

Behind the Door: A Few Remarks Concerning the Direction of Prince Andrei's Gaze

Princess Mar'ia, supporting her sister-in-law, still looked with her beautiful eyes full of tears at the door through which Prince Andrei had gone and made the sign of the cross in his direction.

War and Peace (PSS 9: 135)

Gradually, unnoticed, all these persons began to disappear, and a single question, that of the closed door, superseded all else.

War and Peace (PSS 12: 63)

1.

War and Peace opens with Pierre returning home and Prince Andrei on his way to the war. These are the two vectors of the action: backwards and forwards, the centripetal and centrifugal forces of the novel. If there is any sort of "formula" to Prince Andrei, it is (in accordance with the epic genre) the constantly departing hero; and here it is not important *where* he is going, but *from where*. Even his returns are a variation of his departure: solitude, contempt for society, and finally death. All of the other heroes of *War and Peace* are house-sitters: Even in the regiment Nikolai feels at home, while Pierre is a house-sitter who always wants to go somewhere, hoping to find peace in a new place.

To a large extent, Book I of the epic is about how and why Prince Andrei ("a great man") goes to war. The parting with his sister and father is a Tolstoyan variation—polemical because it is his sister rather than his wife or beloved—of classical partings (e.g., Hector and Andromache, Aeneas and Dido). Ahead, it seems to Prince Andrei, is the road to glory. In fact, the road leads to the hero's injury, his disillusionment with his once-held ideals, his return home, and the death of his wife.

In this note, I will examine the symbolic connection between the hero's departure and the image of the opening and closing door. The

latter, I argue, serves as a particular kind of mediator for the most salient ideas (in Tolstoyan metaphysics) on such dichotomies as the inner and outer, the close and distant, one's own and another's, the unknown and discovery, and life and death.

Let us begin with the farewell scene between Prince Andrei and Princess Mar'ia in Book I. Gary Saul Morson justly calls this scene "remarkable" and twice uses it to illustrate the philosophy of prosaics that he ascribes to Tolstoy:

Thus we have the remarkable scene when Andrei, setting out to join the army in 1805, bids farewell to his sister Princess Marya. She puts a silver cross around her atheist brother's neck and he is wise enough, though smiling at her faith, to be touched by her love. He leans over and kisses her, tenderly if condescendingly, on the forehead. "*Her eyes lit up with an extraordinary glow of sensibility and kindness, but he was looking not at his sister, but over her head toward the darkness of the open door*" (145; PSS 9: 132). He looks over her head and so misses her radiant expression; he literally overlooks the meaningful that is daily before his eyes if he only knew to attend to it. Instead, he peers into the darkness of the open door, where what is vague, opaque, and unknown appear meaningful only because it is far away; and so this apparently simple physical action of the eyes catches his central error. *God is here and now or He is nowhere and never.* (215)

Elsewhere, Morson mentions the darkness of the door where the hero gazes:

The darkness of the open door, like an infinite sky at Austerlitz, suggests the world that Andrei can neither know, nor summarize, nor dismiss—the world in which he will experience all his "finest moments" of sublime ignorance. Presumably, he looks over into the darkness (no internal monologue follows, as it does at Austerlitz) and does

not yet suspect that the darkness will contain his brightest light—the “light [that] shineth in the darkness,” although “the darkness comprehended is not,” as Pierre cites the Scriptures in his diary (537). *Tolstoy’s special irony here is that the mystery Andrei seeks lies before him, in Princess Marya, whom he does not thoroughly understand, and who, in her own way, already understands Tolstoyan truth better than Andrei ever will.* (74)

This is an interesting, albeit not quite accurate, conclusion since it is founded on an error in the Dunnigan translation. It furthermore takes the scene out of context. Let us turn to the original:

Говоря это, он встал, подошел к сестре и, нагнувшись, поцеловал ее в лоб. Прекрасные глаза его светились умным и добрым, непривычным блеском, но он смотрел не на сестру, а в темноту отворенной двери, через ее голову.— Пойдем к ней, надо проститься! (9: 132)

(As he said this, he went up to his sister, and stooping over her kissed her on the forehead. **His** fine eyes shone with an unaccustomed light of intelligence and goodness. But he was not looking at his sister, but towards the darkness of the open door, over her head. “Let us go to her; I must say good bye.”)¹

2.

It is evident that Tolstoy is not concerned with Mar’ia’s eyes but with her brother’s. In addition, Tolstoy sets the stage in such a way that, clearly, it would have been impossible for Mar’ia to see her brother’s shining eyes—Andrei kisses his sister’s forehead while looking over her head in the direction of the door. Here the light—referring back to Morson’s interpretation—is not hidden in the darkness, but is emitted from the hero himself, with this light visible only to the author. Where is Prince Andrei looking? Why does he look *the way* he

does? And why is Princess Mar’ia unable to see his glance?

The exchange of glances and the monologue of gaze are always significant in Tolstoy (the unspoken words as a means of more fully expressing the inner “I”). The door leads to the room of Andrei’s pregnant wife, whom he leaves behind. Immediately after the passage quoted above, Andrei says, ““Let us go to her; it is time to say good-bye. Or you go first and wake her; I’ll be there shortly’...Princess Mar’ia rose and went to the door” (132). Prince Andrei does not look at his sister because he is not thinking about her but about someone else dear to him. The thoughtful and kind shine in his beautiful eyes is a moment of sympathy and pity for Liza. (Such things often happen in Tolstoy: This gaze of pity contradicts the hero’s bitter pronouncement of the lack of happiness in his family.) This moment is unusual because Andrei usually looks contemptuously at the wife towards whom he has grown cold; the gaze is thoughtful because it understands.

It is noteworthy that even in the early drafts of *War and Peace*, the motif of the prince softening up was already in place, if in a more sentimental form. Andrei is shown here with his wife and sister; suddenly overwhelmed with emotion, he looks at them tenderly:

[Andrei] smiled, he smiled and suddenly he began to feel rather bittersweet. For the first time in many months he took his wife by the shoulder, bent her towards him, and did not kiss her but pressed his head against her. “You are both wonderful, wonderful,” he said [...] Princess Maria made the sign of the cross over him and told him to cross himself and to kiss and wear a small icon of the Saviour in a robe. Andrei did all of this and then sat with them, chatting joyfully, as he had not done for a long time. (13: 258-59)

It is evident that in the final draft Tolstoy felt the need to place Liza “behind the door” and tone down Andrei’s elation. Liza sleeps in the neighboring room; he does not see her for

the darkness, but he knows she is there. As Sergei Bocharov has justly noted, Andrei has the look of a lost man, a man on the threshold:

At times he felt somewhat lost when it seemed his fate had been caught up in life's tangles and knots, and it seemed clear that he needed to untangle and sort them out. Thus, when talking to Princess Mar'ia about his family affairs, he says in an unusually somber tone: "You want to know if I'm happy. No. Is she? No. Why is this case? I don't know." How do people come together like this? Andrei senses that his faith in preordination is unable to address this question. It seems he knows how he should act, but here the situation raises questions not only about him, but about the common fate of people and the state of the world, and he can only say in his perplexity: I don't know. (44-45)

Andrei's gaze into the darkness of the open door is linked to the question he cannot answer but which he can also no longer avoid: What is *there*? And what is going on in my absence?

After the conversation with his sister, Andrei passes through the hallway to Liza's room and hears "from the open door" her joyful voice and empty chatter. His irritation returns, and the parting comes off abrupt, even cruel. As is characteristic of the epic hero, he leaves home. Then the author immediately replicates a mirror-image of the scene above: "Princess Mar'ia, supporting her sister-in-law, still looked with her beautiful eyes full of tears at the door through which Prince Andrei had gone and made the sign of the cross in his direction" (9: 136). By virtue of the novel's idiosyncratic vantage point, Mar'ia's and Andrei's eyes cannot meet: He looks past the door, while she looks after him; incidentally, the reader is constantly following Andrei's glances (for instance, the sky at Austerlitz) and the glances *at* him. Finally, the old prince appears: "'Gone? That's just fine!' he said, and looking angrily at the unconscious princess, he shook his head reprovingly and slammed the door" (p. 136).

Book I ends with the sound of the slammed door. This sound also connects the themes of Prince Andrei (the gaze into the open door) and his father, the owner of a huge home with many rooms, the ideological center of which is his own study that is separated from the rest of the world by an "enormously high door."²

3.

In the first part of Book II, Tolstoy describes Andrei's return home after the war, on the eve of his wife's childbirth. They refuse to admit him into the room. He waits behind the door, mentally suffering what is taking place within:

Prince Andrei got up, went to the door and tried to open it. Someone was holding it shut. 'You can't come in! You can't come in!' [...] The door opened. The doctor with his shirt sleeves tucked up, without a coat, pale and with a trembling jaw, came out of the room [...] He went into his wife's room. She lay there dead... (10: 40-41)

To the prince, the battle between life and death is taking place behind the door, and the outcome of this battle is beyond his understanding because both sides prevail: Liza dies, but Nikolen'ka is born. One may recall another symbolically important example of "waiting by the door": Nikolen'ka's recovery. Andrei, sitting in his study, tries to hear what is happening in the nursery. "Suddenly, he *thought he heard a strange noise through the door. He was seized with alarm.* [...] He went on tiptoe to the nursery door and *opened it*" (10: 100). His fear turns out to be groundless—the child is healthy.

Who is hiding behind the door and what exactly is taking place there? This is the question of Prince Andrei. Why does Andrei leave and where does he go? This is the question of those close to him. The door motif, once established, gradually acquires psychological and symbolic meanings and begins to envelope other characters (Natasha, Pierre, Nikolai). The dynamic of this artistic device is how it moves from the quotidian experience of the hero (the door in

one's home) into the realm of existential suffering.

The meeting of Andrei and Natasha in Mytishchi is a case in point. The door to the room is a physical boundary of the space that is reflected in the hero's imagination. In a delirium he fixes his gaze on the door, and at this moment Natasha, who at least for a time returns him to life, appears:

In that world some structure was still being erected and did not fall, something was still stretching out, and the candle with its red halo was still burning, and the same shirt-like sphinx lay near the door; but besides all this something creaked, there was a whiff of fresh air, and a new white sphinx appeared, standing at the door. And that sphinx had the pale face and shining eyes of the very Natasha of whom he had just been thinking. (11: 88)

The *new* sphinx—the riddle of life embodied by Natasha—enters the hero's world and returns him to life. (Does the shirt-like sphinx bear any semblance to Schopenhauer's veil of *Mâyâ*?).³ But again the opposite quickly follows: Andrei's well-known dream in Yaroslavl' (the basis of which is a dream Tolstoy himself had in 1859 and recorded in his diary) explains his rejection of life. At the center of this vision (which has been interpreted in numerous ways) is the question of the door that Andrei tries, but is unable, to close:

He dreamed that he was lying in the room he really was in, but that he was quite well and unwounded. Many various, indifferent, and insignificant people appeared before him. Gradually, unnoticed, all these persons began to disappear and *a single question, that of the closed door, superseded all else. He rose and went to the door to bolt and lock it.*

Everything depended on whether he was, or was not, in time to lock it.

He went and tried to hurry, but his legs refused to move and he knew he would not be

in time to lock the door, though he painfully strained all his powers. He was seized by an agonizing fear. And that fear was the fear of death. *It* stood behind the door. But just when he was clumsily-creeping toward the door, that dreadful something on the other side was already pressing against it and forcing its way in. Something not human—death—was breaking in through the door and had to be kept out. He seized the door, making a final effort to hold it back (to lock it was no longer possible) but his efforts were weak and clumsy, and the door, pushed from behind by that terror, opened and closed again. Once again it pushed from outside. His last superhuman efforts were vain and both halves of the door noiselessly opened. *It* entered, and it was *death*, and Prince Andrei died. (12: 63-64)

As Tolstoy writes, this dream was the hero's awakening from life: "He felt as if powers till then confined within him had been liberated" (*PSS* 12: 63). This, one might say, *unbearable lightness of non-being*—quietism, in other words—enters the hero's consciousness like a refreshing wind blown in from the open door. To borrow a phrase from Schopenhauer, whom Tolstoy was reading in 1868, the "door of freedom" is opened to the hero who has conquered the will to live and achieved "the unbroken peace," which accompanies "the state of resignation" (506). Though antipodal, this feeling is related to the sensation that life has burst in "from behind the door"—the kind of feeling he experienced in his love for Natasha: "He felt so happy and refreshed in his soul, *as if he had left a stuffy room for God's open, free earth*" (12: 3).

It is precisely in this state of blissful estrangement from life that Mar'ia finds him upon her arrival. True to type, she stands for some time at his door and cannot bring herself to go in:⁴

As she stepped to the door she already saw in imagination Andrei's face as she remembered it in childhood, a gentle, mild, sympa-

thetic face which he had rarely shown, and which therefore affected her very strongly. She was sure he would speak soft, tender words to her, such as her father had uttered before his death, and that she would not be able to bear it and would burst into sobs in his presence. Yet sooner or later it had to be, and she went in. The sobs rose higher and higher in her throat as she more and more clearly distinguished his form and her shortsighted eyes tried to make out his features, and then she saw his face and met his gaze. (12: 56-57)

Tolstoy describes this gaze as almost hostile; they can no longer comprehend one another because they are on different sides of the symbolic door.

Prince Andrei dies, but the connection between his image (the departing hero) and the door motif remains intact. The symbolic meaning of this motif is made clear in the description of Natasha's grief:

At the end of December in a black wool coat, with her hair loosely tied in a bun, skinny and pale, Natasha sat in the corner of the divan, tensely ruffling and unfurling the ends of her corset. And she *looked toward the corner of the door. She looked in the direction he had gone: to the other side of life.* And that side of life which she had never thought about before, and which in the past had seemed so impossibly far away was now *closer and more familiar to her, more accessible* than this side where there was nothing but emptiness and destruction, or else suffering and injury. (12: 174)

Natasha's understanding gaze in the direction of death is her last temptation. Never before has she been so close spiritually to the "late" Prince Andrei (as well as, perhaps, Schopenhauer): "Tensely knitting her brows, she gazed at the place where he had stood. And after a while it seemed that she was penetrating the secret." And immediately Tolstoy changes the course of action:

But at that minute, just as it seemed the incomprehensible was being revealed to her, her ears were struck by a loud thud of the door handle. Quickly and carelessly [...] the maid Dun'iasha entered the room. "Hurry, go to your father," she said with an especially animated expression. "Something terrible...a letter...about Peter Il'ych," she said, sobbing. (12: 174)

Petya's death brings Natasha back to life. Once again, as life and death battle behind the door, both sides prevail: Petya dies and Natasha is revived.

4.

In contrast to Dostoevsky's novels in which the action unfolds in commercial houses, with mutually antagonistic people crammed into rooms behind incalculable doors, the doors in *War and Peace* separate the "inner spaces of noble homes and estates" (Bakhtin 398); that is, they belong to their own complete world. This also explains the primary difference in the interpretations of the threshold in the works of the two novelists, noted by Bakhtin. If in Dostoevsky we have the moment of "crisis, a life-changing event," the crossing of another's boundary, then in Tolstoy we witness the alternation of crossings from one's own and returns back to one's own, thus continuing to the final departure of the hero: his own death.⁵ The Tolstoyan home has many rooms, and thus many small, interrelated worlds (the nursery, the study, the servants' quarters) and doors which "hide and open" them.⁶ The physical "duality" of the door—now opening, now closing; now inviting, now hindering—underscores the symbolic ambiguity of Tolstoy's "philosophy of revelation," in which the hero's becoming is a succession of passages and dead-ends; and the final departure "into the darkness" turns out to be a metaphysical obstacle for those left behind. In other words, Tolstoyan metaphysics is played out in the terms of the large home, and the theme of the agitated hero's waiting by the door is the symbolic equiva-

lent of a religious standing at the Royal door, or a mystical penetration into the afterlife. For Tolstoy, death does not bring the “dawn of a new day,” as it would for spiritualists of his time, but rather another room. Prince Andrei’s experience in this context turns out to be the most important to the author.⁷

One might say that Andrei’s ideological (symbolic) space in a way maintains equilibrium on both sides of the door: It opens and closes. Behind it something critical takes place; someone dies and another is born; someone holds it shut, another slams it noisily; people go through it, while the hero himself departs from it. The door is not so much a border (threshold) between life and death, present and future (the traditionally spiritual symbol) as it is an ideological focus, a “question” that the hero and those near him resolve. The point here of course is not that Andrei does not see that God is supposedly here and now, on *this* side of the door, or that this God is in the quotidian, as Princess Mar’ia understands Him. In general, this is not a question concerning Prince Andrei or any sort of “error,” as Morson writes. (“Prosaics” in fact is Pierre’s theme. Compare the narrator’s thoughts on how Pierre, prior to his acquaintance with Platon Karataev, viewed the world *поверх голов* when he should have done otherwise.⁸) Prince Andrei knows, to borrow from Isaiah Berlin, *one big thing* that those in his life either do not or fear to know: What is most important is not exactly *here* (recall Pierre and Natasha) nor is it *there* somewhere (the afterlife for Princess Mar’ia), but *right next to* him, behind the door that always held his gaze in his father’s home—the door he thoughtlessly tries to lock; the door that opens of itself through which he ultimately leaves; the threshold of which others cannot cross.

Ilya Vinitzky
University of Pennsylvania

Notes

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Throughout this article, all italics are mine.

1. The translation is Garnett’s (93). In all fairness, Dunnigan was not alone in her inaccurate translation of the third-person pronoun in this passage: “He turned and kissed his sister, but he did not see *the loving light in her eyes*, for his own were fixed on the door she had left ajar. ‘We must go to her, Maria...’” (Anonymous translation 109).

The translators’ curious mistake is due to the fact that Tolstoy insists on depicting the “beautiful eyes” as a personal characteristic of the empathic princess.

2. The old prince’s gesture is symbolic: It is constantly emphasized that he always locks the door to his study, as if trying to hide from his own life (the study as his own small space). Tolstoy writes that every resident of his house “would feel reverence and even fear whenever the enormously high door would open and the old man’s little figure would appear with his powdered wig, small dry hands and gray hanging eyebrows that, whenever he frowned, would cover the splendor in his thoughtful and shining young eyes.” The image of Natasha unexpectedly dashing into the room where the bored guests are sitting ideologically contrasts with the image of the old prince, shut up in his little world (Pliukhanova 837).

3. M. B. Pliukhanova identifies the thrown-open door motif with the image of Natasha and—what is for Tolstoy—the central collision of the human discovery of the world:

Natasha first appears as a girl: throwing open the door, she bursts into the drawing room where the adult guests are sitting bored. The description of Natasha’s smile (which signifies the awakening of life’s new powers and her self-revelation towards Pierre—“as the rusty door opens”) completes the metaphor. But, like many important themes and symbolic details in the novel, this image can carry the opposite meaning: in the dream before Prince Andrei’s death, the slowly, forcibly opening door signifies the entrance of death. (837)

4. In the same way, Princess Mar’ia cannot bring herself to enter her dying father’s room: “a few times she went to the door, listened a moment, wishing to go in but could not make up her mind

to do it" (PSS 11: 137). The motif of intense waiting, dread, and indecisiveness constantly accompany the door theme in Tolstoy.

5. In Tolstoy, death is always personal; the death of *this particular* hero or heroine. This category of *one's own* death is the ideological opposite of the traditional category of personal immortality.

6. Compare the description of the hero's return to his parents' home in *Youth*:

I involuntarily asked myself, how could we, the house and I, have gone so long without one another? And hurrying somewhere, I ran to see if all the other rooms were the same. Everything was the same, only it had become smaller, narrower, and I somehow had become taller, more cumbersome and crass. Yet the house took me as I was into its arms with joy, and with each floorboard, each window, each little stair, each sound awoke in me hordes of images, feelings, events of my happy, irretrievable past. We came to our childhood bedroom, and all my childhood nightmares were there lurking in the darkness of the corners and doors. We passed the drawing room: the same quiet, tender maternal love was lavished on every item in the room. We went through the hall: the clamorous, reckless childish merriment, it seemed, stopped in this room and only waited to be revived again. In the parlor where Foka led us and where he made our beds, it felt as if everything—the mirror, the screens, the old wooden icon, every bump in the wall lined with white wallpaper—everything spoke of sufferings, death, about what would never come back again. [...] 'Did *taman* really die in this room?' asked Volodya. (PSS 2: 163)

7. Even Pierre Bezukhov has the experience of "standing by the door" in the scenes of his father's death, his initiation into the masons, and elsewhere. But in contrast to Prince Andrei, Pierre does not perceive the door as a metaphysical enigma: He is a house-sitter rather than a wanderer.

8. The scene of Pierre and Natasha's meeting, already after Prince Andrei's death, is curious:

"And that's everything, everything..." said Natasha. She rose quickly, as Nikolushka was entering, and almost ran to the door, *banged her head on the door* that was covered by a curtain, and moaning not so much from pain or sorrow, slipped out of the room. Pierre *looked at the door through which she had gone and couldn't understand why, all of a sudden, he was all alone in the whole world.* (PSS 12: 218)

Note that the "whole world" to Pierre lies on "this side" of the door.

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