correspondents at large

Leo Tolstoy on Peace and War

CARYL EMERSON

"WAR ALWAYS INTERESTED ME," WROTE THE TWENTY-THREE-YEAR-OLD LEO TOLSTOY IN "THE RAID" (1853), AN EARLY STORY INSPIRED BY his personal experience of a brutal border skirmish in the Caucasus. "Not war in the sense of maneuvers devised by great generals . . . but the reality of war, the actual killing" (1). The focus of Tolstoy's interest here remained absolute throughout his long and brilliantly inconsistent life. As a second lieutenant during the Crimean War in 1854–55, he wrote three "Sevastopol Stories" about that city under siege, which were so cannily constructed and voiced that the new tsar, Alexander II, deeply touched, decreed that they be translated into French so that Russian courage would reach a European audience—whereas other readers took these tales as critical of the imperial war effort, even as subversive. Tolstoy revealed his own chauvinist side in the mid-1860s while writing the final books of *War and Peace*. Napoléon was a caricature from the start, of course, but, in a rising arc of patriotic disdain, Tolstoy proceeded to ridicule almost every alien nation's soldiers, generals, and tacticians; only simple Russian peasants, partisans, Field Marshal Kutuzov, and the occasional clear-seeing field commander were exempt from the author's scorn. By the end of his life, Tolstoy professed radical Christian anarchism and pacifism, preaching nonviolent resistance to evil and urging young men to oppose the military draft. But he never lost his fascination with close-up "actual killing." The greatest literary achievement of Tolstoy's final decade, the Caucasus novel *Hadji Murad*, ends with such graphic slaughter, so many grotesque hackings and mutilations, and even the beheading of the hero described at such epic leisure that it is difficult to believe Tolstoy ever doubted the veracity of languages of violence.

Tolstoy saw the world in terms of the actual, not the symbolic. In war as in every other human activity, considerations of strategy, rhetoric, political advantage, the power of institutions, and abstract plans laid down from above were fraudulent. Only subjective feelings and individual, eye-to-eye moral choices mattered. In 1852 Tolstoy joined the Russian army in the Caucasus—not so much out of patriotism

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as out of restlessness, curiosity, irritation with his debauched civilian life, and an impulse to imitate his elder brother. In fits and starts throughout the Crimean War, where he served with distinction and was decorated despite repeated efforts to resign, Tolstoy discovered his vocation as a writer. He drew constantly on his diaries and on his already obsessive habits of psychological self-analysis. Honest writing, he came to believe, never merely described or indulged an emotion. It subjected that emotion to a test, and the site of the test was always the human body.

In "The Raid," the predominant feelings tested by battlefield conditions are fear and courage. War is dangerous, Tolstoy writes, and in every danger there is a choice. If my personal choice—to stand firm, to strike, to duck, to flee—is motivated by a base or worthless feeling, then my behavior is cowardly; if motivated by a noble feeling, it is courageous. These criteria challenge official narratives. The responsible father of a family who sacrifices his life melodramatically, for show, probably acts out of a base feeling (however gloriously the state decorates him posthumously for his bravery). A military man, on the other hand, knows that confronting and bestowing death are part of his duty, that he freely chose this duty, and thus his refusal to sentimentalize or to demonize necessary acts of killing is both brave and noble. Duty is knowing, under an actual concrete circumstance, what one must do. To all varieties of war experience, the youthful Tolstoy applied this cerebral, apatriotic, anti-Romantic, moral criterion.

Here Tolstoy goes further than the celebrated 1839 novel he acknowledged as an influence, Stendhal's *La chartreuse de Parme*, with its chaotic scenes on the Waterloo battlefield presented from Fabrizio's confused local perspective. Tolstoy opens "The Raid" on a philosophical meditation. He seeks principles (in Plato, it turns out) that would permit us, in the presence of that "interesting" occupation of killing another human being, to learn from our reactions and be tested by them. As readers, we do learn a great deal from these Platonic considerations. But the virtuous practitioner inside the fiction, here the modest frontline Captain Khlopov, has no head for philosophy. He simply acts. In Tolstoy's view, the need to think up a theory is the first step toward justifying unethical action. As Donna Tussing Orwin suggests in her discussion of this story, Tolstoy was fascinated by the work required to prepare ourselves for moral action in crisis situations: "courage involved a mixture of 'true knowledge' and 'steadfastness' [or "strength," сила] . . . to do the right thing despite temptation (say, to impress others) or justifiable fear" (223). The workings of courage depend not on a soldier's oath or professional honor but on immediate, visceral feelings. Little wonder that censors cut these prefatory few paragraphs of "The Raid."

A master of the psychology of war, Tolstoy was in no way naive about the horrors of the battlefield. But for half a century, from "The Raid" to *Hadji Murad*, he persisted in affirming the exhilaration, communal purpose, and heightened sense of rhythm and of life that precedes contact with the enemy. In Tolstoy's world, this force is often connected with music—which, together with war, beauty, and sexuality, "interested" him to the point of obsession. By *force* Tolstoy meant not necessarily violence or disruption but the power to organize, suddenly and irresistibly, all our scattered actions and feelings into a coherent, meaningful whole. Thus focused in its energies, the human organism would fear nothing, not even its own mortality. But since this heightened condition lent itself equally well to sublime insight and to irrational acts, it had to be carefully watched. Like music and sexual appetite, war can infect and organize our reactions outside our will. One exemplary scene is described in *War and Peace* (bk. 1, pt. 2, ch. 2), before the military disaster at Austerlitz. Dolokhov, reduced to the ranks, is conversing reluctantly with the hussar cor-

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net Zherkov against the intrusive backdrop of soldiers singing while marching to the front. As the insolent Dolokhov strides along, remarking curtly on his disgrace while keeping time with the music, the song's refrain mingles with the dialogue and frames the replies. "Their conversation would probably have been different," Tolstoy notes, "if they had not been talking to the sounds of the song" (121). The reader senses a larger vortex, set in musical motion by the marching, joyously singing men, which now governs the army. At stake in such scenarios is not life versus death, not even love versus violence, but an unambiguous moment of Tolstoyan brotherhood, sisterhood, panhumanhood, the ideal of unity.

The rallying, uplifting role of war in *War and Peace* has been hotly debated for over a century. For all that the great Russian novelist despised Shakespeare, one senses in Tolstoy an echo of Richard III's gripe against the "weak piping time of peace" (1.1.25): lives are trivialized and will default to idleness, ego, or lust during peaceful interludes, whereas value and purpose are ennobled, strengthened, and mobilized (coordinated) under the crisis of war. Let me mention only two ways in which the actual battlefield becomes for Tolstoy a marker for larger life lessons.

The first is Tolstoy's corrective to our understanding of history, a thesis developed by Gary Saul Morson in his pathbreaking *Hidden in Plain View*. Morson begins with Tolstoy's quest to appreciate the full potentials of the present, his insistence that we learn to live flexibly and with spontaneity so we can participate fully in the unexpected, unscripted now. Plans and strategies (being symbolic projections) can only obscure causation in this most unstable of environments. Morson writes:

> Because battle, as Tolstoy understood it, is the activity most governed by pure chance, it functions in *War and Peace* as a microcosm of the historical process. . . . No one does or can understand a battle because battle is essentially chaotic. . . . The difference between a good and a poor officer in *War and Peace* is that the former knows that he cannot understand battle and knows how to behave in a situation of uncertainty. (88)

In the world of the actual, uncertainty requires flexibility. The key to life is alertness to what can be changed.

During his final years, Tolstoy often returned to this theme of the present tense as moral anchor. He included a section on the virtues of immediacy in his compendium of maxims titled *The Way of Life* (Путь жизни). In the entry on "living in the present," Tolstoy remarks, "We are tormented by our past and spoil our future because we pay little attention to the present. The past is gone, the future is not yet, only the present exists. We must train ourselves to remember that nothing is important except what we are doing right now. All else is a dream" (*Wisdom* 125). These words provide a rich gloss on Morson's thesis about battle and story. For it is indeed an instructive paradox that the chaotic and destructive immediacy of war, which summons up our irrational and thus most honest emotional selves, is our best guarantee against collapsing into fake pasts and faked futures.

The second marker moves us in a different direction: Tolstoy's corrective to European theories of warfare, especially those of Carl von Clausewitz. At the 2006 National Convention of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies, in Washington, DC, one panel was dedicated to Tolstoy's literary representations of war. Among the paper givers was Colonel Rick A. McPeak, a humanities professor at West Point and the finance manager of the *Tolstoy Studies Journal*, who delivered the paper "Tolstoy and Clausewitz on War." In his discussant's response, Val Vinokur, of the New School, raised a crucial issue:

> Colonel McPeak frames pretty starkly the differences between Clausewitz and Tolstoy over

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the nature of war. Clausewitz understands war as a continuation of policy by other means and therefore subject to rational constraints, whereas Tolstoy comes to see war as inherently irrational. I wonder, however, if Clausewitz inadvertently provides the basis for Tolstoy's argument about the madness of war. According to Clausewitz, war, as a closed "kinetic" system, tends towards absolute violence. Total war can change the very landscape over which policy decisions are made and render them obsolete. And isn't this why Tolstoy believes war is irrational? Here is the fundamental difference between the novelist and the theoretician: genre. Clausewitz is writing a treatise that is also a manual; he offers general, practical rules about warfare. . . . *On War* wants to make war *reasonable enough* and thereby reduces its unreasonableness to "friction," the human (and the natural and random) elements that "preclude peak efficiency on the battlefield." For Tolstoy, of course, the "friction" is the very heart of the matter: as a novelist, he writes from the perspective of the "friction."

Writing from the perspective of the friction: Vinokur's phrase helps explain the ambivalent treatment awarded by Leo Tolstoy, officer and pacifist, toward the most interactive and unpredictable of all fields, the field of battle. This friction is equally the experience of Fabrizio at Waterloo and of each of us, so given to projecting and remembering. It helps explain why the war manual or, for that matter, any of Tolstoy's many manuals from the latter part of his life (*On Love, On Life*; "What Is Art?"; "What Is Religion?") always fall short in transmitting the confused immediacy of experience.

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