



The best books ever written

Philip Hensher on War and Peace

It's far too late for any translator to change this immensely famous title in English, but it isn't quite accurate. *War and Peace* is a dichotomy, a pair of alternatives like *Scarlet and Black* or *Pride and Prejudice*. Any reflective reader of the novel will see that, though it loosely alternates between scenes from Napoleon's war and scenes in urban Russian society, the entire action is shaped by the events of the war from the very first page to the last. The scenes in the salons, or in the rural setting of the Bolkonsky mansion, are not scenes of peace; the sense of approaching or retreating war is never that far away. And an English reader might wonder why Tolstoy used a not strictly accurate title, when hardly any of his novel can be divided into neat alternatives.

In fact, Tolstoy's title, I believe, really means 'War and the World'; not a pair of alternatives, but a complex relationship. English readers sometimes say that they prefer the 'peace' parts to the 'war' parts; some have even claimed that you can more or less skip the military passages altogether. But the book's great subject, and what its overwhelming effect derives from, is the way the immense fact of Napoleon's war spreads into the world, changing every life forever.

Tolstoy's subject committed him to one of the hardest tasks a novelist can undertake: to depict individuals whose characters alter, sometimes very significantly, under the pressure of war and time. No other novelist does this so convincingly. The virtuosity of Tolstoy lies in the way he can convince us that the Natasha at the beginning of the novel, full of japes and fun, is exactly the same person as the woman at the end, who 'let herself go to such an extent that her clothes, her untidy hair, her thoughtless jibes and her jealousy...were a constant source of humour amongst her friends'.

But he does this with almost everyone in the novel. Even at the beginning, we understand that Andrey has changed from what he was, with his regrets at marrying Liza, and he will change much further. Sometimes it is a subtle, internal alteration - the most moving story in the whole novel for me is Marya Bolkonsky's journey from a naive, inflexible religious faith to the woman who makes an unforgettable cry for help to Nikolay Rostov in the first epilogue. Sometimes it is a change of circumstances; everything surrounding Pierre is subtly altered, to both comic and tragic effect, with his immense legacy. Sometimes it is a brutal transition, and a character starts to operate in different ways in different circumstances, as when Dolokhov is reduced to the ranks.

The massive effect of *War and Peace*, what E. M. Forster called its 'great chords' comes from that sense of constant psychological shifts, mirrored in the huge movements of armies over half of Europe. Tolstoy's genius was to see that in the perspective of the novel, changes in a foreground figure have the same massive weight as huge historical events, and they parallel each other, amplifying and echoing. Andrey's end is, humanly, unbearable for the reader, and it makes us understand the huge tragedy of the Russian war; conversely, the massively rendered catastrophes of Part III give the experiences of Natasha and Pierre, even his domestic squabbles with Helene, an extraordinary weight and power.

War and Peace overcomes some perverse obstacles of Tolstoy's own making; I've often thought that it not only defies our conventional wisdom by having not only one of the worst first sentences of any great novel, but by a very long way the absolutely worst last one. Many readers find the

theories of history scattered throughout the novel, and gathered together indigestibly in the second epilogue, not just very hard going but perversely inappropriate to the effect of the novel. Tolstoy's conclusion, which endeared him to generations of Marxist critics, was that free will was an illusion, and humans acted in accordance with the pressures of historical necessity.

How could he have thought *War and Peace* demonstrated such a thing? Historical necessity would never account for Pierre's legacy, his escape from death; for Marya's breaking of convention and terrible admission to Nikolay; for Helene's conduct and fate; for a thousand incidents and consequences where we are convinced that here is an individual, acting against his circumstances as frequently as buckling under them.

But the truth is that *War and Peace* carries out Tolstoy's favoured aesthetic design. In many of his works, he sets up an inexorable mechanism, which proceeds to work itself out. In the beautiful late fables, like *How Much Land Does A Man Need* or *What Man Lives By*, it is a sequence of repeated events, which will not stop until a terrible or beneficent conclusion has been reached. In *Anna Karenina* or *Resurrection* a sequence of events is set off by one unconsidered action, and the characters are trapped in the mechanism until an inevitable end has been attained.

In all of these, a massive and unstoppable machine works itself out; in the foreground, our attention is focussed on humans, struggling against those forces. His subject is the "illusion" of free will, as he calls it. In *War and Peace* the immense mechanism is the history of Napoleon's Russian campaign; for the reader, there is no escape from that. He knows how it ends, and sees, as the characters can't, the whole immovable narrative from the start.

If he doesn't know what will happen to the Bolkonskys, the Kuragins, the Rostovs, he does know that their lives will be played out against a vast sequence which can't be altered now. Tolstoy projected backwards, and thought that none of this could never have been altered by personal decision; I think he was wrong, but his peculiar theory provides this greatest of all novels with an august frame. Tragic inevitability, played out on a vast scale combines with mystery, suspense, events unfolding which we don't suspect in advance and which, in retrospect, even at their most bizarre, have an essential human truth and rightness.

Tolstoy certainly wasn't the first, or the last novelist who misunderstood his own work. The most devastating rebuttal of his own theories comes in the great first epilogue. Here, possibilities of free will seem to be opening up gloriously in front of every character, new enterprises start to spring up. Many of the greatest and most ambitious works of art deliberately introduce, in their last moments, quite a new theme; the redemptive theme at the end of the *Ring of the Nibelung*, or the surprising entrance of Mlle de Saint-Loup at the close of Proust's *Le Temps Retrouve*. With the marvellous sketch of Andrey's son at the beginning of his life, Tolstoy ensures a very strange response to this immensely long book. The reader, quite simply, wants it to go on forever.