

The Fiction of Fact and the Fact of Fiction: Hayden White and *War and Peace*

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“History would be an excellent thing if only it were true.”

L. N. Tolstoy (Гусев 188, cited in Berlin 31)

Hayden White has dedicated his career to debunking common assumptions about the nature of historiography and the role and function of historians. Indeed, one scholar writes that we “would have to return to the nineteenth century to find a thinker who has had a greater impact on the way we think about historical representation, the discipline of history, and on how historiography intersects with other domains of inquiry” (Doran 1). Beginning with his seminal work, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1973) and continuing in his collections *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (1978), *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (1987), and *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (1999), White has methodically, at times brilliantly, elaborated a position that calls into question the very concept of historical knowledge by interrogating the discursive basis of historiography, both its epistemological foundations and the deep structure of its linguistic tropes and narrative devices. As White has famously stated, “All stories are fictions” (*Figural Realism* 9) and history—the biggest story of them all—is no exception. Indeed, in their dependence on narrative forms, tropes and devices, historians are little different from the authors of fictional works: Both tell stories, but

only one of them insists that theirs is the truth. This is the crux of the matter for White. “Literary discourse may differ from historical discourse by virtue of its primary referents, conceived as imaginary rather than real events,” White writes, “but the two kinds of discourse are more similar than different since both operate language in such a way that any clear distinction between their discursive form and their interpretative content remains impossible” (*Figural Realism* 6).

Given the kinds of issues that White raises about history as a narrative act and the anti-historicism that attends many of his discoveries, it is not surprising that he would eventually make his way to Tolstoy’s novel *War and Peace*, the anti-historical novel *par excellence* of world literature. With its probing indictment of the various models of historical narrative known to Tolstoy, the novel offers a skeptical view of historiography that anticipates in blunt form some of White’s own cautionary assertions about the relationship of language, narrative and history. Curiously, White’s essay on *War and Peace*, which appeared in Italian in 2003 and in English four years later,¹ does not identify or discuss in any detail Tolstoy’s own theory of history or his polemics with the historians of his day. Neither does White relate Tolstoy’s critique of historiography to his own. Rather, White limits himself to showing “how Tolstoy both invokes history as a subject and at the same time reconceptualizes it in such a way as to deprive it of all explanatory force” (“Against

Historical Realism” 102). And yet, White’s insights into the nature of historiography and the relationship between fictional and historical accounts in his own work over the years as well as his comments on the novel in his essay offer intriguing insights into the vexed question of narrative—historical or otherwise—in *War and Peace*, “a work that questions the validity of all narrative forms and that satirizes the concealed assumptions of all available genres” (Morson 80). White helps us to see Tolstoyan narrative in a new light and gives us a way of approaching that most vexing Tolstoyan narrative of all: the narrative of the Truth.

By and large, Tolstoy and White speak the same language when they speak about the problems of historiography. White contends, for instance, that historians transform a chronicle into a story through an aesthetic process called emplotment (“Metahistory” 5-11). Tolstoy argues that historians, in their desire to write an intelligible account of an event, do the same thing, arbitrarily and artificially selecting out of the innumerable causes for an event those reasons that most conveniently match the story the historian wishes to construct. As such, they “engage in an essentially literary pursuit that they misrepresent as a science” (Morson 100). White asserts that we can no longer “regard the historiographical text as an unproblematical, neutral container of a content supposedly given in its entirety by a reality that lies beyond its confines” (*Figural Realism* 25) because the narrative in which it is related is “a discursive mode whose content *is* its form” (*Figural Realism* 21).

In *War and Peace* Tolstoy, too, demonstrates that narrative forms condition narrative content. He divides historians into groups based on their specialties and then proceeds to argue how their specialties determine their historiography. Biographical historians, for example, or historians of separate nations believe “events are produced solely by the will of the Napoleons, the Alexand-

ers, or generally of those persons the specialized historian is describing” and their accounts reflect that bias (Epilogue 2:2: 1182).² Similarly, historians of culture believe events are caused by ideas, and they write historical narratives to that effect. Such is the case with all historians, Tolstoy argues: The form of their narrative (that is, the bias of their specialty) determines the content of their histories. White writes, addressing this very problem, that “one of the marks of a good professional historian is the consistency with which he reminds his readers of the purely provisional nature of his characterizations of events, agents, and agencies found in the always incomplete historical record” (*Tropics* 82). Tolstoy is not so optimistic, claiming that it is the “always incomplete historical record” that dooms historiography to failure and questioning the advisability and the very possibility of engaging in historical narratives.

White calls historical narratives “verbal fictions, the contents of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences” (*Tropics* 82). Tolstoy goes further, making a case in *War and Peace* that artistic works are, in fact, superior to historical accounts precisely because the artist, in admitting the limits and biases of the narrative act, makes no claims to objectivity and therefore does not deceive the reader while the historian, purporting to show what actually happened, misleads the reader by claiming an objectivity he cannot possess.

Tolstoy writes in his “A Few Words Apropos of the Book *War and Peace*”:

The historian is sometimes obliged, by bending the truth, to bring all the actions of a historical figure under the one idea he has put into that figure. The artist, on the contrary, sees the very singularity of that idea as incompatible with his task, and only tries to understand and show not the famous figure but the human being. The distinction is still sharper and more substantial in the description of the events themselves. (1218)

M. I. Dragomirov, a soldier and military historian, supports Tolstoy's assertion that fictional narratives can reveal truths factual ones cannot. In one of a number of articles he wrote on Tolstoy's novel in 1868 and 1869, Dragomirov writes:

It might be said that these Tushins and Timokhins and so on are no more than fictions, that they never really existed, that they lived only in the author's head. We might well agree; but it must also be agreed that even in historical descriptions not everything is true by a long way, and that these characters who never actually existed illumine that internal side of the battle better than the majority of multi-tomed descriptions of wars in which faceless characters pass fleetingly by and instead of names like Napoleon, Davout, Ney and so on you might just as well insert numbers or letters without any great loss. (Драгомиров 161; translation from Knowles, 154-55)

Tolstoy was himself, of course, every bit as self-conscious about the traps of narrative as his criticisms of historians imply. Indeed, one gets the feeling that in *War and Peace* Tolstoy set out to write something of an "anti-narrative." "It is not a novel," Tolstoy declares in his essay on *War and Peace*, "still less an epic poem, still less a historical chronicle. *War and Peace* is what the author wanted and was able to express, in the form in which it is expressed" ("A Few Words" 1217). Here we have one of the most famous descriptions of the idiosyncratic nature of the narrative act in world literature. Tolstoy not only tells us what he considers his work *not* to be, but he also alerts us to his apprehension that narrative forms condition narrative content. A novel, epic poem or historical chronicle, he implies, are genres that come with their own narrative assumptions. Tolstoy, seeking to avoid such generic models and the narratives they imply, naturally claims his work is *sui generis*. Tolstoy goes on to state that

Such a declaration of the author's disregard of the conventional forms of artistic prose works might seem presumptuous, if it were premeditated and if it had no previous examples. And yet the history of Russian literature since Pushkin's time not only provides many examples of such departure from European forms, but does not offer even one example to the contrary. ("A Few Words" 1217)

If, then, as White asserts in his essay, *War and Peace* "undermined Western European literary realism" ("Against Historical Realism" 89), Tolstoy had a lot of help, or at least many models to influence him.

The path to a new word in literature, however, was not easy. In a draft to an introduction to *War and Peace*, Tolstoy describes his struggle to find the right narrative form for his work. "Above all, traditions of both form and content oppressed me," he writes. "I was afraid to write in a language different from that in which everybody writes." He goes on to say, however, that he decided "to push aside all these fears" and to write, "without worrying about what will come out of it all and without giving any name to my work" ("Drafts" 1087), eventually producing what Henry James would later label, in his preface to *The Tragic Muse*, a "large loose baggy monster" with "queer elements of the accidental and the arbitrary" (cited in Knowles 434).

Tolstoy might have approved of James's characterization of his work, for the accidental and the arbitrary play roles in both his narrative strategy and his vision of the workings of history itself. As the novel started to appear serially, many of Tolstoy's contemporaries responded to it with bewilderment. "The plot is nowhere to be seen," wrote one critic. "Where is it, this novel, what has it done with its main business—the development of its 'inner sequence,' its 'fable' and its 'intrigue'?" (Анненков 45).³ Rather than these things, Tolstoy cultivated a consciously open-ended

narrative (what he called the novel's "special quality"), claiming that he could not tell whether the final version of the work would ultimately include all the published installments of the work or select parts of it. "Because of this special quality, I think that this work can be printed in separate parts without in any way losing the reader's interest and without inciting the reader to read the subsequent parts" ("Drafts" 1089). In other words, he was writing his "novel" in "anti-narrative" fashion—the parts were not necessarily meant to build into a whole. As such, he also avoids the traps of narrative: "No idea is being put forward in it," Tolstoy writes, "nothing is being proved; no single event is being described" ("Drafts" 1087). The expectation of a novel in the mode of Walter Scott is thus dashed, as one critic noted in 1868, for "the plot of Count Tolstoy has no goal [...] the form of his multi-volume work is disconnected and abrupt"; instead of a historical novel there is "simply a series of sketches pertaining to and related to each other merely because they belong to the same period" (Ахшарумов 86, cited in Love 10).⁴

Hayden White picks up on this aspect of the novel in his essay. White argues that, because Tolstoy "does not believe history has a plot," he "reverts to chronology" as the organizing principle of his novel "in order to resist the lure of emplotment" ("Against Historical Realism" 91). *War and Peace*, he argues, is thus made up of sections in series, not in sequence, so there is no progression toward a denouement. In similar fashion, there is no Bildungsroman-type development in the central heroes of the novel. "Rather than development," according to White, "characters undergo a kind of refiguration, with new traits being added and old traits rearranged" (91).

White here echoes Gary Saul Morson's conclusions in his 1987 landmark study of the novel, *Hidden in Plain View*. Plot in Tolstoy, according to Morson, "is the story that happens to emerge" during the writing process, a method that ac-

counts for the open-ended quality of the narrative and that reflects the open-endedness of life and history themselves (188). As for character development, the novel's domestic sections "discredit received views of individual psychology and their representation in novels" (83), for Tolstoy believed that "history and psychology are in part shaped by radical contingency and the purely random" (84-5). Just as historical events do not usually fit a pattern, neither do the lives of people. Thus, in Tolstoy's characters, according to Morson, "changes are revealed, not caused" (155).

War is the medium in which these concepts of plot and character crystallize. Throughout the novel, Tolstoy uses battle as a "microcosm of the historical process" (Morson 88) to illustrate the utter impossibility of narrating history and to mock the notion of military science as a way of ridiculing the idea of the so-called "science" of history. As Prince Andrei tells himself at the war council of Drissa, "What science can there be in a matter in which, as in every practical matter, nothing can be determined and everything depends on countless circumstances, the significance of which is determined at a certain moment which comes at a time no one can know?" (3:1:11: 643-44). Here, we glimpse the pure contingency that is so important to Tolstoy's novel, where plot and characters are shaped as much by chance events as they are by intentions. Indeed, history in the novel is a concept that embodies this combination of the random and the ordered, the arbitrary and the intentional, and that is why historical narratives are so often inadequate to their task. Every historical event, like every human being, is shaped by countless factors, and, according to Tolstoy, "the deeper we go in search of causes, the more of them we find" (3:1:1: 604).

White recognizes this aspect of the novel, arguing that *War and Peace* "seeks to show that while we cannot escape using 'history' as a context for the representation of great events, 'historical' accounts of such events cannot in any way

explain them” (“Against Historical Realism” 89). The question then becomes: What kind of historiography does the novel propose? And, given Tolstoy’s skepticism of historical narrative, what kind of narrative then does he employ in *War and Peace* itself?

The answer to these questions begins in Tolstoy’s disregard for the conventions of plot. As White observes, echoing contemporary commentators on the novel, “in spite of all of the movement, sound and fury of the war story, nothing really happens. Although there are many occurrences in *War and Peace*, it is very difficult to identify specific events and the chains of effects that any given event might have had on subsequent events” (“Against Historical Realism” 97). This disregard for plot is paradoxical in its manifestations. On the one hand, it takes Tolstoy the first one-hundred and twenty pages of the book to relate what are essentially only two real plot events, plot events, moreover, that can be summed up in a mere four words: Pierre inherits, Andrei departs. On the other hand, in the opening part of volume two, an abundance of story incidents—the duel between Dolokhov and Pierre, the separation between Pierre and Hélène, the arrival back from the dead of Andrei, and the death of Lise while giving birth to Andrei’s son—are all hastily dispatched in only thirty pages. Important and potentially very dramatic events—such as the death of Hélène Bezukhova—take place “off camera” and are mentioned only in passing and after the fact. Highly suspenseful events, such as the rescue of Pierre from the French (4:3:12 1058), are all too often deflated by Tolstoy’s straightforward declaration of their outcome before the stories themselves are actually related. And then, of course, there are all of those digressions in which Tolstoy lectures the reader on his philosophy of history, retarding the novel’s momentum at key intervals throughout the second half of the book and providing the famous

thud—part two of the Epilogue—with which the novel closes, like the heavy tome it is.

The problem of plot in *War and Peace* has been at the center of critical debate and speculation since the novel appeared. Tolstoy’s contemporaries disparaged the novel as a “disordered heap of accumulated material” (S. Navilikhin, cited in Eikhbaum 236) plagued by a plethora of petty details and narrative dead ends. Adding to the confusion was Tolstoy’s extensive use of French, his insertion of historical and philosophical essays, his use of footnotes, and the novel’s lack of a clear beginning or satisfactory ending. And yet it is here in this “disordered heap” that we can glimpse the alternative narrative Tolstoy is proposing in *War and Peace*. Tolstoy’s “tendency to mix fiction and nonfiction, romance and scholarship, novel and history, in a single work” (Morson 74-75) is both a marker of the consciously experimental nature of the book and a sign of its anticipation of a different kind of narrative strategy, one that evokes the narratives of the modernist novel that rose to prominence a half-century later. White is one of the few Western commentators to make this connection, citing the novel’s “eventlessness and plotlessness” as qualities that evoke “the modernist novel—or that aspect of modernism already immanent in a realist like the Flaubert of *The Sentimental Education*” (97).⁵ In the 1920s, the Russian Formalists saw in the novel’s structural anomalies a fascination with form for its own sake and a rejection of traditional aesthetics very much in line with the modernist impulse (Morson 72-76).

Tolstoy’s flouting of the conventions of unity in character and plot; his use of free indirect speech, interior monologue, and focalization techniques; his privileging of the subjective, interior world to the public, outer world; and his use of ironic juxtapositions to challenge received notions of historical discourse are all strong indications of the modernist thrust of *War and Peace*. It is important to note, however, that while *War*

and Peace mirrors the modernist novel in these ways, it is still but an anticipation of the movement, not its first example. As anyone who has read *War and Peace* knows, Tolstoy is very “un-modernist” in other crucial ways, such as in his direct appeals to his readers in which he makes unequivocal declarations about war, history, God, life, and love, doing so, moreover, in what Morson calls Tolstoy’s “absolute language, “the language of “biblical commands and proverbs,” “nonnovelistic,” didactic and monologic (15, 13).

While this aspect of the novel can be understood as part of Tolstoy’s desire to break out of the “traditions of form and content”, as Tolstoy put it, it is hardly modernist, even if such moments of “absolute discourse” may be ascribed to his desire to innovate, to narrativize in a new and unprecedented fashion. Nevertheless, recognizing the novel’s anticipation of modernist techniques opens up new insights into *War and Peace* and, more importantly for this analysis, sheds light on its narrative strategies.

Of all of the novel’s modernist attributes, the collapse of plot is the most prominent. Different models have been proposed to describe how *War and Peace* generates meaning without recourse to plot. White, as noted earlier, proposes understanding the novel as chronology: It presents events in series, rather than sequence. The structure of the novel, White implies, reflects the workings of history, as Tolstoy understood it, with “no beginnings or endings [...] only a stream of happenings” that historians—or, in the case of the novel, readers—“break up in different ways,” and out of which readers and historians “make stories,” that is, create sense (“Against Historical Realism” 105).

Other critics have proposed their own theories of the novel’s structure: The Russian Formalist Boris Eikhenbaum, for instance, argues that Tolstoy renounced the conventions of beginning and ending story lines, taking, instead, “the path of contrasted parallelism of plot lines, the inter-

sections of which are indicated by only a dotted line.” This kind of narrative is “construction not according to the principle of the story but according to the principle of a montage of fragments” (166).

R. F. Christian sees not events in series but juxtaposition as the key narrative operation in *War and Peace*, a device prefigured in the book’s title itself. The principle on which the novel is composed is “to think of people and phenomena in terms of their opposites and then to contrive the juxtaposition and interaction of these opposites” (124).

Natasha Sankovitch emphasizes a different kind of narrative juxtaposition and a different idea of narrative as series, one involving repetition as the central device in Tolstoy’s fiction. “Repetition,” she argues, “is the key to how human beings create and recover experience” (11). Without repetition and memory, she writes, “Tolstoy believed that the world could only appear hopelessly contingent and experience could only fade into ephemerality” (226). Repetition “is central to his style, to his understanding of characters’ psychology, to the structure of his works, and to his interactions with implied readers. It defines much of what is ‘Tolstoyan’ about Tolstoy” (225).

Finally, Gary Saul Morson argues that *War and Peace* is a “negative narration”—rather than series, juxtaposition or repetition, Morson proposes that the Tolstoyan narrative is one in which any center is denied, effects are revealed rather than caused, and wholeness is eschewed in favor of fragmentation and interruption. It is a narrative not only about the impossibility of narrating, but about the “pettiness and falsity of everything that might ever be narrated” as well (163). Instead of grand narratives and broad formulas, Tolstoy, according to Morson, advocates a kind of philosophy of the “prosaic,” locating meaning in the small, fragmented non-narratives of daily living, in which, in Tolstoy’s own words, “a hundred

million of the most diverse chances” must be acted upon by a hundred million people (3:2:25:773).

I mention all of these approaches to *War and Peace* because the organizational structures they propose for the novel—montage of fragments, non-sequential events in series, juxtaposition, repetition, fragmentation—all help to illuminate the modernist aspects of Tolstoy’s narrative. They also call to mind a well-known letter from Tolstoy to N. N. Strakhov from April 23, 1876:

In everything, almost everything, I have written, I was guided by the need to bring together ideas linked among themselves in order to express myself, but every idea, expressed by itself in words, loses its meaning, is terribly de-based, when taken alone out of that linkage in which it is found. The linkage itself is not constituted by an idea, I think, but by something else, and to express the basis of this linkage directly in words is quite impossible; but it is possible only indirectly—in words describing images, actions, situations. [...] Now, it is true, when nine-tenths of everything published is criticism, then for the criticism of art, people are needed who would show the senselessness of the search for ideas in an artistic work and would continually guide readers in this endless labyrinth of linkages in which the essence of art consists, and to those laws which serve as a foundation for these linkages. (PSS 62: 269, cited in Sankovitch 49)

The use to which Tolstoy puts these “links,” “ties,” “couplings,” and “connections” that he identifies in letters and diaries as essential to navigating the “labyrinth” of art (Christian 123-24), however, ultimately argues for a narrative operation beyond mere series, juxtaposition, fragmentation or repetition, especially when we keep in mind that in *War and Peace* and elsewhere, Tolstoy insists on a didactic function in literature—the reader must learn something from

all of these links, ties, couplings and connections, from these mixed genres, from this “disordered heap of accumulated material.”

Indeed, ultimately we learn that what Tolstoy seems to be after in his narrative experiments is nothing less than the truth itself, the famous “hero” of his anti-war story “Sevastopol in May,” written a decade before *War and Peace* in 1855. There, at the conclusion of his tale, Tolstoy writes:

I have said what I wished to say this time. But I am seized by an oppressive doubt. Perhaps I ought to have left it unsaid. Where in this tale is the evil that should be avoided, and where the good that should be imitated? Who is the villain and who the hero of my story? All are good and all are bad. [...] The hero of my tale—whom I love with all the power of my soul, whom I have tried to portray in all its beauty, who has been, is, and always will be beautiful—is Truth. (“Sevastopol in May” 43)

This is, of course, one of those famous declarations in “absolute language” that one can find as well in *War and Peace*. The very fact that Tolstoy can claim to know and then to disseminate the “Truth” somewhat undermines claims for him as a modernist writer. We must keep in mind, however, two things: the context in which Tolstoy searches for the truth, and what Tolstoy means by “the truth.” As Peter Brooks points out:

[T]he enormous narrative production of the nineteenth century may suggest an anxiety at the loss of providential plots: the plotting of the individual or social or institutional life story takes on new urgency when one no longer can look to a sacred masterplot that organizes and explains the world.

The emergence of narrative plot as a dominant mode of ordering and explanation, Brooks concludes, “may belong to the large process of secularization, dating from the Renaissance and gather-

ing force during the Enlightenment” (6), a process which dominated Tolstoy’s century.

With his absolute language and truth as his hero, Tolstoy is, in part, responding to this kind of anxiety. There is a truth out there and he is going to find it, a fact certainly borne out by the philosophical essays he intersperses in *War and Peace* and with which he concludes his magnum opus. In point of fact, while Tolstoy proceeds from the notion that the Truth is something that can not only be determined but also imparted, he frequently ends—sometimes seemingly against all of his efforts—in actually opening to the reader a multiplicity of truths. In fact, Truth in Tolstoy is, paradoxically, not always fact-like, objective or indisputable; it is sometimes rather more like fiction, subjective and open to multiple viewpoints. As in modernism, individual consciousness plays a large role in Tolstoy’s truth narratives, with the author’s subjective perceiver groping his or her way toward the truth in passages characterized by a catalogue of thoughts, emotions and sensations.

Tolstoy’s truth narratives in the period before and during the writing of *War and Peace* acknowledge the immutable nature of truth and its correspondence with the realm of objective reality, but they also demonstrate that no one truth will ever be perceived the same way in the subjective inner thoughts of different people. Pierre Bezukhov learns this lesson in both volume two and in the novel’s conclusion, when he understands that the “infinite variety of men’s minds” prevents “a truth from ever presenting itself identically to two persons” (2:3: 7).⁶ This is one of Pierre’s greatest discoveries, though it has been little commented on to date.⁷ For Tolstoy, the subjective nature of human perception and intellect makes the objective reality of any truth a goal that ultimately cannot be reached, except perhaps approximately, one perceiver at a time. Due to the “infinite variety of men’s minds,” every truth is apprehended idiosyncratically, even if only to a

small degree. If any truth cannot present itself identically to two persons, it necessarily becomes somewhat less objective and fact-like and more subjective and figured, a process reflected in Tolstoy’s truth narratives, which acknowledge the unavoidable subjectivity of any apprehension of the truth.

This process is reflected in Tolstoy’s literary text itself, which emerges as a “third possibility” between narratives that purport to be purely factual and those that are regarded as merely fictional in the apprehension of objective reality. Here I have in mind comments that Hayden White made in a 1997 interview suggesting, after Foucault and Barthes, that “modernist writing is neither fictional nor factual” but rather “blurs the distinction between fact and fiction, not in order to make the factual fictional or the fictional factual, but to say that the representation of reality can no longer be carried out responsibly on the basis of that older distinction between fact or fiction, one or the other [...] either/or” (Murphy, “Discussion” 21-22).

As early as “Sevastopol in May,” which in this instance emerges as an important subtext for *War and Peace*, Tolstoy teaches his reader to discern just such a narrative, one that blurs the distinctions between fact and fiction in order to propose something quite different and quite audacious: the narrative of the Truth. One of Tolstoy’s striking narrational innovations in “Sevastopol in May” is how he presents his readers with models of different kinds of narratives describing the same event or the same character. When in part eleven of the story, for example, the Russian cadet Pyest bayonets a Frenchman, we are given three different accounts of the act: Pyest’s own, an objective version “based on fact,” and a third, much longer version relating “what really occurred.” The first version is labeled a fiction or “story” (‘пасска’) by the narrator: “Pyest began to relate how he had led his company, how the company-commander had been killed, how he

himself had stabbed a Frenchman, and how if it had not been for him we should have lost the day.” The second version reflects the naked facts of the affair: “The company commander had been killed and Pyest had bayoneted a Frenchman, but in recounting the details the cadet invented and bragged.”

However, neither of these accounts suffice. Only the third narrative, “what really happened,” imparts the truth. Moreover, this truth is somewhere between the factual and fictional accounts already given within the text. Indeed, it is a fairly long account, by comparison, that is distinguished first by its pronounced subjectivity and second by its lack of determinacy, its refusal to provide a precise description. It is a narrative peppered with indefinite adjectives, adverbs and pronouns reflecting the contingency of all narrated events. All that Pyest remembered of what had happened “seemed to have happened somewhere, at some time to somebody”:

They were ordered to aim bayonets and the battalion advanced. Pesth [Pyest] was in such a fright that he could not make out in the least how long it lasted, where he went, or who was who. He went on as if drunk. Suddenly a million fires flashed from all sides, and something whistled and clattered. He shouted and ran somewhere, because everyone else shouted and ran. Then he stumbled and fell over something. It was the company commander, who had been wounded at the head of his company, and who taking the cadet for a Frenchman had seized him by the leg. Then when Pesth had freed his leg and got up, someone else ran against him from behind in the dark and nearly knocked him down again. “Run him through!” someone else shouted. “What are you stopping for?” Then someone seized a gun and stuck it into something soft. “*Ah Dieu!*” came a dreadful, piercing voice

and Pesth only then understood that he had bayoneted a Frenchman. (34-35)

This kind of narration is a classic example of what Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky called *остранение* or ‘defamiliarization’, a device designed “to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known” (Shklovsky 12) through the use of impeded form (*затруднение*) and prolonged perception (*замедление*). In this scene and throughout “Sevastopol in May” Tolstoy has “made strange” our concept of narrative by suggesting that the truth is to be found in the narrative that blurs the factual and the fictive.⁸ Tolstoy is doing more than simply telling us “what really happened”; he is forcing us to formulate a theory of narrative better able to account for human action.⁹

Identical instances of this kind of narration can be found in *War and Peace* as well. Nikolai Rostov’s experience at the battle of Schöngraben, for instance, is similarly related in three narratives, two of which are explicitly contrasted. When Nikolai is asked to relate what happened to him in battle, he lapses into “falsehood”—that is, he tells a story:

His hearers expected a story of how, all aflame with excitement and forgetting himself, he had flown like a storm at the square; how he cut his way into it, hacking right and left; how his saber tasted flesh and how he fell exhausted, and so on. And so he told them all that.

The facts, of course, are much different: “He could not simply tell them that they all set out at a trot and that he fell off his horse, dislocated his arm and then ran as fast as he could from a Frenchman into the wood” (1:3:7: 242). We readers know, however, that the truest narrative is the one that does not draw such a strong line between fact and fiction, for we have encountered this narrative some fifty pages earlier (1:2:19: 189) where

Tolstoy relates the incident through Nikolai's perception:

"What is it? I'm not moving ahead? I've fallen, I've been killed! [...] Has something bad happened to me? There are such cases, and what must be done in such cases? [...] Well, here are some people. They'll help me! [...] He must be one of ours taken prisoner [...] Yes. Can it be they'll take me, too? What men are these? Can they be French? [...] Who are they? Why are they running? Can it be they're running to me? Can it be? And why? To kill me? *Me* whom everyone loves so?"

And so on. In a brilliant use of the focalization technique for which he is famous, Tolstoy avails himself of a subjective perceiver who is not the narrator proper. In Wallace Martin's words, "we as readers are allowed to experience something we cannot otherwise experience in this world: subjectivity freed from its connection with our own bodies and voices" (141). Martin argues that focalization "provides a means of reintegrating consciousness and dialogue in the description of narrative structure" (145), and this becomes a crucial aspect of Tolstoy's truth narratives. Ironically, Tolstoy's "Truth narratives" are not always the most objective or fact-based ones, for the truth in Tolstoy's universe, it turns out, can be a deeply subjective phenomenon. In other words, some truth narratives not only blur the line between factual and fictional discourse, but they also acknowledge an interpretive attitude toward the facts as an essential feature of its discourse on the part of the subjective agent creating the narrative.

Earlier, in Nikolai Rostov's first experience of battle on the bridge over the river Enns, we are also given three narratives of one event, but they are not as clearly delineated into "fact," "fiction" and "truth." We first encounter Nikolai's speculation about the unfolding event:

At first it seemed to Rostov that Bogdanich was only pretending to be inattentive and that his whole goal now consisted in testing the young junker's courage, and he sat up straight and looked around cheerfully. Then it seemed to him that Bogdanich was deliberately riding close to him in order to show Rostov his own courage. Then he thought that his enemy would now deliberately send the squadron into a desperate attack in order to punish him, Rostov. Then he thought that, after the attack, he would come to him as he lay wounded and magnanimously offer him a conciliatory hand. (1:2:8: 145)

These are all, of course, invented stories, narratives imposed upon the present or the immediate future. The second narrative is what actually happens: Nikolai runs with the others, stumbles, falls, gets up, hesitates, stands uselessly idle as he had brought no straw to fire the bridge, then runs away with the rest. As a narrative, however, these facts are equally unilluminating. Only the third narrative—Nikolai's "slow motion," estranged survey of the sky, the sun, the trees, the gorge and the waters of the Danube, whose beauty are all the more ineffable for being perceived now, in the heat of battle—tells us the truth of what is transpiring with Nikolai on the bridge.

There's nothing, nothing I would wish for, there's nothing I would wish for, if only I were there [...] In me alone and in this sun there is so much happiness, but here... groans, suffering, fear, and this obscurity, this hurry... Again they're shouting something, and again everybody's run back somewhere, and I'm running with them, and here it is, here it is, death, above me, around me... An instant, and I'll never again see this sun, this water, this gorge... (1:2:8: 148)

The truth—that battle is a confusing and terrifying brush with death and suffering—can only be

apprehended subjectively, through Tolstoy's use of impeded form, prolonged perception and focalization in relating Nikolai's perceptions on the bridge.

In each of these narratives, there is series and juxtaposition (we compare accounts of what has happened). There is fragmentation (cause and effect narration is eschewed). There is repetition (the same event is described different ways). A different kind of narration emerges, a Tolstoyan one ("what the author wished and was able to express in the form he expressed it"). Peter Brooks affirms that "repetition by three" is the "minimum repetition to suggest series and process" (9). In her analysis of Tolstoy, Natasha Sankovitch notes "Tolstoy's use of repetition to suggest a model for how human beings create order and give meaning to their experience" (85). I would alter Sankovitch's assertion to argue that Tolstoy's fact-fiction-truth dialectic is a minimum repetition necessary for the model Tolstoy is proposing for one way that human beings arrive at the Truth, which, according to Tolstoy, can be something between the real and the figurative. This narrative is, at its heart, dialectic: rather than repetition or juxtaposition, thesis and antithesis (fact and fiction) resolve themselves in a synthesis. This synthesis reveals the fiction of fact and the fact of fiction, the "third possibility" that must be arrived at not through plotting—for the plot proper does not change but merely repeats—but through the complex and subjective reenactment and rereading at the core of the narrative act for both author and reader, who live in what Brooks calls "the anticipation of retrospection"—our "chief tool in making sense of narrative, the master trope of its strange logic" (23).

Morson correctly cautions us—as Tolstoy himself does—that those who consciously seek the Truth are doomed never to find it; in other words, the truth cannot be sought, it must simply be found. But the reader of Tolstoy's texts is not so much seeking a single Truth or transcendent

system as learning a way of seeing, a way of narrating that discovers not the objective truth that is often inadequate when reduced to the merely factual, but the Truth available to each of us when we acknowledge the subjectivity we cannot escape but that nevertheless does not prevent us from seeing correctly and indeed can be necessary for us to see truly.

In allowing for such an outcome, Tolstoy does not deny the existence or possibility of objective Truth; indeed, from the metaphysical quests of Prince Andrei and Pierre to Tolstoy's concluding thoughts in part two of the epilogue, *War and Peace* is nothing if not a search for the larger truths that govern human life and the universe. But Tolstoy also seems to be acknowledging the elusiveness of Truth, both as a concept and the object of his questing. In revealing the porous boundary between fact and fiction in these truth narratives, Tolstoy also acknowledges that, however objective Truth may be, it can never be grasped except subjectively, by a perceiving human agent. This applies as much to the smaller truths that characters like Nikolai Rostov grasp as it does to the larger truth with which Tolstoy concludes his novel: renouncing one's nonexistent freedom to recognize an imperceptible dependence on laws of space, time and cause.

Like Nikolai Rostov, Andrei Bolkonsky learns this way of seeing, not through contrasted narratives of fact and fiction—a device Tolstoy uses sparingly—but through the same use of focalization in narratives constructed through estranged perception. The novel's *raisonneur*, Andrei learns through battlefield experience that life does not conform to the narratives our reason contrives of it, whether those narratives are battle plans (narratives imposed on the future) or battle reports (narratives imposed on the past). Instead, he comes to understand that one must avoid narrativizing altogether, for the truth can only be experienced, not reasoned out.

Indeed, only in various moments of intense subjectivity—lying wounded after the Battle of Austerlitz or delirious from his wounds after the Battle of Borodino—does Andrei penetrate the mysteries of life. These moments are all conveyed through the estranged perception his wounds cause, when reason and intellect give way to feeling and experience. At Austerlitz, he learns to reject the desire for his own “Toulon”—his own narrative of glory to match that which launched Napoleon’s career—after looking up at his former hero, Napoleon, who is inspecting the enemy wounded, and hearing only the buzzing of a fly against the “distant, lofty, and eternal sky” (1:3:19: 291). In similar fashion, after the Battle of Borodino, Andrei experiences “a new happiness” that had eluded his reason and its search for meaning: the intimation of “divine love,” the love of enemies (in this case, Anatole Kuragin), the love which needs no object, a discovery Andrei makes with “perfect clarity” precisely because, Tolstoy implies, he is feverish and in a delirium (3:3:37: 920-21). In both instances, Andrei has arrived at truths by rejecting the narratives his reason has imposed on life (his Toulon, his plans to revenge himself on Anatole Kuragin). “Perfect clarity” (3:3:37: 921), Tolstoy shows us, is something that can only be experienced and not reasoned out, hence his reliance on and promotion of a narrative where the subjective and the figurative open up truths inaccessible to reason alone, both for his characters and his readers.

These experiments in narrative are crucial components of Tolstoy’s larger project in *War and Peace*: understanding better than historians not only the history of the war of 1812, but the nature of history and historical narratives themselves. He does this by proposing as a third possibility beyond historical accounts (fact) and historical novels (fiction) his own *War and Peace*: A narrative where the literal and the fanciful, fact and fiction, are no longer in false opposition to each other.

Having taught his heroes and his readers crucial lessons about narrativizing, Tolstoy is in an excellent position to confront the nature of historical accounts and indeed to argue for the impossibility of an objective science of history capable of reducing the infinitely complex laws of space, time and cause to a bland relating of the facts. Historians, Tolstoy contends, are like men relating war stories: they inevitably take events and craft fictions about them that they pass off as factual narratives, as in the following example from the battle of Schöngraben:

The regimental commander [...] reported to the prince that, as soon as the action began, he withdrew from the woods, gathered the woodcutters and, letting them pass by him, started a bayonet attack with two battalions and overwhelmed the French.

“As soon as I saw that the first battalion was in disorder, Your Excellency, I stood there on the road and thought: ‘I’ll let them pass and then meet them with ranged fire,’ and that’s what I did.”

The regimental commander had so wanted to do that, he had been so sorry that he had had no time to do it, that it seemed to him that all this was exactly so. And perhaps it really was so? As if one could make out in that confusion what was and was not so? (1:2:21: 198)

These last comments are particularly telling, for Tolstoy is acknowledging that there are as many potential narratives about an event as there are possible causes for it. The latter is the determiner of the former. Jeff Love reminds us in his work on the novel that Tolstoy’s “narrator typically emphasizes multiple causal explanations for an event, none of which *alone* may explain it,” because “each cause reflects merely the subjective presuppositions of the interpreter of the event.” Thus “any cause is as sufficient and insufficient as

any other to explain the event, and others can always be found" (56).

Since "any particular cause or series of causes is incommensurable with the event" (Love 49) in Tolstoy's theory of history, and since there will always be a potentially infinite number of causes for events until one reaches "the one cause of all causes," God (4:2:1: 987), historical narratives will always be laboring under the subjective presuppositions of their authors as interpreters of the event. Because only God is outside history and the rest of us are bound by the laws of space, time and cause that inscribe us into "an ultimate order to which we do not have access through the causes" (Love 51), we can never gain a sufficient objectivity on history to claim we know the only truth of it. Indeed, the truth, as Tolstoy has shown, can be understood by us primarily in contingent and subjective ways. Tolstoy's "truth narratives," with their dialectic of fact and fiction, thus help to elucidate the novel's artistic program, just as they also confirm Pierre's discovery about the "infinite variety of men's minds" that prevents "a truth from ever presenting itself identically to two persons" (2:3:7: 436). In other words, our understanding of the truth—as of history—always depends on us and how we have emplotted it. Just as there is no one "right" way to narrate a sequence of events, there is no one "right" way to narrate the truth. But the best narratives, of history as of the truth, Tolstoy suggests, are the most self-reflexive and subjective ones.

Historical novelists have always had to confront the "tension between fact and fiction, the 'empirical' and 'aesthetic planes'" that constitutes the "peculiar dynamic" of their genre (Ungurianu, "Fact and Fiction" 380). In historical novels of the Romantic period, this tension is worked out through "a dialogue between the truth of art and the truth of fact" (Ungurianu, "Plotting History" 120). Tolstoy, however, collapses the distinction between fact and fiction in *War and Peace*. His position—and it is one of the novel's central

polemical propositions—is one shared by Hayden White: that "figurative descriptions of real events are not less factual than literalist descriptions; they are factual [...] only in a different way" (*Figural Realism* 18). As White has argued (following Louis O. Mink), facts themselves have a fictional quality to them for they are always "an event under a description."¹⁰ Factuality is thus "a matter of the descriptive protocols used to transform events into facts" (*Figural Realism* 18). Consequently, there is a fictional quality to facts just as there is a factual quality to fiction. Thus in any historiography, White reminds us, "The conjuring up of the past requires art as well as information" ("Historical Fiction" 149).

In *War and Peace*, Tolstoy's "descriptive protocols" and those of the historians of his day are explicitly contrasted with the aim being to demonstrate Tolstoy's contention that his artistic creation gets us closer to narrativized truth than the texts of historians. Whether deconstructing Napoleon's dispositions for the Battle of Borodino (3:2:27: 780-83)—much praised by historians—or polemicizing with the French historian Thiers's account of Napoleon's encounter with a captured Cossack (3:2:7: 709-12) or with French and Russian historians' accounts of the burning of Moscow (3:3:26: 894-98), or in numerous other instances in volumes three and four, Tolstoy consistently debunks received historical narratives, often with savage irony.

Thiers's account of Napoleon's interview with the captured Cossack is a particularly vivid case in point. In Thiers's history, the French monarch interviews and then magnanimously frees a simple Cossack who is unaware he is speaking with the conqueror of Europe until the amazing news is disclosed to him after the fact. In Tolstoy's account, however—given side-by-side with Thiers's—the Cossack plays Napoleon for a fool, just as Tolstoy plays Thiers for a fool, punctuating every reference to his French source with the phrase "says Thiers" in order to show how Thiers,

like Napoleon, absolutely misunderstands the encounter. Tolstoy's Cossack fathoms full well with whom he is conversing and, according to Tolstoy, could not have known otherwise. His skillful manipulation throughout the interview of both Napoleon and the French interpreter is but the textual reflection of Tolstoy's adroit discrediting of Thiers and received historical authority. Ironically, in Tolstoy's account, the Cossack, after he is freed by Napoleon, invents a different story of what happened to tell his comrades, as "what had actually happened to him [...] was not worth telling" (3:2:7: 712). Tolstoy's implication is thus doubly damning: not only is Thiers' account essentially deconstructed for the empty narrative it is, but it is judged to be less worthy than the tall tale the Cossack invents for his comrades. Nowhere, of course, does Tolstoy explain his own knowledge of these events. Rather, Tolstoy's authority emerges from the truth-telling properties of his narrative itself, whose artistic devices have already imparted to author and reader alike the ability to see the truth "hidden in plain view," as Saul Morson so aptly puts it.

This question of Tolstoy's historical authority is often invoked in discussions of the novel. Eikhensbaum asserts that "Tolstoy read and selected historical material only until it became clear what he would do with it and only for the sake of illustrating what he wanted to prove" (160), an assertion echoed by other critics (some of them veterans of the 1812 war) who accused Tolstoy of, among other things, dilettantism, distortion or outright factual inaccuracy (Шкловский; Berlin 26; Ungurianu 109-24). Ungurianu, on the other hand, concludes that "nowhere in *War and Peace* can one find intentional anachronisms or any other major or minor 'sins' against fact" (*Plotting History* 114). Tolstoy himself was adamant about the research he did for the novel: "Wherever in my novel historical figures speak and act, I have not invented, but have made use of the materials, of which, during my work, I have formed a whole

library, the titles of which I find it unnecessary to set down here, but for which I can always give the reference" ("A Few Words" 1222). In actuality, Tolstoy "protests too much," for historical veracity was never the goal of his narrative, indeed, quite the opposite: As Eikhensbaum points out, Tolstoy chose the historical novel "precisely with the intention of being anti-historical" (135). This focus only intensified in volume three with the appearance of Tolstoy's inserted philosophical and historical essays, which preached their author's anti-historicism in no uncertain terms. Tolstoy had a better explanation for the events of 1812 and, indeed, the movement of history in general, and *War and Peace* became his vehicle to communicate it.

One of Tolstoy's main discoveries in his anti-historical project was that figurative narrative opened up truths and insights that attempts at literal historical narrative could not access. Tolstoy's portrayal of Kutuzov is a case in point. Based more on "factual legend" than historical accounts (Eikhensbaum 226), it has become the defining portrait of the general in the nation's historical consciousness. It is irrelevant that Tolstoy strayed from the historical facts; his figurative narrative captured the "truth" of Kutuzov better than any historical account. Eikhensbaum discusses how Tolstoy arrived at his portrait of Kutuzov in *Tolstoi in the Sixties* (149-51; 223-226). The same can be said of *War and Peace* as a whole. As Ungurianu reports, "Tolstoy's novel was gradually perceived as more authoritative than any other contemporary accounts, which seemed biased, overly patriotic (in the 'official' sense), and artistically inept" (*Plotting History* 124). Here, "literary fiction ceases being an antonym to nonfiction" (*Plotting History* 120); rather it becomes, according to White, "what Aristotle had in mind when, instead of opposing history to poetry, he suggested their complementarity, joining both of them to philosophy in the human effort to represent, imagine and think the world in its

totality, both actual and possible, both real and imagined, both known and only experienced” (“Historical Fiction” 147).

History can—and perhaps should—be narrated figuratively, in a language and a style actually more suited to its contingency and in accounts that acknowledge the impossibility of knowing the truth utterly objectively, factually, and comprehensively. Such, indeed, are Tolstoy’s truth narratives, with their depiction of our subjective response to the chance event and the random act,¹¹ where things are not always clear but where we at least have not imposed false order where it does not exist, or false truth where it cannot be found. Such, indeed, is Tolstoy’s subjective history of 1812. If, in the end, Tolstoy is proposing *War and Peace* as a truer history of Napoleon’s invasion of Russia than those produced by the historians of his century, he is also advancing another radical idea. This idea is not so much what he spends all of his time on in the second part of his epilogue, where he argues for a new understanding of the laws of history that reveals our dependency on space, time and cause and that considerably diminishes the idea of free will. That is all very interesting and important in its own right, but it is not the Copernican revolution Tolstoy would like it to be. This idea is also not that of the primacy of our “elemental, swarmlike life” (3:1:1: 605) and the sanctity of the family nest, figured in the three bedroom scenes with which the novel proper ends: the elevation of the domestic to an ideal or, as Hayden White puts it in his essay, the idealization of the “calm enjoyed by a married couple when, after dinner, when the children have been put to bed, they can take pleasure in the contemplation of their adequacy to one another” (106).

Tolstoy’s revolutionary idea is that notion which has preoccupied Hayden White over the course of his career concerning the thin boundary between history and fiction and the legitimacy (indeed, at times the superiority) of the fictional

and the poetic as forms of knowledge in their own right (Murphy, “Facts, Fictions” 6). The truth, Tolstoy shows us, is like history, for it, too, is narrativized by a process of emplotment that acknowledges both a subjective interpreter as its author and the figurative essence of its own creation. Together with White, then, Tolstoy asks: “Is it not possible that the question of narrative in any discussion of historical theory is always finally about the function of imagination in the production of a specifically human truth?” (*Content* 57). For the author of *War and Peace*, the answer is self-evident.

Notes

1. Hayden White, “Against Historical Realism: A Reading of *War and Peace*,” *New Left Review*, 46 (July-August 2007): 89-110. Originally published as “Contro il realismo storico” in Franco Moretti, ed., *Il romanzo*, vol. V: *Lezioni* (Turin 2003), 221-37.
2. References to the novel will be given parenthetically within the text, citing volume, part (when necessary), chapter and page. Page references are from the 2007 Pevear and Volokhonsky English edition, from which all translations are taken. I have slightly modified the translation in places.
3. English translation from Knowles (103). For accounts of similar reactions, see the translation of N. N. Strakhov’s review of the novel in Knowles (159-69; especially 164); and the review from the journal *Nation*, also in Knowles (198-200). The Russian originals of Annenkov’s and Strakhov’s reviews are collected in Сухих (38-58 and 257-284, respectively).
4. Having thus described the novel, however, Akhsharumov goes on to explain that such a judgment is not entirely fair inasmuch as the form of a Walter Scott novel reflects the realities of English culture and history, while Russian culture and history necessarily require a different narrative form for their exposition (Сухих 86-87).
5. On the topic of Tolstoy and modernism, see also Diment’s scholarship in the Works Cited.

6. This truth is reaffirmed at the end of the novel, where we read:

There was a new feature in Pierre which won him the favor of all people: This was the recognition of the possibility for each person of thinking, feeling, and looking at things in his own way; the recognition of the impossibility of changing a person's opinion with words. This legitimate peculiarity of each person, which formerly had troubled and irritated Pierre, now constituted the basis of the sympathy and interest he took in people. The difference, sometimes the complete contradiction of people's views with his own life and among themselves, delighted Pierre and evoked an amused and meek smile in him. (4:4:13: 1106-07)

7. Morson and Love are exceptions. Morson expands on Pierre's discovery, arguing that not only is "a truth [...] never the same to any two persons," but it is not even the same "to the same person at different times" (212). Love relates Pierre's discovery to Tolstoy's theory of history (*Overcoming of History* 52).

8. Another example of Tolstoy's use of this device is the description of Praskukhin's death at the end of part twelve of "Sevastopol in May." Three accounts are given. Praskukhin thinks he is only bruised by an exploding shell (fiction). In reality, "He had been killed on the spot by a bomb-splinter which had struck him in the middle of his chest" (fact). The "truth" of his death, however, is what is conveyed in between these two accounts, where Tolstoy attempts the unknowable: Narrating death from within a subjective perceiver through a focalization technique, in which Praskukhin's perception of what is happening is communicated in an estranged narrative so that we experience Praskukhin's dying as he experiences it ("Sevastopol" 37-38). Tolstoy returns to this technique in his depictions of the death of Prince Andrei in *War and Peace* and, most famously, in "The Death of Ivan Ilich," a story entirely organized along the lines of the fact/fiction/truth dialectic Tolstoy deploys in "Sevastopol in May."

9. This last phrase is from Wallace Martin, who states "Instead of imitating or jeering at the philosophic tradition which assumes that there is only one way to know truth, we might better participate in the formulation of a theory of narrative better able to account for human action" (188).

10. See Mink; White (*Content* 66ff; *Figural Realism* 18); Murphy, "A Discussion with Hayden White" (especially 15-17); and Paz Soldán.

11. Andrei's insight into success in battle comes to mind here:

He had already managed to draw from his military experience the conviction that in military matters the most profoundly devised plans meant nothing (as he had seen in the Austerlitz campaign), that everything depended on how one responded to the unexpected and unpredictable actions of the enemy, that everything depended on how and by whom the action was conducted. (3:1:9: 632-33)

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