

Review Article: *The Overcoming of History in War and Peace*

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Jeff Love. *The Overcoming of History in War and Peace*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004. Pp. vii + 206. Cloth.

Why is it nearly every critic who approaches Tolstoy's *War and Peace* finds the need to restate or reinterpret the philosophy of history contained in it? Is it because Tolstoy explained it poorly? Is it because he was himself uncertain how the synergy of fiction, historical narrative and historosophical commentary might work itself out in a novel he was publishing in installments? Is it because he arrived at a coherent conceptualization of historical dynamics only through a series of missteps, hypotheses, and unanticipated discoveries that he managed to resolve only late in the novel? Is it because his theory of history, particularly in the epilogue, was beyond the ken of most literary critics, who as a rule have only a hazy familiarity with philosophy?

Literary criticism in Tolstoy's time was highly partisan and impressionistic. Positivists lampooned the book as nostalgia for serfdom. Aesthetes like P. Annenkov and M. Pogodin were reminded of Pushkin's poetic aura. Veterans of the War of 1812 were enraged by Tolstoy's misrepresentation of facts. Among the most sensitive reactions were those of N. Akhsharumov, who was frustrated by the lack of narrative coherence and logical causality in the story—a feature that was redeemed only by the novel's "lyrical con-

tent" (95). Most readers of Tolstoy's time were perplexed by the way he plotted events and digressed about the historical process.

In the late 1920s, at the dawn of the Stalinist era, Tolstoy scholarship became an industry generously funded by the state. Tolstoy was marketed by Soviets as a link to a pre-revolutionary past, whose core values remained in large part unaltered by the new regime. Tolstoy's *What Is Art?* became an *esquisse* for a new Communist aesthetic, and his novel *War and Peace* served as the model of how to understand history. Here the Hegelian roots of Marxism became apparent in the assumption that the novel showed not an abrupt departure from the past but rather a synthesis, a smooth transition that validated Soviet power as a bastion of reasonable and inevitable progress toward the good. Tinged as this theory was with the Kantian belief in human disposition toward moral perfection, it carried Christian overtones and underscored the new regime's continuance of a religious tradition familiar to the Russian people.

One might presume that this valorization of Tolstoy would lead to incisive analyses of his historical essays based on sound philosophical knowledge. This, however, was not the case. By and large Soviet scholarship focused on aesthetics (style, composition, genre) and the novel's creative history. These topics were deemed safe in the Stalinist era and indeed until the 1990s. The legacy of the great philosophers was treated only

in passing (at best) and with major omissions of pertinent traditions. This was the result of a persistent and deliberate effort on the part of the Communist Party to stifle philosophical research. The best way of doing so was to eliminate access to the ideas of great philosophers. If we survey the comprehensive Soviet bibliographies of Tolstoy over the period from 1928 until 1973, we find among the titles few references to major thinkers: Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Fichte, Schelling escape mention. Kant, Hegel and Nietzsche are cited only once, Schopenhauer twice, and Rousseau seventeen times. The only major philosopher securely attached to Tolstoy's name is Rousseau. Clearly this list gives no reliable idea of the philosophers Tolstoy actually knew. Rather it reflects the way Tolstoy was packaged by the Soviet regime.

To be sure, Tolstoy had no systematic training in philosophy. As a student at Kazan University in the 1840s, however, he could hardly escape the welter of Hegelianism and, indirectly, other German philosophers of the Kantian bent. Kazan was a seedbed for Hegel's views, surpassed only by Moscow and St. Petersburg. Tolstoy's nickname at the University was "the philosopher"—an epithet that may have had to do as much with his reclusive habits as with his interest in philosophy. But there is evidence he learned philosophy from other students, some of whom he encountered in the university stockade where he was confined for skipping classes. Not surprisingly, Soviet accounts of Tolstoy's philosophical interests tend to be anecdotal if not at times dismissive. One cannot forget Tolstoy's frequently cited statement that Hegel's writings are "an empty agglomeration of words" (*PSS* 17: 716). This may be amusing, but it is more a candid admission of Hegel's often impenetrable style. One should not forget that Tolstoy read Schopenhauer and Kant in German with relative ease. The point to be made here is that it was in the interest of Soviet ideologues to minimize knowledge of any philosophy outside of the

pantheon of Marxism-Leninism, from which even Hegel (who inspired Marx) was excluded. In the Soviet period, only Boris Eikhenbaum made a genuine effort to study Tolstoy's early philosophical education, but he too was limited by numerous constraints.¹

In the West, critical interest in *War and Peace* saw an upsurge after World War II, but it was not generally informed by a philosophical interest. Isaiah Berlin's famous monograph, *The Hedgehog and the Fox* (published originally in 1951), brought scrutiny to the historical digressions, but it was essentially an analysis in the vein of New Criticism. Compelling as it is, it scrupulously avoids the philosophical apparatus this school tended not to recognize. Subsequent treatments of history and narrative in the novel have exhibited interest in this issue but have not gone deeply into its sources.

All of the above is intended to highlight the newness of Jeff Love's book. Love is a wonderful resource of philosophical knowledge and he brings with it a refined literary sensitivity. The two are a remarkable combination that gets into the guts of what Tolstoy is doing.

Love sets out by delineating the terms of his analysis in language understandable to a reader not versed in Kantian antinomies. He introduces immediately the crucial categories that will figure prominently in the second epilogue, namely "reason" and "consciousness." Wisely and to avoid confusion he chooses the same terms Tolstoy uses, but invests each with richer meaning and explains their underlying opposition. "Reason" (разум) is the capacity for phenomenal knowledge, that is, sensory apprehension of the world as a representation of concrete objects. It presumes the physical world is intelligible to the mind via temporal, spatial and causal categories. "Consciousness" (сознание), by contrast, is the capacity for metaphysical (or noumenal) awareness upon which we apprehend intangibles that cannot be directly intuited (God, freedom, an afterlife).

Tolstoy's approach to historical events, Love argues, is at first "skeptical" in that it casts doubt on the capacity of reason to grasp the minute chain of causes that determine the outcome of battles. But as the book unfolds Tolstoy discovers an underlying metaphysical coherence in events which he attributes to belief, that is, to "consciousness." Andrew is one vector of this change. In the early battle scenes he is convinced that generals foresee events by discerning the connectedness of phenomena. By so doing he relies too much on reason and fails to acknowledge its limits. But later, before the battle of Borodino, he becomes subtly aware of subliminal forces within himself and in the mood of the troops which translate into raw will to save the homeland. This is in the realm of the "consciousness." In working out these details Love follows Morson's groundbreaking work, which treats the interrelation of randomness and order, but he adds the dimension of the Kantian background. While Love pablumizes philosophy somewhat, he does so intelligently and securely.

Another vector of the gradually emerging Tolstoyan view is Kutuzov, whom Love sees as an alter ego of the author. This idea is not new, but Love exfoliates it in a unique way, suggesting the general is like a reader of an artistic text, a kind of "philologist" who discovers order in obstreperous details (43). He reads events not rigidly but creatively, with interpretive insight. He exhibits a rational awareness of causality in events which he can hardly change, but he also sees a modicum of freedom to adjust them subtly when the opportunity arises. In this straddling of the phenomenal-noumenal divide Kutuzov prefigures Tolstoy's daring step in the epilogue.

The crucial point in Love's argument occurs in the first chapter, where he defines the aporias of skepticism and the usual ways of overcoming them (40-43). This passage is densely written and not easily unpacked, but I still think it can best be understood in terms of the Kantian dualities.

Love posits two modes of overcoming skepticism, one he calls *mimesis* and the other he calls *invention* or *creation*.

Mimesis presumes that there is an ultimate yet unknown order in the universe, "an inherent coherence in experience" which is not directly accessible to reason. The world is governed by supernatural, unseen forces, by God or an underlying fatalism, of which we have no immediate intuition. We can mount no reasonable argument to explain the world, but we rely on the presumption of its well-formedness. Here Love is referring, it seems to me, to *theoretical reason*, the reason that grasps phenomena in the surrounding world. *Mimesis* in Love's understanding stands akin to what Gustafson calls "emblematic realism":

Emblematic realism resembles allegory. In allegory the represented reality is an abstract moral or spiritual quality which is signified by[...] images which seem to refer to the world as we ordinarily understand it.[...] The represented reality includes the world [...] in all its psychological, social, economic, and historical complexity. [...] But the concept of reality is expanded beyond the material and historical world to uncover the Divine within and abroad. [...] In Tolstoy's emblematic realism [...] the signified is this expanded reality which itself embodies and reveals moral and spiritual truth to the characters and readers. (204)

When Andrew looks up at the sky at Austerlitz he apprehends a transcendent reality he could not explain logically. *Mimesis* is a form of knowing.

Invention presumes that the world is chaotic, that its orders must be created (cf. Morson). One must impose order upon the world, shape it and make it conform to our own designs. This is essentially what Kant calls *practical reason*, namely that locus within us that generates desires, volitions and actions that can potentially change the world. Napoleon, for instance, is the

quintessential "inventor" of reality. Invention is a form of doing.

In this context it is useful to recall that Kant saw these two types of reason as complementary and in fact unitary:

[...] practical reason has as its basis one and the same cognitive power as does speculative [i.e., theoretical] reason insofar as both are pure reason. [...] Some day [it may be possible] to attain insight into the unity of the entire pure power of reason (theoretical as well as practical) and to derive everything from one principle. (89-91, *passim*)

Thus Kant suggested a relation between these two forms of cognition, which Tolstoy, following Schopenhauer, chose to call "reason" and "consciousness." For Love these working terms are subscribed into the dichotomy "mimesis" vs. "invention."

As Love points out, Tolstoy adjusted the model Schopenhauer used in *Essay on the Freedom of the Will* to invent a new theory about the relation between history and volition. For Schopenhauer participants in historical events are locked into a web of phenomenal causality that allows them no freedom, while at the same time they feel themselves free to do whatever they please. Tolstoy will attempt to show that this rigid divide is negotiable.

Love makes sense out of Tolstoy's use of calculus to solve the riddle of cognizing human agency in history (72-87). Integral mathematics offered a way of reconceptualizing the dichotomy of competing cognitions of events by grasping them as infinitesimals in dynamic flux. In every moment of time and in every volition there is a point at which necessity and freedom manifest themselves simultaneously and in such a way that the two cannot be separated. The conventional ways historians fabricate a dubious causality or ascribe events to the will of great leaders beg the question of how people experience life with its poignancy, its joys and disappointments, and its

moral meaning. For if people have no freedom they also have no way of choosing good over evil. And if people find themselves caught in dire circumstances beyond their control then they are deserving of compassion.

This book contains many riches. It is a measure of how broadly Love casts his net that no review of the book can adequately summarize the wealth of insights it contains. This is not to say that it is without fault, but a reader who picks up this volume is likely to synthesize only a portion of it in one reading. In closing, it makes sense to point out that Love carries over his observations about history into his analysis of fictional narration. The dichotomous interior design of Tolstoy's narrative, for instance, manifests itself in competing forms of discourse. On the one hand there are scenes which seem to convey the disjunctive quality of experience. In this regard Love rightly points out that the novel resembles the non-authoritative model of fiction Bakhtin subscribed to—not so much as "dialogical" in the literal sense but in the sense of a multiperspectivalness (109-114). On the other hand, as he points out, there is the epic quality Lukács uncovered that helps bring forth a holistic diorama of a socially validated world (115-118). In the latter half of the book Love discusses a series of subtle distinctions (e.g., between causes and laws) which figure prominently in Schopenhauer and are pertinent to Tolstoy's argument. Tolstoy's concept of power is explicated as a subliminal force emanating from the "swarm" life of the masses. Here Tolstoy is polemicizing with positivist psychology which deals only with phenomena and has no understanding of how the mind grasps intangibles. Clearly, Tolstoy is not against science, but he faults it for dismissing hidden motives that barely reach consciousness.

In sum, this is a fine book that grapples with the philosophical underpinnings of Tolstoy's theory of history more deeply than any work I am aware of. Nevertheless there are some omissions. Love does not explain in detail how Tolstoy

acquired his knowledge of Schopenhauer and fails to cite some pertinent literature on this topic.² For some reason, Lur'e's intelligent discussion of Tolstoy's historical calculus is not cited. Limitations of space may be the cause, given the current priority on compactness. I question also why Hegel's importance in this enterprise is so easily dismissed. Hegelian gestures are often evident in Tolstoy's text.³ But these criticisms seem minor in the midst of so many good things Love offers.

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Notes

1. See Эйхенбаум, pp. 195-356.
2. For instance, Eugene Schuyler, the American Slavist, reports visiting Tolstoy in September 1868 and remarking how deeply Tolstoy admired Schopenhauer and how much he praised his German style. This account appeared in *Scribner's Magazine*, vol. V, no. 5 (1889) and is anthologized in *L.N. Толстой в воспоминаниях современников*. See also McLaughlin.
3. See, for instance, Orwin 26-28.

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