky is wounded on the battlefield of Austerlitz and, while nearly dying, his consciousness is absorbed by the awe of discovering a deep and solemn sky. Seven years later, he is wounded again at the Battle of Moskowa. Treated in a field hospital, beside him he sees Anatol Kuragin, the one who ruined his happiness for a whim, whose leg is being amputated. Unexpectedly, a wave of love overwhelms Andrey filling him with compassion and tenderness for every human being. Now, nearing the end of his long agony, shut in a small room in a village overrun by refugees, he dreams that something is pressing at his door. In the dream, he slowly gets up to bolt it, but feels, knows he will not make it in time. Indeed, that thing bursts open the door and enters, and that thing is death. After the dream, Andrey, though still alive, no longer belongs

to life; he has entered the cold realm of indifference. Pierre instead meets the Absolute when, prisoner of the retreating French, exhausted by the cold and the march, he dreams of an old man who shows him what life is: a globe of drops that are themselves alive, sometimes merging, sometimes splitting, sometimes plunging into the sphere itself and disappearing, at other times reemerging and reappearing. Later, threatened by a soldier who warns him not to cross the line where the prisoners must remain, under penalty of death, he begins to laugh like a madman and says to himself: "*Am I their prisoner? I, who am an immortal soul!*"

Natasha, on the other hand, has no encounters with the transcendent and does not seek them. But this is neither superficiality nor materialism. We sense — because the author himself feels it — that Natasha has no need for it, because she is the incarnation of life and of nature itself. Pierre and Natasha are the final victors of the long tale, because they believe in life, just as Andrey and Sonia are the losers because they do not know how to surrender to life.

In his long life, Tolstoj would not again reach the visionary heights of *War and Peace*. He tries in *Anna Karenina*, but influenced by the French novel, he writes a story driven more by reason than by the fervor of his heart.

The influence of the psychological novel fills his story with symbols: before unintentionally driving Anna to despair and suicide, Vronsky unwittingly breaks the spine of his beloved mare Frou-Frou; the train is a symbol of modernity and also of mechanisation and death; Levin's brother agonizes in the station district; Vronsky and Anna meet on a train, but the arrival is marred by a fatal accident foreshadowing Anna's suicide at the end of the novel. Anna and Vronsky are so physically united as to share similar nightmares.

But this intentional, almost psychoanalytic symbolism cannot replace the magical, supernatural ease of writing in *War and Peace*; in fact, it somehow highlights the difficulty, as confirmed by Lev himself, who writes in his diary: "Ah, if someone could finish *Anna Karenina* in my place!"

Yet *Anna Karenina* is also a great literary success, and its author's fame becomes even more established throughout Europe. Still, his success coincides with the

beginning of a serious depression. We have testimony of this great crisis in his "Confessions":

"Five years ago, something strange began to manifest in me: at first, I had moments of bewilderment, a halting of life (...). These moments were expressed with the same questions: Why? Well then? And what next? At first, they seemed like useless questions, aimless (...) and that if someday I wanted to try to solve them, it would be very easy (...). But the questions kept appearing more frequently, demanded an answer, and like blows always to the same spot, eventually formed a dark patch (...). I realized it was not a passing malaise but a very serious illness, and that if the same question kept repeating, it would be necessary to answer it (...). But as soon as I studied and tried to solve them, I was immediately convinced that they were neither childish nor stupid, but the most serious and profound questions of life (...). My life came to a halt... In this state I reached a point where I could no longer live and, fearing death, I had to resort to tricks toward myself not to take my own life."

It is easy, reading these words, to speak of depression; "depression" is a generic term, one of many that creates the illusion of explaining what we cannot understand. Tolstoj, instead, had gone to the root of the true problem of the human condition, and through his crystal-clear intellectual honesty discovered the impossibility of continuing to distract himself, of persistently turning his attention elsewhere, and instead accepting full awareness of the lack of meaning in human life.

He had reached that condition some have defined as "The dark night of the soul." The crisis lasted a long time, but even those terrible days passed, and as happened to other great figures who had gone through the same experience, a new Tolstoj emerged, who had found meaning in a spiritual commitment of planetary scope.

The last phase of his life, Lev dedicated to what could be for the good of humanity. Not for his loved ones, not for his nation, but for the human being, of any condition and from every latitude. He prophesied a truly Christian revolution,

a nonviolent struggle that would bring an end to poverty, violence, and exploitation of man by man. He wanted to renounce — and this is where conflicts with his wife began — the copyright on his writings, so that they would cost less and be more widespread; he wrote pamphlets against power, both political and religious, and this brought him many enemies, but his ideas spread, and the Tolstoian movement was born. Many years later, Gandhi admitted to being inspired by Tolstoj in his nonviolent struggle for India's independence.

But over time, his relationship with his wife became intolerable to Lev, so much so that on October 28, 1910, now eighty-two years old, he fled from home. At Astapovo, he got off the train feverish and was taken to the largest room at the station itself. Cared for by his daughter Alexandra, he dictated his final thoughts to her: *"God is that infinite All, of which man becomes aware of being a finite part. Only God truly exists. Man is His manifestation in matter, in time, and in space. The more the manifestation of God in man (life) unites with the manifestations (lives) of other beings, the more He truly exists. The union of this life of his with the lives of other*

beings is achieved through love. God is not love, but the greater the love, the more man manifests God, and the more He truly exists."

He died on November 20th. He was buried in his garden at Jasnaja Poljana, in the shade of an old oak, in an extremely simple grave, a mound of earth covered with grass and flowers. The place had been chosen by Tolstoj himself, because it was tied to a memory. As a child, Nikolai, his eldest son, had confided to him that he had hidden a green stick with magical properties there. Whoever found it would have the power to make all men happy; and hatred, war, and misery would disappear from the Earth.

Sergio Guarino

