

VALERY ALEFF

RUSSIAN LITERATURE

EUGENE ONEGIN

To Dmitri Tcherniakov

1

What is the process of thought? Thought is, in essence, the active response of memory in every phase of life. We include in thought the intellectual, emotional, sensuous, muscular and physical responses of memory. These are all aspects of one indissoluble process. To treat them separately makes for fragmentation and confusion. All these are one process of response of memory to each actual situation, which response in turn leads to a further contribution to memory, thus conditioning the next thought.

David Bohm, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*

Whenever I think about something, I set my memory in motion instead of leaving it in peace. Nor do I leave in peace my whole being, my life, my pastime, my time and space. Perhaps my memory does not budge from where it dwells and only a few pieces of information pop out of it as I go on thinking about this and that.

I have got a jack-in-a-box in my bedroom. Whenever I open it, a clown pops out. I look at the clown for a while, thinking about Nijinsky, among other people. How many people are clowns of God, I wonder? There are clowns of men; there are clowns of animals, of plants. A woman who fritters away whole days in her garden is a clown of plants. There are clowns of Time, I presume; I am loath to join the ranks of those individuals.

There is in this mechanical process no inherent reason why the thoughts that arise should be relevant or fitting to the actual situation that evokes them. The perception of whether or not my particular thoughts are relevant or fitting requires the operation of an energy that is not mechanical, an energy that we shall call intelligence. This latter is able to perceive a new order or a new structure, that is not just a modification of what is already known or present in memory. For example, one may be working on a puzzling problem for a long time. Suddenly, in a flash of understanding, one may see the irrelevance of one's whole way of thinking about the problem, along with a different approach in which all the elements fit in a new order and in a new structure.

David Bohm, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*

My thoughts are often irrelevant and *irreverent*, given that I expect them to serve my needs. I am their master after all, but they seem to ignore me as they trot through my head, using it as a receptacle, as a concert hall where they talk and sing and dance. They dance to the beat of my heart and I try to talk them out of this pastime, saying my head is not a nightclub. 'It's neither a nightclub nor a concert hall,' I say to them. When you feel lonely, you speak to yourself and also to your thoughts: you need a lot of people around you. My thoughts answer me, of course, otherwise I would not talk to them so often.

'You're used to concert halls, aren't you?' they answer. 'Your enthusiasm for good acoustics is starting to rub off on all of us.'

'I'm not used to nightclubs, am I? So why do you mistake my head for a nightclub?'

'We've decided to rejuvenate you by making you feel as if you're inside a hall where people dance at night and drink champagne.'

‘I’m not sure this thought of mine is relevant,’ I say to them. ‘If it’s not, I’ve no energy left to investigate how an error like this could have occurred.’

‘It’s not an error,’ they answer. ‘Just a longing, a yearning.’

Mechanically, I answer my thoughts and then I perceive both a new order and a new structure – something completely new, although I am aware that this novelty is deep-rooted in my soul, dating back to my childhood, to the late 50s. I did not like music at the time, but my parents played the piano so that in our library one might chance upon a few opera scores and I could not help looking at them. I even sight-read Tchaikovsky’s much-maligned *Eugene Onegin* and I went so far as to learn some scenes by heart so as to perform them for my friends and the damsels I was in love with. We did not have *The Pique Dame* in our library and therefore I came to know this opera much later – to the detriment of *Eugene Onegin* which certainly pales in comparison with the later opus. Does it really?

I talk to my thoughts every morning and all day long, if I feel like it. This is a habit of mine; loners systematically rely on their thoughts to keep them company. At the beginning of his novel in verse, Pushkin speaks about an ordinary habit which is a godsend and cannot be discarded as easily as might be expected. I play with my cat who does not enter the room where I write my texts with the aid of my computer. He just calls me and obediently I answer his calls so as not to disappoint him: after all, it’s not much fun having to look all day long out of the window. Of course he sleeps a lot but I’m not sure he enjoys sweet or exciting, sensual dreams. I stroke and pursue him through the rooms he knows by heart: my house is his *Eugene Onegin*.

2

According to Bohm, every thought squeezes a piece of information out of one’s memory in order to drop yet another piece of information into it. One’s memory grows bigger and bigger; one’s legs grow shorter and shorter. I don’t mind having a pair of short legs and I wish they could make an impact on my memory – on my brain in general. Probably nature thinks in terms of balance so you are obliged to have a long member so as to compensate for your overall shortness. ‘We must strike a balance between reckless spending and penny-pinching,’ as a Russian economist put it.

‘What is written with a quill cannot be hacked off,’ as a Russian saying goes. Lenski challenges Onegin to a duel and writes a poem a few hours before dying on a blanket of snow. What can one do about this bout of insanity? It is too late to put Lenski in an asylum: he is to be murdered shortly and so one does not need to dispose of a bad poet for the sake of poetry. As usual, he writes a bad poem:

*Whither, ah! Whither are ye fled,
my springtime’s golden days?
What has the coming day in store for me?
In vain my gaze attempts to grasp it;
in deep murk it lies hidden.*

Nabokov’s translation, though literal and faithful to the original, also lies hidden in deep murk on account of its clumsiness. But I shall overlook this deplorable fact because I have got no other paraphrase of the immortal

masterpiece at my disposal. I may come up with another paraphrase if I feel like it this afternoon – instead of having a walk in the woods. Why should I parody *Eugene Onegin* when the weather is so fine?

*The days I've lived are over. I won't
see them again. Nor am I to live the days
which are ahead of me. Do they
hide anything from me? Anyway I won't live
them so they might exhibit whatever they wish:
time will hide what's in store for me.
To cut a long story short, I'm to die this morning:
I'm fighting a duel with my dearest friend.
Why am I doing it? Because I've nothing else
to do. I'm a romantic hero and the only
way to attract attention to my persona is to get
killed. Okay. I'll get killed. So what?
My mistress will forget me, at least I think so.
The world will forget me: everyone
thinks so. So what? Destiny is a turkey and
life is a kopeck, as the Russians say. They say
so many things. I'm also talkative and I
never cut long stories short. My life, on the other
hand, isn't a long story. Tant pis. Long live the Tsar!*

I could go on writing this nonsense for a long time: my story is *long*. Why should I? I am also a romantic hero; at least I know my life is not too long. You cannot change Pushkin's text because it was written, published and commented upon. Lenski writes:

*Tomorrow will gleam the ray of daydawn,
and brilliant day will scintillate;
whilst I, perhaps – I to the tomb's
mysterious shelter shall descend,
and the young poet's memory
Slow Lethe will engulf.*

I am not sure Lethe is really slow, but it certainly engulfs whoever comes near it in this or other worlds. Neither am I sure the day I glance at is brilliant and scintillates, although it doesn't rain, in my opinion.

I wonder why Lethe is slow, in Pushkin's opinion. Because it is, as usual, slow to respond? You ask it, 'What's this poet's name?'

And it answers you, 'I don't know. Do you know what poet you're thinking about?'

'The poet I have in mind fights a duel in *Eugene Onegin*.'

'I'm almost sure his name's Onegin,' answers Lethe.

'Onegin was just the opposite of what I call a poet,' I answer. 'A wealthy socialite, he spent a lot of time in ballrooms and preferred economists to poets.'

*Lacking the lofty passion
not to spare life for the sake of sounds,
an iamb from a trochee he could not –
no matter how we strove – distinguish;
dispraised Homer, Theocritus,
but read, in compensation, Adam Smith,
and was a deep economist:
that is, he could assess the way
a state grows rich,
and what it lives upon, and why
it needs not gold
when it has got the simple product.
His father could not understand him,
and mortgaged his lands.*

But, for all this prosaic stance, Onegin is not devoid of a number of traits habitually associated with poets and poetry. At some point he withdraws from social life to devote his time to simple pleasures afforded by the country. Then he kills Lenski and probably thinks he might get away with it, not taking into consideration his memory and conscience which eventually make him set off on a round-the-world cruise.

*A restlessness took hold of him,
the urge toward a change of places
(a property most painful,
a cross that few deliberately bear).
He left his countryseat,
the solitude of woods and meads,
where an ensanguined shade
daily appeared to him,
and started upon travels without aim,
accessible to one sensation;
and journeys to him
tedious became as everything on earth.
He returned and found himself,
Like Chatski, come from boat to ball.*

When I say Onegin sets off on a round-the-world cruise, I don't really mean he travels all over the world. I just focus my attention on the boat from which he comes to the ball where he meets Tatiana again. His train of thought stumbles upon Griboedov's *Woe from Wit* – at least that is how Tchaikovsky construes the end of the stanza. In his opera Onegin sings the whole of it, for he has no alternative but to resort to Pushkin's text whenever in the mood for thinking: he is just a character in a book and cannot let himself go. But Tchaikovsky does take the liberty of embroidering upon Pushkin's ideas and even adding a few personal touches to the sacred text. So does Tcherniakov whose staging of the opera I recently saw on television. For instance, in his paraphrase of *Eugene Onegin*, it is Lenski who sings Monsieur Triquet's song, behaving on this occasion like the class clown. Guided by Tcherniakov, he makes a fool of himself so as to hold the other guests up to ridicule: they appreciate only bad poetry. Indeed, Triquet's couplets are even worse than Lenski's creative output. So, in this particular scene, everyone except Onegin becomes an object of ridicule. But, oddly enough, the ball infuriates Onegin even more than his friend and future enemy.

*He went into a huff and, fuming,
swore he would enrage Lenski,
and thoroughly, in fact, avenge himself.*

4

When two bodies are in uniform relative motion, all the laws of physics, both those of ordinary dynamics and those connected with electricity and magnetism, are exactly the same for the two bodies. 'Uniform' motion, here, means motion in a straight line with constant velocity...What if the motion of the two bodies is not uniform? Suppose, for instance, that one is the earth while the other is a falling stone. The stone has an accelerated motion: it is continually falling faster and faster. Nothing in the special theory enables us to say that the laws of physical phenomena will be the same for an observer on the stone as for one on the earth. This is particularly awkward, as the earth itself is, in an extended sense, a falling body; it has at every moment an acceleration towards the sun, which makes it go round the sun instead of moving in a straight line.

Bertrand Russell: *ABC of Relativity*

Onegin and Tatiana find themselves on the earth and on stones as soon as the action of Pushkin's novel in verse gets underway. At the outset of his personal rake's progress, Onegin is the earth in comparison with Tatiana who turns into a falling stone upon seeing him in her parents' country estate. And he comes closer and closer to the earth as he leaves his Petersburg flat and goes to the country where he rides a horse and visits his neighbours. His time is solid and homogenous.

*It happened, he'd be still in bed
when little billets would be brought him.
What? Invitations? Yes, indeed,
to a soirée three houses bid him!*

*here, there will be a ball; elsewhere, a children's fete.
So wither will my prankster scurry?*

Space changes in accordance with the little billets Onegin receives in his bed, but time is far more stubborn and remains the same in spite of space's frolics. They are quite separate, in my opinion: no wonder, Einstein has not yet made his appearance in the world of physics, in the world *tout court*. Onegin's time does not budge from the spot to which it is used even when Onegin inherits his uncle's manor and moves there, longing for a change. Again space proves to be far more flexible than time: an idyllic rural setting where he finds himself after his uncle's demise is rather different from Petersburg.

*During two days seemed to him novel
the secluded fields,
the coolness of the sombre park,
the bubbling of the quiet brook;
by the third day, grove, hill, and field
did not divert him any more;
then somnolence already they induced;
then plainly he perceived
that in the country, too, the boredom was the same,
although there were no streets, no palaces,
no cards, no balls, no verses.
The hyp was waiting for him on the watch,
and it kept running after him
like a shadow or faithful wife*

In other words, the hyp (ennui) doesn't leave him in peace or rather the peace it provides is too peaceful to amuse our hero. Time is often associated with ennui, especially in the 19th century when the word 'spleen' was also quite in fashion. You go from one ball to another, from one theatre to another, from one country estate to another, but nothing diverts your attention from boredom which pursues you like crowds of journalists and paparazzi: I feel like updating Pushkin's simile. In one theatre somebody dances, changing the rhythm of time, not time itself. Another time comes when Pushkin starts exploring his memory's treasure house:

*I have remembrance of another time
in chary fancies now and then
I hold the happy stirrup
and in my hands I feel a little foot.
Again imagination seethes,
again that touch
has fired the blood within my withered heart,
again the ache, again the love!*

Grass has already withered in the fields. Why not follow its example? Are humans better than grass? No one is better than the grass glistening in the early-morning dew. Even the withered grass is a model for humans to emulate, a model of deportment.

5

Even in Chapter One of the novel Onegin can hardly control his urge to travel – with Pushkin in the flesh, if you please!

*Onegin was prepared with me
to see alien lands;
but soon we were to be by fate
sundered for a long time.*

He demonstrated a genuine interest in space, but neglected time to the extent of regarding daily routine as an unavoidable feature of life. Then he meets Tatiana who sends him a love letter.

*But on receiving Tanya's missive
Onegin was intensely moved:
the language of a maiden's dreaming
in him roused up thoughts in a swarm*

He was not falling yet – far from it. Tatiana's missive must have stirred up some painful memories and he decided to dismiss both the memories and Tatiana's love. No sooner had his time been set into motion than everything stopped again and gladly he returned to his routine and boredom.

Tatiana, on the other hand, was falling faster and faster. Even Onegin's rebuff did not arrest her fall; yet she noticed that Onegin did not take the trouble to accompany the earth in its movement. He seemed to be rooted to the spot in outer space. He was neither going round the sun nor moving in a straight line towards an indefinite goal.

In St Petersburg, far from her parents' estate and her own landscapes, Tatiana harks back to her childhood and teenage years, to the visits she paid Onegin's home in his absence so as to find out, by meditating upon his furniture and library, what kind of individual she had come across through a mere chance or fate. Tatiana's wayward time slows down – at least within the framework of Pushkin's narrative – in the following stanza (she is in the midst of yet another ball):

*Thus does her thought roam far away;
high life and noisy ball are both forgotten
but meantime does not take his eyes off her
a certain imposing general.
The aunts exchanged a wink*

*and both as one nudged Tanya with their elbows,
 and each whispered to her:
 'Look quickly to your left.'
 'My left? Where? What is there?'
 'Well, whatsoever there be, look....
 In that group, see? In front....
 There where you see those two in uniform....
 Now he has moved off...now he stands in profile.'
 'Who? That fat general?'*

In the course of Chapter Eight, her manifold time gradually grinds to a halt and reveals a sort of one-dimensional time from which Onegin and also 'the campestal life' are excluded. But she continues to fall with the earth and dutifully goes round the sun instead of moving in a straight line. This movement is betrayed by her last confession – a pallid copy of her famous letter:

*'Yes, happiness had been so possible,
 so near!...But my fate
 already is decided. Rashly
 perhaps, I acted.
 With tears of conjuration, with me
 my mother pleaded. For poor Tanya
 all lots were equal.
 I married. You must,
 I pray you, leave me;
 I know: in your heart are
 Both pride and genuine honour.
 I love you (why dissimulate?);
 but to another I've been given away:
 to him I shall be faithful all my life.'*

To another *time* I've been given away; and to another *space* of course. This is probably a perfect example of literary space-time.

At this point Onegin's time is manifold, weird and wicked to some extent. He recalls his former meetings with Tatiana:

*'Can it be possible?' thinks Eugene.
 'Can it be she?...But really...No...
 What! From the wild depth of steppe villages...'*

Onegin devotes his time to travel with a view to forgetting the past.

*A restlessness took hold of him,
the urge toward a change of places
(a property most painful,
a cross that few deliberately bear).
He left his countryseat,
the solitude of woods and meads*

He cannot forget the past and so is bent on exploring space which, in his opinion, must in the long run obliterate whatever took place in the country to which he had transferred his residence upon his uncle's demise. (Actually he chiefly recalls his former friend whom he killed in 'single combat'.) His travel notes, preserved by Pushkin, are to be found at the very end of the novel:

*But now, the waste's eternal watchman,
compressed around by hills,
Beshtu stands up, sharp-peaked,
and, showing green, Mashuk,
Mashuk, of healing streams dispenser;
around its magic brooks
a pallid swarm of patients presses*

Alas, time takes no notice of space, of different spots to which Onegin directs his emotions or their absence. Time is indifferent to what is going on: it does not seem to appreciate either Mashuk or the magic brooks. Time has often been criticised for being insensitive to sorrow and despair. Is it also insensitive to the beauty of nature? It may not appreciate the pallid swarm of patients, but nature is surely different, otherwise poets would not devote their time to it with such determination.

Nor does time fall in love with Odessa; and yet Pushkin loved it dearly:

*But it is late. Sleeps quietly Odessa;
and without breath and warm
as the mute night. The moon has risen,
a veil, diaphanously light,
enfolds the sky. All's silent;
only the Black Sea sounds.*

Even Pushkin is unable to influence time in this domain unless he does all this on purpose, being resolved to punish Onegin for his callousness and nonchalance.

I have a pile of books on my desk. From top to bottom every one of them is covered with letters, diagrams, images, slogans, births and deaths. I pick up a book and leaf through it, lighting upon one thought, another thought, a project and so on. I say to myself that all of them are none of my concern; and yet I continue to put a lot of books on my desk as if to rebuild the Tower of Babel or at least a skyscraper worthy of its name. Onegin travels from one city to another; in his mind they look like an enormous pile of washing-up. All this amounts to one sensation, one feeling, one thought: 'I'm bored to death.' Then another thought makes its appearance: 'I had 450 hours at the last count.' Of what?

*This morning I began counting backwards:
'ten, nine, eight...' Why go back? What did I
forget in my youth, in my countryseat?
I've nothing to forget and what I'd like to forget
looms on the horizon that's too near.
I step on it all the time; willy-nilly, I trample upon it.
How many times can I kill my friend? I can count
up to ten in Italian. So I'll kill him in Italian:
'Morto, morto, morto, morto, morto.'
I'd better count backwards: 'four, three, two, one,
zero, none.' I've killed nobody. Lenski's alive
and I'm dead. The cities I cross are dead too; so are
the seas and water in general. How can water live
after his death? The light's supposed to reflect
off the surface of the water, but nothing happens except
the ennui of winter, of summer, of autumn.
Let me count the seasons: 'Four, five, six, seven.'
I should count them backwards: 'two, one, nuclear
winter.' There isn't enough wind to fly a kite.
Boredom, ennui, monotony, tedium. Should I buy a cat?*

Then a new order or a new structure comes to the fore:

*I wonder where Tatiana is now? I shouldn't have talked to her like that because she isn't a doll. Why did
I take her for a doll? Did I find her sobbing in the bedroom because she'd broken her favourite doll?
Never. Doesn't Pushkin say:*

*Sign of the urge to domineer:
with her obedient doll, the child
prepares in play
for etiquette, law of the monde,
and gravely to her doll repeats*

*her mamma's lessons;
but even in those years a doll
Tatiana took not in her hands;
about town news, about the fashions,
did not converse with it*

I should have studied this masterpiece more carefully, avoiding Tatiana's name day like the plague. But I hadn't known I'd quarrel with Lenski and kill him. Nor had I read this passage about Tatiana's aversion to dolls, otherwise I might have married her. She didn't understand what I was trying to impart to her because she had only a smattering of the doll-language. And yet I said:

*'Again you will love; but...
learn to control yourself;
not everyone as I will understand you;
to trouble inexperience leads.'*

Of course I didn't understand her, otherwise I'd have proposed to her on the spot. She was my obedient doll. Without a murmur she listened to me. Then I offered her my arm. Mechanically she leaned on it, lowering her eyes and her head. Where's she now, I wonder? Where's her little head, her big eyes? In Petersburg, I suppose. She didn't stay in the country, did she? I wish I could read the end of the book, but I'm only allowed to read a part of what has been written. A paraphrase of my life. Tatiana's not as beautiful as her sister, nor does she have the latter's rosy freshness. But she may appeal to an old general or an intellectual. And few intellectuals live in the country. Nor do you encounter many generals outside the two capitals. I'm fed up with these trips, as you might have noticed. So I'll go to Saint Petersburg and propose to her. I'm not an old general, but I'm an intellectual. Besides, no one's entitled to lay claim to Tatiana's love.

8

Eugene Onegin lends itself to paraphrasing on account of all the parodies and laughing-stocks that you encounter as you read it. Upon visiting Onegin's country seat Tatiana asks herself a crucial question: 'Isn't he a parody?'

*And by degree begins
My Tatiana to understand
More clearly now – thank God –
The one for whom to sigh
She's sentenced by imperious fate.
A sad and dangerous eccentric,
Creature of hell or heaven,
This angel, this arrogant fiend,
Who's he then? Can it be – an imitation,*

*An insignificant phantasm, or else
 A Muscovite in Harold's mantle,
 A glossary of other people's megrims,
 A complete lexicon of words in vogue? ...
 Might he not be, in fact, a parody?*

Lenski writes bad poems and even Onegin, for one, does not understand them – perhaps because he knows instinctively it is not worth his while wasting time on them. Onegin trifles with Tatiana's love and his neighbours' desire to meet him:

*At first they all would call on him,
 but since to the back porch
 there was habitually brought
 a Don stallion for him
 the moment that along the highway
 one heard their homely shandrydans*

Pushkin is not always facetious so that he resorts to the light-and-shade method more often than one might think in the light of what happens to his heroes and heroines. Moreover, at some point he says that he does not 'live and write for praises'. And he adds, 'But I might desire to glorify my wretched lot.' This is also a parody of what Lenski says or does not say on the eve of the fatal duel. Only death allows us to recall that, even in a novel in verse, life is not a parody.

9

Lenski dies and Pushkin writes:

*The storm has blown; the beauteous bloom
 has withered at sunrise;
 the fire upon the altar has gone out!...*

This does not sound silly; and yet one might get the feeling that Lenski continues to write his poem. But 'the rich and original metaphor of the deserted house...is Pushkin's own contribution, a sample as it were of what *he* can do' (Nabokov).

*Stirless he lay, and strange
 was his brow's languid peace.
 Under the breast he had been shot clean through;
 steaming, the blood flowed from the wound.
 One moment earlier
 in this heart had throbbed inspiration,*

*enmity, hope, and love,
 life effervesced, blood boiled;
 now, as in a deserted house,
 all in it is both still and dark,
 it has become forever silent.
 The window boards are shut. The panes with chalk
 are whitened over. The chatelaine is gone.
 But where, God wot. All trace is lost.*

In this highly-praised stanza Lenski's heart is compared to a house which used to be swarming with people, emotions, hopes, poems and so on. After the owner's death, however, the house is deserted, but you can still find it on the map, so to speak. A deserted house is part of a landscape and cannot be disregarded because of its owner's death. An estate agency might include it in the files designed to attract potential buyers who may fear the presence of ghosts when acquiring a deserted house. But, in this particular case, they have nothing to worry about unless the chatelaine returns by night to haunt whoever she may find in her house. The chatelaine is obviously Olga who should remember Lenski all her life so as to put flowers on his grave.

*My poor Lenski! Pining away,
 she did not weep for long.
 Alas! The young fiancée
 is to her woe untrue.
 Another fascinated her attention,
 another her suffering managed
 to lull with love's flattery*

So Olga forgets Lenski's heart and is therefore unlikely to visit it either by night or by day. Did this metaphor really come to Pushkin in a flash of inspiration? The heart is one of the most important organs in the entire human body. It is really nothing more than a pump, composed of muscle which pumps blood throughout the body, beating approximately 72 times per minute of our lives. By no stretch of imagination can I visualise a house that beats like the heart, a pulse or the hummingbird's wings. I don't deny that, according to poets and some philosophers, the heart is the seat of emotions; but it also pumps the blood. And the blood carries all the vital materials which help our bodies function. But did Pushkin use his metaphor metaphorically?

In Egyptian mythology, the heart portion of the soul was weighed in a balance against the feather of Ma'at, symbolising truth, in the judgment of the dead in the Egyptian Book of the Dead. Egyptian sources do not actually reveal whether the heart had to be lighter than the feather for the deceased to pass into paradise – all depictions show only the weighing of the heart, not the actual results, heavier or lighter.

It is an empty house that Pushkin depicts in his masterpiece: inspiration, enmity, hope, love and the chatelaine are gone. The deserted house is rather light; anyway it is much lighter than before, due to the absence of the

chatelaine and the emotions associated with her. In a way Lenski has finally become light-hearted. But all this is far-fetched and I am prepared to forget about Lenski's heart, following in Olga's footsteps.

His soul seems to unravel the mystery of the deserted house; at least it provides an outlet for my post-modernist caprice. 'The window boards are shut. The panes with chalk are whitened over. The chatelaine is gone.' Obviously Pushkin thinks about Lenski's corpse which, for some reason, reminds us of an Egyptian mummy: the panes with chalk are whitened over. His eyes are shut, of course: the window boards are shut. The chatelaine is gone. Even after death does not the heart forsake the human body, being far more faithful to it than the soul.

Plato, drawing on the words of his teacher Socrates, considered the soul as the essence of a person or being, that which decides how we behave. He considered this essence as an incorporeal, eternal occupant of our being. As bodies die, the soul is continually reborn in subsequent bodies. I am not sure that Olga ever identified with Lenski's soul, but Pushkin might have bestowed upon her this honorary status after the death of his hero. 'Another fascinated her attention, another her suffering managed to lull with love's flattery...' In other words, Olga's love is constantly reborn in subsequent bodies.

Aristotle, on the other hand, seemed to opt for Olga's faithfulness, for her eternal union with her beloved. Following Plato, he defined the soul or *psyche* (psūchê) as the essence of a living being, but argued against its having a separate existence from the physical body.

The Hebrew terms נפש nephesh, רוח ruach (literally 'wind'), and נשימה neshama (literally 'breath') are used to describe the soul or spirit. The soul is believed to be given by God to a person by his/her first breath, as mentioned in Genesis, 'And the LORD God formed man [of] the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.' (Genesis 2:7). Judaism relates the quality of one's soul to one's performance of mitzvot and reaching higher levels of understanding, and thus closeness to God.

Lenski did not fall in love with Olga in his cradle, let alone in a maternity hospital: there are too many anachronisms in my essay already. But he did fall in love with her at a very early age, at a very early stage of his life.

*When scarce a boy, by Olga captivated,
heart pangs not knowing yet,
he'd been a tender witness
of her infant amusements.*

And it goes without saying that, thanks to her, he reached higher levels of understanding – at least in the domain of love.

At this point I propose to discuss a remark Nabokov drops when enlarging upon the duel. He says that in modern Russia – in the late Fifties – 'little remains of the idea of honour' so that 'readers, if not accepting passively the

Lenski-Onegin duel in terms of some curious “feudal” legend or operatic libretto, are puzzled by its cause and baffled by its details.’ It is a pity I cannot ask Mr Nabokov what kind of attitude the Americans he met or just saw out of the window might have had towards the same situation, had they read Pushkin’s novel or seen and heard Tchaikovsky’s opera. Some of them did, of course, but I am sure their reaction was quite similar to what my friends and I experienced upon reading the novel and listening to the opera. Incidentally, I would have acted exactly as Lenski did, had it been permitted to fight duels in the second half of the 20th century.

Nabokov goes on: ‘Actually, not only was a gentleman of 1820, anywhere in the civilised world, perfectly justified in challenging to a duel another gentleman who had behaved in regard to him and his fiancée as Onegin had in regard to Lenski at the Larin ball, but it is indeed a wonder that young Lenski had had enough self-control not to send Onegin a cartel of defiance (*lettre d’appel*) immediately after the latter’s vulgar remarks about mediocre Madonnas and round moons half a year earlier.’

The stanza in question runs as follows:

*‘Tell me, which was Tatiana?’
 ‘Oh, she’s the one who, melancholy
 and silent like Svetlana,
 entered and sat down by the window.’
 ‘How come you’re with the younger one in love?’
 ‘Why, what’s the matter?’ ‘I’d have chosen the other,
 if I had been like you a poet.
 In Olga’s features there’s no life,
 just as in a Vandyke Madonna:
 she’s round and fair of face
 as is that silly moon
 up in that silly sky.’
 Vladimir answered curtly
 and thenceforth the whole way was silent.*

I broke off diplomatic relations with a friend of mine only because he had spoken disparagingly about a woman I was in love with at the time. Alas, I was in no position to challenge him to a duel. It is indeed surprising that Lenski’s response to Onegin’s rudeness does not go beyond curttness. The only explanation I can find resides in my attachment to Dante’s relationship with Beatrice. She was his child, in a manner of speaking; what is more, he made a deliberate choice to rear her alone. From time to time he met her in the streets of Florence, but he continued to spin his yarn under the guidance of his dreams and amorous disposition. He would fall in love with other women who did not seriously interfere with his spiritual progress because they belonged to another world where people socialised and were not much addicted to daydreaming. Beatrice led him to the Madonna and she eventually succeeded by inducing the poet to write the *Commedia*.

It is not for nothing that Onegin mentions a Vandyke Madonna when describing Olga’s features. He feels that Lenski is in love with his own ideal and probably with the Madonna as well. He might have fallen in love

with Tatiana but, coming across Olga first, he resolved to single her out for the express purpose of materialising his dream. 'He would amuse with a sweet dream his heart's incertitudes.'

*He believed that a kindred soul
To him must be united;
That, joylessly pining away,
It daily kept awaiting him*

That is why Onegin permits himself this offensive portrayal of Olga, touching upon Tatiana in the same breath. Actually he *will* choose Tatiana, thereby proving he is also a poet. Lenski does not challenge him to a duel on the spot because he knows Onegin is right, although his friend touches a raw nerve by reminding him that in his dream-like world all real women are more or less interchangeable.

Various schools of Buddhism have differing ideas about what continues after death. In some schools, particularly Tibetan Buddhism, the view is that there are three minds: Very-Subtle-Mind, which is not disintegrated in death; Subtle-Mind, which is disintegrated in death, and is 'dreaming-mind' or 'unconscious-mind'; and Gross-Mind. Gross-Mind does not exist when one is sleeping, so it is more impermanent even than Subtle-Mind, which does not exist in death. Very-Subtle-Mind, however, does continue, and when it 'catches on' or coincides with phenomena again, a new Subtle-Mind emerges, with its own personality/assumptions/habits and that someone/entity experiences the karma on that continuum that is ripening then.

One wonders if Lenski ever goes to sleep: his daydreaming is a worthy substitute for any nocturnal rest. But if he does succumb to this temptation now and then, his gross-mind, if any, departs this life. His dreaming-mind is portrayed in the following stanza:

*Indignation, compassion,
pure love of Good,
and fame's delicious torment
early had roused his blood.
He wandered with a lyre on earth.
Under the sky of Schiller and of Goethe,
with their poetic fire
his soul had kindled;
and the exalted Muses of the art
he, happy one, did not disgrace:
he proudly in his songs retained
always exalted sentiments,
the surgings of a virgin fancy,
And the charm of grave simplicity.*

His very-subtle-mind is Olga or the Madonna who leaves him at the moment of his death only to meet him again in Paradise. What does the deserted house signify in this context? Is Lenski supposed to spend some time in Purgatory? But The Orthodox Church does not teach that Purgatory exists. Is the deserted house his personal paradise? The real world has never come up to his expectations and he does not need it any more; at last he is allowed to rest in peace. Olga betrayed him, as any other woman would have done: he is quite aware of that. Consequently he does not mind living alone in the deserted house; on the contrary, he is delighted to be on his own, far away from treacherous and shallow society. He has grown so allergic to human beings that he not only barricades the front door but also shuts the windows and whitens the panes over with chalk. What would he do if given an opportunity to meet the Madonna in Paradise? Would he turn down the opportunity?

11

A breast pocket, a hip pocket. A pocket
On the ceiling. Light, tunnels – everywhere you've got
Light and tunnels. The afterlife's on your dinner table.
A glass of wine. You drink it and live forever. Crimes and
Punishments don't exist. A glass of wine,
A tablecloth. Say your prayer. You don't know it by
Heart: the heart's forgotten it. Say your prayer:
'You're my tablecloth, my glass, my wine, my wife,
My life.' And then you go to sleep.

Postmodernism involves the belief that many, if not all, apparent realities are only social constructs, as they are subject to change inherent to time and place. Whereas modernism was primarily concerned with principles such as identity, unity, authority, and certainty, postmodernism is often associated with difference, plurality, textuality and scepticism.

I am not keen on putting works of art in pigeonholes, especially when dealing with masterpieces. But the plurality advocated by post-modernists teachers allows me to change my mind and adopt a different approach to *Eugene Onegin*. The term 'postmodernism' got under my skin a long time ago, but exceptionally I shall make use of it for the sake of argument. Difference, plurality, textuality and scepticism – these notions can be easily applied to Pushkin's masterpiece because it *is* a masterpiece. And every masterpiece includes not only these notions, but also identity, unity, authority and certainty. Pushkin's identity is evident throughout the novel – partly on account of numerous personal digressions. His unquestionable authority enables him to play with the dolls he creates as he goes from one chapter to another. Not at once does one realise that Onegin is a doll in spite of his inviolable reality, identity and nonchalance. One realises that all human beings are dolls to some extent, although no one knows who plays with them: God must be above this kind of pettiness. But Pushkin is accustomed to looking at his heroes, heroines and their problems from different angles, which proves that he knows what post-modern difference and plurality are about. His style ranges from parody, triviality and humour to the statements which can and indeed should be taken seriously. Death helps him to sound serious and he does not hesitate to resort to it when Lenski becomes too ridiculous and pathetic. What is more, he deprives his hero

of posthumous solace by removing Olga from his field of vision, assuming that the dead can see what happens in the vicinity of their tombs.

As a commentator, I permit myself to adopt the same method, turning the novel's characters into dolls with which Tatiana would not have played, even if she were to become a scholar. I have no idea where Lenski and his soul spend their timeless holiday. (Souls are supposed to travel in stages, staying for a while on the moon, for instance.) *My Onegin* lives in Hell where he is subjected to a literary torture. He forgets the end of his life, of his travels and gets stuck in the middle of nowhere. Some hints reach him once in a blue moon and he endeavours to decipher their meanings. He is allowed to guess that Tatiana might settle down in Saint Petersburg and marry an old general who 'has been maimed in battles'. 'We never find out what scars Prince N. bore,' writes Nabokov. 'We know he was fat; the tinkling of his spurs and his proud port suggest his legs were intact. Had he lost an arm?' The guessing game played by Onegin reveals a lewd turn of mind. Now he loves Tatiana and regrets his former behaviour – as he does in the following stanza:

*There is no doubt: alas! Eugene
in love is with Tatiana like a child.
In throes of amorous designs
he spends both day and night.
Not harking to the stern reprovals of the mind,
up to her porch, glassed entrance hall,
he drives up every day.
He chases like a shadow after her;
he's happy if he casts
the fluffy boa on her shoulder,
or touches torridly
her hand, or separates
in front of her the motley host of liveries,
or else picks up her handkerchief.*

He is enjoined to recite this stanza twice a day so that he has known it by heart for at least a hundred years. He also recites the beginning of the next stanza: 'She does not notice him, no matter how he strives – even to death.' Now he realises that she is not married to an intellectual – at least not to a poor intellectual: 'her porch, glassed entrance hall, the fluffy boa...' The rest is pure guesswork on his part.

Eugene Onegin is a curious compound of lightness and tragedy, of common sense and absolute truth. This many-sided work may be defined as the ultimate test of mind over matter. I think it is generous and indulgent to a fault: a great many comments and adaptations betray its words and spirit along with Pushkin and his characters. But, oddly enough, this light-heartedness only enhances its quality, proving once again that nothing can spoil an immortal masterpiece. In one of his interviews, Borges said he had once attended a performance of *Macbeth* in Buenos Aires. Even the translation was disappointing, let alone the rest. There were tears streaming down his

face as he walked out of the theatre. Shakespeare won once again. I wonder how many victories *Eugene Onegin* has achieved since the day of its publication.

Nabokov makes fun of Tchaikovsky by mocking his music, the libretto of his opera. At the beginning of Act I, Larina is seated under a tree, making jam. Onegin talks to Lenski: 'Now, tell me which is Tatiana?' I find the scene rather touching, especially that both Larina and the nanny are making cherry jam – my favourite. Onegin's question is only too natural under the circumstances: he wants to find out to whom he will be talking in a minute or two. When reading the novel, one is bound to conclude that no word was uttered in the course of the first visit. Did the friends depart at once? And yet Pushkin describes a sort of Russian tea ceremony:

*'Let's go.' And off the two friends drove;
they have appeared, upon them are bestowed
the sometimes onerous attentions
of hospitable ancients.
The ritual of the treat is known:
in little dishes jams are brought,
on an oilcloth'd small table there is set
A jug of lingonberry water.*

The question 'Tell me, which was Tatiana?' is put on the way home. Does this mean that no ceremony of introduction took place prior to the tedious show of hospitality? In Tchaikovsky's opera Larina says, 'Here are my daughters.' No names are uttered. But didn't Lenski and Olga disclose their relationship through an exchange of glances? One might say Onegin paid no attention to details – to anything for that matter; as usual, he was bored to death. But why does he ask this question on the way home? To kill an hour?

Actually Pushkin did not care about such details, taking short cuts in order to focus on the matters he found important. *Eugene Onegin* is a novel in *verse*, not a *novel* in verse. But the libretto of Tchaikovsky's opera is not as silly as one might presume upon reading Nabokov's account of it. Making cherry or strawberry jam seems logical too: after all, Larina had not bought the jam our friends partook of in a shop.

13

For the sake of the argument, let us compare life to the sea. Within the framework of this comparison, Pushkin often skims across the tops of the waves as if adopting Onegin's nonchalant attitude towards human existence. But sometimes both of them explore the very bottom of the sea, which broadens immeasurably the scope of the novel. There is a marked contrast between Pushkin and those authors who just swim all the time.

At the beginning of the duel Pushkin skims across the tops of the waves. Onegin oversleeps and realises he is late for the hostile encounter. Besides, he has not even taken the trouble to search for a suitable second. So he asks his valet to perform this part in the novel and in the opera: for once, Tchaikovsky is faithful to the original. All this sounds like an Offenbach operetta in which a war may turn into a joke.

At the end of the duel we are exploring the bottom of the sea:

'Tis pleasant with an insolent epigram

*to madden a bungling foe;
 pleasant to see how, stubbornly
 bending his buttsome horns,
 he can't help looking in the mirror
 and is ashamed to recognise himself;
 more pleasant, friends, if he
 like a fool bowls out: It is I!
 Still pleasanter – in silence
 for him an honourable grave to prepare
 and quietly to aim at his pale forehead
 at a gentlemanly distance;
 but to dispatch him to his fathers
 will hardly pleasant be for you.*

Pushkin pokes fun at his dolls, but he does not dispatch them to their fathers. Lenski is redeemed by his death, by the duel he fights with Onegin. Tchaikovsky, however, does not keep Lenski waiting for ages: throughout the opera he is a good poet and a highly regarded citizen. In this respect, Tcherniakov's staging is more faithful to Pushkin than to Tchaikovsky; Lenski is a laughing stock of everybody with the exception of Tatiana, Larina and the nanny.

On her name day, Tatiana receives from him a box filled to the brim with his poems: he writes for Beatrice, not for Olga. During the ball, the guests play with the box, open it and scatter the poems all over the floor. The duel takes place in the same hall. Lenski picks up one of the poems and starts to sing as if he had foreseen his death like Pushkin and Lermontov: the poem was written well before the idea of the duel crossed his mind. Here is the first quatrain of Lermontov's poem, translated by Nabokov:

*In noon's heat, in a dale of Dagestan,
 With lead inside my breast, stirless I lay;
 The deep wound still smoked on; my blood
 Kept trickling drop by drop away.*

Tcherniakov outstrips in this instance both Pushkin and Tchaikovsky, turning Lenski into a poet of genius and even a prophet.

*In the ache of the heart's remorse,
 his hand squeezing the pistol,
 at Lenski Eugene looks.
 'Well, what – he's dead,' pronounced the neighbour.
 Dead!... With this dreadful interjection
 smitten, Onegin with a shudder
 walks hence and calls his men.*

In *The Open Work*, Umberto Eco enlarges upon the element of multiplicity and plurality in art. According to him, readers and texts play with each other, thereby killing the author, as Roland Barthes would have said. This interactive process is as old as the hills or rather as the arts. I am not sure that, in the 19th century, Tcherniakov would have staged *Eugene Onegin* in the same way. But I was not influenced by Umberto Eco when writing this essay for the simple reason that I know only the title of his book. To some degree, readers, critics and stage directors have always impinged on works of art. The interactive process about which, according to the Internet, Umberto Eco speaks at length may be dubbed ‘artistic harassment’. Do authors really mind being treated with disrespect? My respect for Pushkin knows no bounds, which does not prevent me from embroidering upon *Eugene Onegin*.

*She has gone. Eugene stands
as if by thunder struck.
In what a tempest of sensations
his heart is now immersed!
But a sudden clink of spurs has sounded,
and Tatiana's husband has appeared,
and here my hero,
at an unkind minute for him,
reader, we now shall leave
for long... forever....*

In a way, it is an *invitation au voyage*, to borrow the title of Baudelaire's famous poem. Pushkin's work is not just open – it is open-ended. So, a week ago, I set off on a round-the-world cruise in order to write my commentary on *Eugene Onegin*. Taking my cue from the Talmudists, I have also written a commentary on comments. Actually my cruise was not confined to our world only: I called on Onegin in the Hereafter. He is allowed to read about his cruise, his travels which have already bored him to death so many times.

*Land sacred unto the imagination
There with Orestes argued Pylades;
There sang inspired Mickiewicz
And in the midst of coastal cliffs
Recalled his Lithuania.*

For years and years he has been writing the same letter to Tatiana in the hope that she would tell him, ‘I love you.’

*I foresee everything: you'll be offended
By a sad secret's explanation.
What bitter scorn*

*Your proud glance will express!
 What do I want? What is my object
 In opening my soul to you?
 What malevolent merriment
 Perhaps I give occasion to!*

Onegin foresees nothing at all.

14

CHAPTER ONE

Onegin receives a letter and sets off for his uncle's estate, hoping to inherit it; and he is bound to inherit it on condition that he spends a few days and nights by his uncle's deathbed – the latter's *real* estate. What do we own on our deathbed except this bed on which we are to die a few days or hours later?

*My uncle has most honest principles
 when taken ill in earnest,
 he has made one respect him
 and nothing better could invent.
 To others his example is a lesson;
 but, good God, what a bore
 to sit by a sick man both day and night
 without moving a step away!*

Onegin's uncle is compared to the donkey (or an ass) one comes across in Krylov's fable *The Ass and the Boor* ('the donkey had most honest principles'). Why does he merit such a comparison? Because only on his deathbed does he resolve to make one respect him – too late, in Onegin's opinion, for he has no wish to spend too much time by his uncle's deathbed. A sign of disrespect, isn't it? Besides, it goes against the grain to show respect for authority – at least in Onegin's eyes.

What else could Onegin's uncle have invented? He could have said to his steward, 'Don't write to my nephew – he's unfeeling and cruel. He would curse me for making him waste his precious time at my bedside. I have no other relatives and so he'll inherit my estate – I don't want to give it to the poor. But why should I waste my precious time in his company? I'd do better devoting it to prayer.'

This monologue would be more efficient and instructive, for if you *are* to give good lessons to others, you must speak of prayers and not of those who are supposed to respect you throughout your life. Actually, they are more likely to respect you without listening to your injunctions and reading your letters – if you go to church every Sunday.

CHAPTER THREE

*Long since had her imagination,
 consumed with mollitude and yearning,*

*craved for the fatal food;
 long since had the heart's languishment
 constrained her youthful bosom;
 her soul waited – for somebody.*

Lotman does not fail to emphasise the link between Tatiana's spare time which is devoted mostly to novels and nature-oriented walks and her yearning for love, for somebody who may teach her body – not only her soul – a *real* love-lesson. Instead, Onegin enlarges on morals and common sense as if pointing out that the pragmatic approach to problems is often more successful than an idealistic one. Like Madame Bovary, Tatiana relied on books for good advice, hoping that the data she came across when perusing their pages would pave the way for a more detailed and *realistic* exploration of love. But, in spite of Onegin's unquestionable tangibility, she continues to judge reality in romantic, idealistic terms which turn out to be incompatible with the truth she is so reluctant to admit and accept.

Anyway, what counts is her longing for *somebody* – for 'my guardian angel' or 'a perfidious tempter'. (Grandison or Lovelace.) Alas, Onegin is neither and I keep asking myself whether Tatiana *really* loved him as dearly as her literary, idealistic, Plato-outlined heroes. Her approach to real life was doomed to remain literature-impregnated, for all her involvement with *grand-monde* recreations to which she did justice whenever in need of enhancing her husband's prestige. Her destiny was rather merciful – in comparison with her French counterpart's – because she managed to transfer her idealism from Onegin to her husband, saying to the former: 'My husband has been maimed in battles.' Here is Nabokov's witty analysis of her assertion, of the word 'maimed' that she used when referring to her husband's military achievements: 'This is a strong term on a romantic heroine's lips. We never find out what scars Prince N. bore. We know he was fat; the tinkling of his spurs and his proud port suggest his legs were intact. Had he lost an arm?'

The term *is* rather strong; and yet, contrary to Nabokov's view on the subject, I think it is *not* incompatible with Tatiana's general outlook, with her lifelong predilection for heroes and heroines who seldom behave like Onegin and Olga. A military hero is always prepared to die on a battlefield, and whenever God chooses to prolong his life by several years, his honour does not permit him to go about his business unscathed. He cannot get away with a mere scratch and therefore 'maimed' is the right word when used in relation to one's husband – in a Petersburg ballroom. In all probability, however, Prince N. had both arms at his disposal and was disfigured neither by burns nor by scars.

In short, Tatiana's love (or loves) is akin to that of Lenski: Olga was singled out on account of her idealistic affinities with Beatrice and Laura.

*When scarce a boy, by Olga captivated,
 heart pangs not knowing yet,
 he'd been a tender witness
 of her infant amusements.*

'Heart pangs not knowing yet.' One may enjoy playing with one's coeval, be it a boy or a girl, but real or unreal love comes later, when one is mature enough to judge an object of desire in terms of ideals, ideas and bodily

imperatives. Had Lenski emerged from the duel unscathed, he might have ended up admiring and worshipping a matronly housewife whose hackneyed rituals are enlarged upon in Chapter Two:

*She would drive out to tour the farming,
she pickled mushrooms for the winter,
she kept the books, 'shaved foreheads',
to the bathhouse would go on Saturdays,
walloped her maids when angered –
all this without asking her husband's leave.*

At the age of forty, Lenski might have fallen in love with Olga's mother, had he been given an opportunity to read *Eugene Onegin*.

CHAPTER SIX

Onegin receives a visit from one Zaretski who turns out to be Lenski's second. Unlike the reader, Onegin knows this character and has no respect for him; one cannot help wondering whether Zaretski will do his utmost to command respect on the verge of death by means of letters and verbal admonitions. Perhaps this reformed rake will chiefly rely on his art of talk for which Onegin likes him in spite of what he says to himself after Zaretski's departure: 'He's malicious, he's a gossip, he's glib....'

Pushkin devotes two stanzas to depicting Onegin's dissatisfaction with himself: he should not have poked fun at Lenski and his love for Olga. Besides, he is far more mature than Lenski whose poetic licence often drives him to strange extremes.

*And secondly: why, let a poet
indulge in foolery! At eighteen
'tis pardonable, Eugene,
loving the youth with all his heart,
ought to have shown himself to be
no bandyball of prejudices,
no fiery boy, no scrapper,
but a man of honour and sense.*

What happens next is hardly in keeping with Onegin's character which is used to despising whatever Pushkin enlarges upon in his novel. Onegin does not think highly of St Petersburg and its inhabitants; he avoids his neighbours, their parties and samovars, saying to Lenski in Chapter Three:

*'From here I see what it is like
First – listen, am I right? –
A simple, truly Russian family,
A great solicitude for guests,*

*Jam, never-ending talk
Of rain, of flax, of cattle yard.'*

Why does Onegin undergo a change in attitude in the wake of Zaretski's impromptu visit?

*'Moreover,' he reflects, 'in this affair
an old duellist has intervened;
he's malicious, he's a gossip, he's glib....
Of course, contempt should be the price of his droll sallies;
but the whisper, the snickering of fools...
And here it is – public opinion!
Honour's mainspring, our idol!
And here is what the world twirls on!*

Why should he care about public opinion to which Charlie Chaplin devoted a movie? Is it more important than the life of a friend? But for fools and their whispers, he would have spared Lenski's life – if only on account of what both fools and sages think today: no cause, however grandiose and vital, should induce men and women to leave the vale of tears.

Agamemnon feels duty bound to sacrifice his daughter, Iphigenia, for the sake of the expedition against Troy that he launched to punish Helen's abductor and his fellow citizens. Oddly enough, he also thinks of the masses as he reflects on his discomfiture:

*To be low-born, I see, has its advantages:
A man can weep, and tell his sorrows to the world.
A king endures sorrows no less; but the demand
For dignity governs our life, and we are slaves
To the masses. I am ashamed to weep; and equally
I am ashamed not to weep, in such a depth of grief.
Euripides, *Iphigenia in Aulis**

Onegin chooses not to weep either before or after the sacrifice he performs as he gently begins to raise his pistol. Had Lenski been low-born, Onegin would never have met him socially; and had he come across him somewhere – in the streets of Naples, for instance – he would not have challenged him to a duel. I wonder if, at some point, Onegin said to himself, 'I wish I'd been low-born,' which might have spared him the image of Lenski's corpse and Tatiana's rebuke. To some extent, for all his disdain and society-inspired boredom, the demand for dignity governed his life and he murdered Lenski because of his concern to appear sophisticated, elegant and triumphant. Agamemnon's sacrifice is the perfect foil for Onegin's callous stance, for whatever he did as he courted Olga, infuriated Lenski and murdered him, taking notice of public opinion – the masses, so to speak.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Tatiana paid a few visits to Onegin's castle (or manor) – in its owner's absence. She was eager to learn more about this owner who was in Odessa or on another continent. One evening, while strolling around her favourite river, she saw from a hill his manor house, his village and garden. As she gazed in admiration at his estate, her heart began to beat faster and faster. Would she have died of a heart attack, had she relinquished the idea of visiting Onegin's former abode?

Had he been at home, she might have said to him, 'Sorry to descend on you like this, but I had no time to write and send you another letter.' He was not at home. A dozen dogs attempted to deter Tatiana from obtruding on the house's privacy; upon hearing her cry of alarm 'a household brood of serf boys' swung into action. These boys dispersed the hounds, 'taking the lady under their protection'. 'I wonder, can one see the master house?' she said. Nabokov does not seem to think that, by voicing her desire, Tatiana overstepped the limits of what is regarded as socially acceptable behaviour.

Apparently, at some point, Pushkin 'toyed with the idea of having Tatiana discover Onegin's St Petersburg diary; but he thought better of it. By omitting Tatiana's discovery and perusal of Onegin's St. Petersburg diary, Pushkin no doubt showed good taste and saved Tatiana from a brazen inquisitiveness hardly in keeping with her character. There is a world of difference between, on one hand, reading a private letter placed in a borrowed book and, on the other, deducing its owner's character from the scholia in its margins.'

I beg to differ: by perusing the pages covered with Onegin's handwriting – a brief word, a cross, an interrogatory crotchet – Tatiana might have chanced upon a four-letter word or a casual remark such as: 'Natalia's feet are better.' Is that really different from what Onegin confided to his St Petersburg diary?

Suppose you find a few crosses in the margins of Byron's *Don Juan*. One of them refers to the following stanza:

*Her glossy hair was clustered o'er a brow
 Bright with intelligence, and fair, and smooth;
 Her eyebrow's shape was like the aerial bow,
 Her cheek all purple with the beam of youth,
 Mounting, at times, to a transparent glow,
 As if her veins ran lightning; she, in sooth,
 Possessed an air and grace by no means common:
 Her stature tall – I hate a dumpy woman.*

And you find a trace of Onegin's fingernails under the words 'I hate a dumpy woman'. It is virtually certain that, after studying *Don Juan*'s margins, Tatiana did not say to herself, 'I cannot deduce very much from these figures.' Is there really a world of difference between a diary and such telltale signs? What *did* Onegin note in his diary? 'I hate a dumpy woman.'

CHAPTER EIGHT

Tatiana does not take the trouble to write a second letter to Onegin as if counting on his forthcoming visit during which she might have an opportunity to express herself more clearly, with more determination and vigour: human presence and voice played a decisive role in human affairs before the advent of computers. 'I love you,'

she says during her monologue; and she adds a few words to the effect that she will always be faithful to her husband. A classic conflict between love and duty – she is undeniably torn between loyalty to her husband and love for Onegin. Doesn't she betray the former when pledging her everlasting love to the latter? When musing about loyalty and betrayals, an honourable woman draws the line at sleeping with her husband's rival. What about words?

Suppose Tatiana says to Onegin: 'Of course I love you because no one can forget your personality, your sense of humour, your beauty and intelligence. Besides, a true love is always everlasting and I well and truly loved you – a romantic teenager never loves otherwise. I still love you like a romantic heroine, like a character from a novel I read in my youth. Such a heroine may commit suicide if her love is threatened by humdrum reality, by petit bourgeois prejudices. Do you recall my letter?

*“Scarce had you entered, instantly I knew you,
I felt all faint, I felt aflame,
And in my thoughts I uttered: It is he!”*

'It is you, but I'm married and should be faithful to my husband. I don't want to hear my friends and acquaintances say, "She has failed to fulfil her duties as a wife." My feelings for you are reciprocated, judging by your letter and behaviour. I can't forbid you to say, "I love you", but I do forbid you to touch my face. You're allowed to kiss my hand, not my lips. I may put up with a brotherly kiss, not with a sensual embrace. Do you recall Pushkin's wife? Her reputation was unfairly sullied by allegations, half-truths and innuendos. But she never had sex with d'Anthès, whatever Pushkin thought and did. I would hate to be regarded as morally inferior to Natalia Goncharova.'

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Pushkin's second was his old schoolmate, Lieutenant Colonel Konstantin Danzas, and that of d'Anthès was Viscount Laurent d'Archiac, a secretary of the French embassy. The duel took place on Wednesday, January 27. Both sleighs arrived in the vicinity of the so-called Commandant's Villa about 4 p.m., with dusk already dulling the frosty air. While the two seconds and d'Anthès were engaged in trampling out a twenty-yard-long path in the snow, Pushkin, enveloped in a bearskin pelisse, sat waiting on a snowdrift. The seconds marked the ten-yard boundary with their shed carricks, and the duel began. Pushkin at once walked up his five paces to the boundary. D'Anthès made four paces and fired. Pushkin fell on Danzas' military carrick, but after a pause of a few seconds raised himself on one arm and declared he had enough strength to fire. His pistol had stuck barrel down in the snow; another was given him, and Pushkin took slow careful aim at his adversary, whom he had ordered to come up to the boundary. The shock of the ball, which hit d'Anthès in the forearm, bowled him over, and Pushkin, thinking he had killed him, exclaimed, 'Bravo!'

How could I have interacted with Nabokov's account of the duel that Pushkin fought in 1837? Should I have stopped after the sentence 'Pushkin at once walked up his five paces to the boundary'? I am not even tempted to

paraphrase the text. There is no point in writing if one cannot alter Pushkin's destiny. D'Anthès later had a distinguished career in France.

There are many dotted lines in *Eugene Onegin*. An omitted stanza may reflect the mood of a censor or Pushkin's own mood, his inspiration and aspiration. A pregnant caesura.

The last stanza of Chapter Eight does not look like a dotted line. It ends as follows:

*Blest who life's banquet early
left, having not drained to the bottom
the goblet full of wine;
who did not read life's novel to the end
and all at once could part with it as I with my Onegin.*

Doesn't this sound like a dotted line? The goblet with a few drops of wine. There are a thousand drops perhaps: a long dotted line. The Novel of Life; a lot of uncut pages with their dots, commas and words. Why should you cut the pages and read the dénouement of the story? No suspense, no deus ex machina. All lives look and sound alike: fury, laughter, sobs, duels. It is better to die before a series of betrayals and unrequited love. Pushkin takes leave of Onegin, of the reader:

*Whoever you be, O my reader –
friend, foe – I wish with you
to part at present as a pal.
Farewell.*

The reader is spared another duel – Pushkin's duel – and another love, dozens of letters a score of Tatianas. You can live without them, can't you? What is more, you can *die* without them.

Pushkin's novel is the Book of Life. (So is every masterpiece, to some extent.) It is no easy task to stop in the middle of a sentence, especially if you know what this sentence is about. Did Pushkin know what would happen to Onegin in Chapter Twenty-Two? Does Onegin commit suicide after another round-the-world cruise? Or *before* it? The reader keeps Onegin company during his journey *after* having read Chapter Eight where Pushkin bids the reader adieu. And yet the reader embarks on another journey situated beyond the book, beyond his or her life.

Some verses do sound like a report from the Hereafter:

*Whatever feelings lurked
in me then – now they are no more:
they went or changed...*

Pushkin survived Onegin – not for long, though. Onegin was therefore 'blest' in comparison with his creator who went on writing for the sake of life or for the sake of writing. A Russian émigré defined the situation thus: 'Pushkin fought the duel because, as a poet, he was at the end of his tether.'

Pushkin was at the end of Chapter Eight. The book was finished and he had no wish to finish it completely: there were fragments of *Onegin's Journey* to deal with. He left them unfinished as if to prove that any life is made up of fragments – not of ideals and long-term harmonies. No need to quote the Buddha who talked about renunciations and showed flowers. Why should you renounce anything? Just hold a flower for several hours. Don't water it; nor should you part with the flower. Everything will happen of its own accord. The fragments will become another book, another dotted line, another God.

*My books; the sea of ignorance.
I'll drink the sea. One note's nothing.
I'll hear it out; Beethoven's quartets.
The sky's closed; so is the Earth.
Only the quartets are open. Notes,
Notes, notes. One of them tells me
I think. I don't; nor do I feel. Yet
It tells me I think and eat and drink
And write and live another life.*

POSTSCRIPT

How does the body die? By the soul's leaving it. I say, by the soul's leaving it the body dies; and it lies along a mere carcass, what was a little before a desirable, now a contemptible, object. There are in it still its several members, the eyes, and ears; but these are but the windows of the house, its inhabitant is gone. They who bewail the dead, cry in vain at the windows of the house; there is none within to hear. How many things does the fond affection of the mourner give utterance to, how many enumerate and call to mind; and with what a madness of sorrow, so to say, does he speak, as with one who was sensible of what was doing, when he is really speaking with one who is no longer there? He recounts his good qualities, and the tokens of his goodness towards himself. It was thou that didst give me this; and did this and that for me; it was thou who didst thus and thus dearly love me. But if thou wouldest only consider and understand, and restrain the madness of thy grief, he who once loved thee, is gone; in vain does the house receive thy knockings, in which thou canst not find a dweller.

St Augustine, *Sermons on New-Testament Lessons*

PEACE AND WAR

CHAPTER 1

Nowadays, I often repeat myself and I have no idea whether this new habit of mine has anything to do with my age, with my senility that I am reluctant to characterise as senile dementia. My age, however, does not seem to coincide with my views and hopes; it carries on in its own sweet way, making me repeat new versions of the same idea. I just pick up an old idea that wears the same garment instead of throwing it away for the sake of a pinstripe suit, a made-to-measure shirt. So I am about to speak of Schubert's last sonata which, with the passing of the years, has become a sort of logo: when music lovers discuss my piano playing – this does happen from time to time – they invariably mention this sonata as if I had never performed anything else, any other composer.

In this essay I shall speak about Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, but first I am tempted to do justice to the Russian tradition, according to which one is supposed to 'dance from the oven' or *ab ovo*. In this case, the oven is Schubert's *Sonata in B flat Major*, DV 960 and I am about to *dance* through *War and Peace* because, in my opinion, this novel is nothing less than an invitation to a dance. Everything and everybody dance in it: comets, soldiers, death and, last but not least, all those who take part in the numerous balls that punctuate the peace and even the parts devoted to the war. I don't mean to say that the Russians are more addicted to balls than the French or the Viennese, but they *are* keen on dances and long, almost infinite tables seen in any film version of the novel.

In Schubert's last sonata there is a weird dance that presides over the finale – a *danse macabre*, to be sure. But I am getting further and further from the oven where I hope to find the starting point of my perilous adventure: I feel like Pierre Bezukhov who, during the battle of Borodino, staggers from one cannon to another without taking an active part in it. I don't belong in the novel: I am not allowed to take part either in the battles or in the balls. I don't mind: I can neither handle a rifle nor dance a waltz or anything else with the exception of the *danse macabre*. I am a distant observer of what happens in the book which, for some reason, my father got me to read when I was only ten years old. At the time I was not acquainted with Schubert's last sonata; nor did I know anything about Jung or the *I Ching*, the Chinese Book of Changes. *War and Peace* is a Russian version of this book. I shall start with Schubert and then pass on to Jung and the *I Ching*. In the context of the novel, Schubert represents war and the *I Ching* peace.

In the first movement of the sonata we find ourselves in Paradise where songs can be heard all day long, turning into dances now and then. The inhabitants of this musical paradise sing and dance, totally oblivious of our worries and tragedies. And then comes a transition that first leads us back, to the beginning of the exposition; this often happens in classical sonatas. But Schubert's last sonata is in a class of its own – not only by virtue of the intrusion of our tragedies into the paradise we got accustomed to in the course of the exposition. This intrusion is operated through the apocalyptic transition that upsets the apple cart, making us listen to the same music in a different way: Schubert has replaced Paradise by Hell without altering a single note in the exposition of the sonata.

Something identical happens in Tolstoy's novel whose epilogue upsets the apple cart: we had better read the end before tackling the problem of the beginning. A friend of mine re-reads this novel regularly, every time

getting as far as the epilogue. He goes no further because he does his best to preserve Natasha's youthful image intact. Here is the second Natasha, the 'old' one:

Since her marriage Natasha and her husband had lived in Moscow and Petersburg, on their estate near Moscow and at her mother's house, or rather Nikolay's. The young Countess Bezukhov was not much seen in society, and those who saw her were not greatly impressed. She was neither charming nor friendly. It wasn't that Natasha was a lover of solitude (she wasn't sure whether she liked it or not – probably not, she thought), but busy as she was with pregnancy, confinements and nursing children, as well as involving herself in every minute of her husband's life, the only way she could satisfy all these demands was by renouncing society. Everybody who had known Natasha before her marriage was astonished to see how much she had changed, as if this was something out of the ordinary. Fussing with her hair, dressing up and singing songs just to appeal to her husband would have seemed as weird as adorning herself to please herself.

At the end of the novel Natasha has a decidedly down-at-heel appearance and one is even tempted to conclude she has turned into a sloppy housewife, focusing all energy on her husband and children. But now Hélène is dead and Natasha does not seem to have followed in her footsteps – at least not in Tolstoy's novel. Neither Tolstoy nor Natasha judges life in terms of beautiful dresses and most elaborate hairdos on which Hélène used to spend a lot of time. We know that almost all of Tolstoy's characters were inspired by real people with whom he would fall in love or out of love; they went on living after the publication of the novel. What became of them at the end of *their* lives? Natasha and Hélène share the same husband – even in the Hereafter, assuming there is such a thing as the Hereafter. Luckily for Natasha, however, Hélène must live in Hell.

When I first read the novel, I did not fall in love with Natasha; and yet I am not incapable of falling in love with literary heroines. At the age of fifteen, I was in love with Aglaia Epanchina and two years later I talked only about Liza Tushina whose presence dilutes the gloom of *The Possessed* despite her atrocious death in the midst of the Russian crowd. For whatever reason, Natasha appealed neither to my senses nor to my mind that was always on the lookout for both real and fictional women. Now I must resemble Natasha, although I have no family, no children – nobody to take care of apart from a beautiful cat. Nor am I tempted to create a heroine with whom the common or uncommon reader might fall in love when perusing one of my works. Likewise, real women walk away from me as I take my daily stroll in the Parc deVersailles or go to Paris. They don't walk away if I go in the same direction, following them like a dog, but there is no point in trying to pick them up: they would laugh in my face or give me an accusatory look. So I just follow them or glance back to analyse their figures, their legs and their gaits. Natasha stays with me as if hoping I shall change my mind and fall in love with her at last, for want of anything better.

I re-read the novel – in English this time. No novel worthy of its name lends itself to translation, but Anthony Briggs did all he could and his English sounds all right. And I need his English, not the Russian original I can pick up at any time: it is easier than picking up girls at my age. When engrossed in my commentary on Dante's *Commedia*, I read it in four languages; I shall not go so far during the period I intend to devote to Tolstoy's masterpiece. Two languages are quite enough, all the more so since I also have Prokofiev's opera at my disposal, along with two film versions dating back to the middle of the 20th century. In the American

film I pay more attention to Audrey Hepburn than to any other character, Hélène of St Petersburg included. I have been in love with Audrey Hepburn for many years, but her contribution to cinema is not limited to *War and Peace*, especially that she mainly deals with peace and its components: diamonds, dances and so on.

The Americans embroider upon the novel as they add some finishing touches to the text the Russians published a century before. They cut out some pieces from the book and pin them on the screen. You recognise Natasha, Pierre and Andrey, but they live a sort of parallel life that is not far from the one they live in the book. My professor of philosophy told me the Americans had captured the spirit of the masterpiece. 'And our film crew just followed Tolstoy's instructions to the letter,' he rounded off. He did not know that, at the beginning of the 21st century, the Russians would make another film version of *War and Peace*. This time they used a fair amount of poetic licence when dealing with the dialogues and narrative. Prince Andrey spots Natasha in the very first episode; their eyes meet as he stands hesitating on the threshold of the Rostovs' house where a ball is in full swing. At the end of the ball, Natasha says to Sonya, pointing at Andrey: 'I've fallen in love with this man.' Sonya does not even attempt to conceal her surprise, but Natasha cuts her short saying: 'I know he's married and I envy his wife. But sooner or later I will marry him.'

The American film begins with a military parade that looks like a dance – like the *polonaise* habitually performed at the Russian court. Their affinities, if any, concern only the majesty and the festive quality of the ritual. Natasha watches the parade from her window; she appreciates its beauty and majesty to the extent of longing to take part in it herself. Actually she says nothing to this effect, but her face speaks volumes and one believes her face on account of Natasha's unmistakable sincerity. This is the first scene of the film; yet Audrey Hepburn's beauty and radiance seem to guarantee her probity and integrity. I cannot help comparing this scene and Audrey Hepburn's looks and grace to what one may read in Tolstoy's novel where, at some point, Natasha makes her appearance for the first time.

...suddenly they all heard a racket from the next room as several boys and girls ran to the door, bumping into a chair and knocking it over with a bang, and a girl of thirteen dashed in with something tucked into her short muslin frock. She came to a halt in the middle of the room, evidently having misjudged everything, gone too far and burst in on them.

If a ballet version of Tolstoy's novel were written, Natasha would run quite a lot, especially at the beginning. Her agitation subsides during the war and even dies down in the epilogue where she acquires a matter-of-fact, matronly way of dealing with daily problems. But no choreographer is likely to show us a mature Natasha because her maturity is hardly suitable for ballets and even operas, let alone films. No wonder that the American film shuns the rotten image of Natasha's metamorphosis, limiting its scope to her golden age, to her youthful follies and the gifts she showered on the wounded during her family's exile from Moscow.

The reader always associates Natasha's first appearance in the novel with speed, racket and overturned chairs. From the outset the American films link Natasha to Audrey Hepburn's femininity that does not really conform with Tolstoy's description. Suffice it to say that one of the guests – a mannish countess – calls her 'Cossack', occasionally shaking a fat finger. Audrey Hepburn, on the other hand, does not look like a Cossack; actually her face has nothing in common with that of the 'real' Natasha. 'The dark-eyed young girl was not pretty – her mouth was too big – but she was full of life.' In the film Audrey Hepburn *is* full of life, her beauty

unquestionable, flawless, and Tolstoy needed a more or less ordinary girl to make things easier for readers who are supposed to overcome the shock awaiting them in the epilogue of the novel. Hélène Bezukhov would fuss with her hair and dress up even on the very last day of her life: only her untimely death was in a position to put an end to her perfectionism in the realm of female beauty.

Another scene from the unwritten ballet:

When Natasha came rushing out of the drawing-room, she ran only as far as the conservatory, where she stopped and listened to them still talking in the drawing-room, and she waited for Boris to come out. She soon began to lose patience, stamping her little foot and almost bursting into tears when he didn't come, but then she suddenly heard someone's footsteps, not too relaxed, not too quick, the measured tread of a young man. Natasha nipped between two tubs of flowers and hid.

In this paragraph, in spite of being a Cossack, Natasha behaves like a woman, especially if we compare her lack of patience and its manifestations with the measured tread of the young man. But a few minutes later Natasha takes the initiative and orders this young man to kiss her. As he procrastinates, she skips up on to a tub to make herself taller than the young man, flings her bare arms round his neck and kisses him right on the lips. Once again she lives up to her nickname and demonstrates how hard it is to define the borderline between female and male characteristics.

Hélène's way of life and her behaviour turn out to be in stark contrast to those of Natasha who, according to Tolstoy, is 'at that charming age when the girl is no longer a child, and the child is not yet a young girl.' (We are still at the beginning of the novel.) And she is neither a boy nor a girl; or both at the same time. Hélène is a woman to the core and Pierre Bezukhov is not feminine enough at this point to be able to appreciate fully his wife's frolics and self-centred ego.

As for Aglaya, throughout the novel she is as unpredictable as young Natasha whose destiny makes her grow quite predictable towards the *end* of the novel. But even in the epilogue of *The Idiot*, Aglaya remains faithful to her frolics and crazy ideas that used to shake the world where she lived until Prince Myshkin's equivocal betrayal of their love. She takes a liking to a Polish count and marries him against the wishes of her parents. To avoid a scandal 'of exceptional proportions', they eventually grant their permission only to find that the count is just an émigré with an obscure and ambiguous past. But the nobility of his soul is beyond suspicion. At least Aglaya does not suspect anything, worshipping instead her husband's love for his fatherland – to the point of becoming a member of 'some foreign committee for the restoration of Poland'. She ends up 'in the Catholic confessional of some famous *pater*' who takes possession of her mind. The pseudo-count's colossal fortune turns out to be imaginary, but Aglaya has a very vivid imagination. 'Such is Aglaya's life,' says her mother who cannot reconcile herself to the prospect of losing her daughter forever. So far she has managed to keep her more or less within her field of vision – in spite of Prince Myshkin's madness and Nastasya Filippovna's insolence.

Myshkin sends a short and incoherent note to Aglaya. She flushes all over; Natasha might do it as well, which does not mean that these young ladies are on the same wavelength. Aglaya asks herself, 'Should I show this to anyone?' Natasha might show it to Sonya, to her dearest friend. Aglaya feels ashamed; so does Natasha when Prince Andrey and Pierre Bezukhov make a few oblique references to their passion. Aglaya throws the

letter into her writing desk – with a strange, mocking smile. Natasha is unlikely to do that because there are no mocking smiles in her repertoire. She may, on occasion, mock and despise herself, but others are beyond her range of experience. She knows herself and so can laugh at her own follies; others are far away, out of her reach. She either falls in love with them or takes no notice of their compliments and words she does not listen to.

Natasha falls in love rather often: three men appear in her diary and every one of them is her ultimate love. Aglaya loves Prince Myshkin and she is faithful to him as long as he does not make a fool of himself by staying with Nastasya Filippovna's at the crucial moment of his life. Aglaya goes out of the room where she has just confronted her rival and the object of her love talks about unhappiness – not about *her* unhappiness, mind you. He does not have the slightest inkling of what is in store for Aglaya, his second love. At last he realises that one love is enough for him. He no longer remembers their meetings, their dialogues.

They meet in a park, in a garden, on a bench. He falls asleep and Aglaya laughs as she contemplates his body reclining elegantly on the bench. 'He's asleep! You were asleep.' 'It's you!' These exclamations act as a springboard for a dialogue that is noteworthy in more than one respect. He thinks that someone else woke him up, although there is nobody else in the park and even in the neighbourhood where many country houses protect their owners' peace. These owners and their families are asleep before sunrise and so they do not exist – at least in this chapter of the novel. Aglaya and Myshkin engage in a comprehensive dialogue, anxious to resolve the problem of yet another eternal triangle.

Aglaya puts a lot of questions to the man who cannot answer questions, for his mind is not focused on answers. And whenever he deigns to answer a question, he unwittingly obscures the real situation from those who are longing to clear up mysteries.

Aglaya's mind is focused on hypothetical answers:

She asked her questions quickly, spoke rapidly but sometimes seemed to lose the thread and often did not finish what she was saying; she was in a constant hurry to warn him about something; in general, she was in a state of extraordinary anxiety, and although she was putting a very brave face on it, even with a kind of challenge, she was also perhaps a little frightened. She was wearing the most ordinary, simple dress, which suited her very well. She frequently started and flushed, and sat on the edge of the bench.

In my youth I found this description most endearing on account of the changes that Aglaya's moods and features undergo in the course of the dialogue. To some extent Aglaya is a human equivalent of the Book of Changes and I am sure she would have consulted the book rather often, had she ever heard about its supernatural power.

Hysterical women are frightening and I am loath to deal with them because they go too far and scream too much as if determined to add a few items to our impressive, worldwide collection of screams. They are often over the top and on the brink of either a revelation or suicide. At the age of thirteen, Aglaya thought of poisoning herself about thirty times. What for? She answers the question, although Myshkin does not ask it, his mind being focused neither on questions nor on answers. Even at this stage his mind is unfocused, predicting another era of madness, another sojourn in Switzerland that is synonymous with madness in the context of *The Idiot*. Usually, however, it is associated in Dostoevsky's mind with dreams, with mountain and lakeside retreats.

Aglaya says that she was yearning to commit suicide in order to write all about it in a letter to her parents. She also imagined how she would lie in her coffin with everyone weeping over her. I was touched by these

teenage projects which, though frantic, reveal a playful and charming nature. Judging from what follows on the bench, Aglaya is still a child doomed to confront a mature, hysterical woman whose refusal to settle down constantly unsettles her entourage of fops and wealthy protectors.

A member of this entourage, Prince Myshkin, dreams about her on the bench where he is supposed to wait for Aglaya who does not fail to question him on the subject of his dreams. 'I was dreaming...about...you've seen her...' There are a lot of suspension points in Myschkin's answers.

'I understand, I understand perfectly. (Aglaya does not.) She's someone you're very much in...What was she like in your dream, what did she look like? Though actually, I don't want to know,' she snapped suddenly, with annoyance.' Aglaya borrows some suspension points from Myshkin's answers as if poisoned by his madness: the uncommon reader already senses its powerful and dangerous undercurrents. But this poison will not drive her to the verge of suicide because her ego is healthy and consequently does not yield to the allure of hysterics.

According to Jung, a healthy Ego organises and balances the conscious and unconscious elements of the psyche. A weakened Ego – that of Nastasya Filippovna, for example – leaves an individual 'in the dark', in danger of being swamped by chaotic unconscious images. Light and darkness. Jung identifies them as the related archetypal figures – the Ego and the Shadow. The Shadow is our own 'dark side', characterised by inferior, uncivilised or animal qualities which the Ego wishes to hide from others. Nastasya Filippovna is pursued by her shadow and sometimes we see nothing but her shadow where the heroine's ego disappears completely. Her shadow accuses her benefactors who used to enjoy her company to the detriment of her psychological health. This is done publicly and a bunch of money lands up in a fireplace. Once again Nastasya Filippovna – or rather her shadow – is over the top. Instead of following her path quietly, in a dignified way, Nastasya Filippovna wraps herself up in her shadow as if it were a mink coat of sorts. None of Tolstoy's heroines has any shadow, which does not render them one-dimensional, though: they have their quirks and foibles. Natasha's youthful playfulness is bound to gratify many a reader; and yet I have always opted for Aglaya's or Liza Tushina's comedies and tragedies. Their amateur theatricals are more spacious and therefore offer more thrills to those who appreciate the amplitude of the human psyche.

The more Aglaya blushed, 'the more angry she seemed to become with herself, which was plainly expressed in her flashing eyes; usually a moment later she would transfer her anger to the person she was talking to, no matter whether he was to blame or not'. It was not her shadow that rebuked the Other. What we are dealing with in this case falls into a category of psychological types. To what type does Aglaya belong? Is she choleric, melancholic, sanguine or phlegmatic? She is distinctly romantic, sanguine and choleric: only a romantic and sanguine person can become a member of some foreign committee for the restoration of Poland. I might have done something along these lines in the 19th century, for I am romantic and admire the Poles and their country. As to Aglaya, only a romantic and melancholic woman is capable of falling in love with an idiot. And only a melancholic teenager may attempt suicide in order to write a letter to her parents and imagine how she would lie in her coffin.

Aglaya's choleric side comes to the fore in the following excerpts from the same dialogue:

'This is the reason I asked you to come here: I want to propose that you become my friend. Why did you stare at me like that suddenly?' she added almost with anger.

'Perhaps you don't want to accept my proposal?' she cast a haughty look at the prince.

'But what did you think, then? Why would I have asked you to come here? What is on your mind? Actually, I think you probably consider me a silly little fool, as they all do at home?'

Natasha remains in between these types and that is one of Tolstoy's greatest achievements. At the end of the novel she finally does justice to phlegm as she calms down and begins to take care of her husband and children. There is no denying that in her youth Natasha displays a few characteristics of a romantic maiden – when she is on the point of flying off, for instance. 'Oh, please come and look at this moon!...It's gorgeous! Come on. Darling, sweetheart, please come here. There you are, look at that! Hey, if you rock back on your heels like this – watch – and squeeze your knees together – hold them tight, as tight as you can – one big squeeze and you could – fly away!...Like this – look!' she says to her dearest friend Sonya, who prefers Morpheus to the starry night. But the introverted romanticism for which Aglaya is justly renowned is far more impressive than the cliché-ridden outburst of juvenile energy.

CHAPTER 2

Day and night, light and darkness, heaven and earth, yang and yin. *Tao* is divided into a fundamental pair of opposites. Yang signifies warmth, light, maleness; yin is cold, darkness, femaleness. Yan is heaven, yin earth. From the yang force arises *shen*, the celestial portion of the human soul; from the yin force comes *kwei*, the earthly part. Natasha looks at the starry sky and envies birds flying across it as if they were part of the stars, of the gorgeous moon. By dreaming about her flight, Natasha joins the yang force and once again does justice to her nickname 'Cossack', paying homage to the mannish countess and her fat fingers. Natasha's soul receives an additional portion of maleness; and yet darkness pervades everything, even the room where she speaks to her dearest friend Sonya.

There are a few mixtures of this kind in the novel: the sky blends yin and yang as if to confuse the characters that look upwards and are invariably in transports of delight. Prince Andrey makes a major contribution to this ritual at Austerlitz where he lies in a supine position and has no alternative but to look at the clouds: his wound does not permit him to contemplate either the Earth or the battle. 'Above him was nothing, nothing but the sky – the lofty sky, not a clear sky, but still infinitely lofty, with grey clouds creeping gently across. "It's so quiet, peaceful and solemn, not like me rushing about," thought Prince Andrey, "not like us, all that yelling and scrapping..."' He realises he has never seen that lofty sky before. "'Oh, how happy I am to have found it at last. Yes! It's all vanity, it's all an illusion, everything except that infinite sky. There is nothing, nothing – that's all there is. But there isn't even that. There's nothing but stillness and peace. Thank God for that!'"

Suppose that for a while the sky becomes a symbol of femaleness. Andrey is cold and distant – at least in the opening chapters of the novel, before the defeat at Austerlitz. The reader is confronted with his boredom, slowness and haughtiness during the first of many soirées that punctuate the novel and enliven its gloom. 'Everything about him, from his languid, bored expression to his slow and steady stride, stood in stark contrast to his vivacious little wife. He made it obvious that he knew everybody in the room, and was so fed up with the

whole lot that just looking at them and listening to them drove him to distraction.’ One wonders how he made his disgust obvious: it is no easy task if you are surrounded by those whom you meet rather often at balls, dinners and in theatres. You risk being universally scorned one day if you overindulge in your holier-than-thou stance.

‘Prince Andrey scowled and turned away. ‘It was obvious that he didn’t like the viscount, and he was directing his remarks at him without looking his way.’ We already know that he likes no one except Pierre Bezukhov, but does he have to make it so obvious? (We don’t know yet that he also likes his father and sister.) What Andrey’s nature lacks is a feminine streak, a bit of yin, a lot of softness. But we are told that yin is cold and so Andrey seems to be faithful only to yin, neglecting yang, his masculine substance. All this is too complicated and at the same time commonplace, for clear-cut solutions and definitions lead us astray and we get lost among symbols and structures we try to impose upon our life, upon literary heroes and heroines.

The *I Ching*, the Book of Changes. The world and its history are ruled by hexagrams. Every hexagram is made up of six divided or undivided lines. The character of the lines is designated as firm or yielding. The undivided lines are firm (or rigid), the divided lines are yielding (or weak). Both firm and yielding lines may be favourable or unfavourable, according to the time requirement of the hexagram. When the time calls for firmness, firm lines are favourable; when the time requires giving way, yielding lines are favourable.

Andrey is lying on the earth; the sky seems to be right above him. He is under the impression he can touch it with impunity. But he is grievously wounded; he cannot move his arms, let alone his body. He just looks at the sky that slowly turns into its opposite, into yin. There are clouds in the sky and they obscure sunbeams that no longer reach Andrey’s eyes and consciousness. The sky is dark and feminine to a degree; Andrey loses his male molecules and probably his life as he grows more and more passive. Everything bows to the inevitability of changes that perturb and obfuscate our vision of the world (*Weltanschauung*). Opposites change too: we don’t recognise them any longer, mistaking a man for a woman, a woman for a man.

*He who knows the male, yet cleaves to what is female,
Becomes like a ravine, receiving all things under heaven;
And being such a ravine,
He knows all the time a power that he never calls upon in vain.
This is returning to the state of infancy.
The impunity of that which is fraught with this power
May be likened to that of an infant.*

Indeed, Andrey looks like an infant now. He is helpless and badly needs the presence of those he used to despise so openly and impertinently. All of a sudden the heavens revert to yang and masculinity, becoming a mirror in which Prince Andrey sees himself. Yin has already permeated his body and mind; his thoughts reflect the feminine streak he is not accustomed to, not yet. From now on, however, he must take notice of it and even submit to the new rules dictated by moisture, the Earth.

It is high time he gave way, fell in love and settled down with his family. Lying on the earth can be an intellectually rewarding activity. One’s actions should not be confined to wars and battles: there is peace, another hexagram – another solution to the problem of life. ‘As regards the time of the hexagram,’ says Shuo Kua, ‘the lowest and the top place as a rule represent the beginning and the end. But under certain circumstances the

lowest line may also stand for an individual beginning to take part in the time situation without having as yet entered the field of action, while the top line may signify someone who has already withdrawn from the affairs of the time.' Heaven is the top line, the end – in the time situation where Andrew has got stuck for a while. As he continues to look at it he withdraws from the affairs of the time, from time itself. He would have withdrawn completely from time and space, but for Napoleon who happened to ride in the vicinity of his body. He came to a halt right above Prince Andrey and said, after looking down at him: 'A fine death this one!' And then Napoleon realised that the body lying in front of him was alive. Prince Andrey's life also came to a halt, made a U-turn and finally resumed its place in the body it had forsaken some minutes before, leaving a few molecules behind – just in case, as they say.

I don't think that Prince Andrey's life counted on Napoleon and his horse and trusted the Emperor's forthcoming admiration to the point of forgoing its own peace of mind and the pleasures of retirement. It is just a habit of any life, be it the life of an animal or that of a human: it does not *always* leave us once and for all. Sometimes it lingers for a while, hoping to catch sight of a healer or a saviour whose art or benevolence may renew its interest in the body it is about to betray. This time the onus was on Napoleon to ensure that Prince Andrey would come back to Russia and his estate where his wife was about to die, by the way: you cannot save *everybody* from death. Incidentally, Nabokov did not appreciate this encounter thanks to which Prince Andrey's life returned to its owner for several years. He thought the coincidence was supernatural and consequently did not fit the art of a writer whom everyone regarded as a symbol of realism.

All depends on situations, on time, on chance, on opportunities we miss and daily recall, our eyes filled with tears. How to tell a good opportunity from a bad one? And what about these lines? Even if we consult the *I Ching*, we are bound to make wrong decisions now and then, for the top line may come down and become the lowest line, the Earth, an underground cave. We look at the sky and see a cave or an underground passage that leads to the centre of the Earth. How could we live at the centre of the Earth where the temperature is higher than in Tripoli? Could we marry Natasha or Hélène under the circumstances? Hélène would never agree to live in such a place for the simple reason that she loves European capitals and balls during which she enjoys the love of men to whom she says either 'yes' or 'no'. To whom would she say 'yes' at the centre of the Earth? To aluminium, to fire?

This world of the immutable is the daemonic world, in which there is no free choice, in which everything is fixed. It is the world of yin. But in addition to this rigid world of number, there are living trends. Things develop, consolidate in a given direction, grow rigid, then decline, a change sets in, coherence is established once more, and the world is one again. The secret of Tao in this world of the mutable, the world of light – the realm of yang – is to keep the changes in motion in such a manner that no stasis occurs and an unbroken coherence is maintained. He who succeeds in endowing his work with this regenerative power creates something organic, and the thing so created is enduring.

Ta Chuan, *The Great Treatise*

The Earth is full of action, given that the war is not over yet. (Where is our passive, feminine Earth?) The battle has been lost but yet another war is looming on the horizon, in the background of time. Andrey's body and mind are at peace with the world and, upon meeting Natasha, he is likely to thank his enemies for wounding him at

Austerlitz. No, he does not thank them; he remains an ungrateful, haughty aristocrat whom no one or nothing can change, not even the Book of Changes. War and peace supersede each other, but he maintains his style of life, sticking to his old outlook and habits.

At some point Natasha betrayed him as she succumbed to Anatole Kuragin's charisma and even agreed to elope with him. When the plan fell through, Anatole was banished from Moscow. Natasha felt she could not cope with the situation and was in desperate need of some reassurance. Prince Andrey was in the grip of anger and under the influence of the yang forces, but he needed no reassurance. His sister, Princess Marya, talked to him and then gave a warm welcome to Pierre Bezukhov whose heart of gold might have reassured Natasha, had he permitted himself to ask Count Rostov for his daughter's hand in marriage. But in Prokofiev's opera he says to himself that he cannot marry Natasha because Prince Andrey is his long-standing friend.

Princess Marya informed him about her brother's reaction to the bad news:

'He says he's been expecting it,' she commented. 'I know his pride won't let him tell us what he feels, but I must say he's taken it better, far better, than I ever expected. It obviously wasn't meant to be...'

'So it really is all over, is it?' said Pierre.

'What are your hopes and dreams for the future?' No, Princess Marya does not ask this question to which she probably knows the answer: some people must have an inkling of what is going on in Pierre's heart. 'Is there any hope of getting married to Natasha?' he keeps asking himself and this time he answers this question, if only partially: 'So it really is all over, is it?' If Prince Andrey has no intention of forgiving Natasha's misdemeanour, he will be able to marry her in the near future – as soon as she gets over her illness - what Natasha suffers from may be diagnosed as some sort of nervous breakdown. Oddly enough, in Prokofiev's opera she drinks a phial of arsenic, but we are not supposed to take notice of this poetic or operatic license.

Pierre's discussion with Andrey gave a much-needed boost to his hopes – Pierre's hopes, for Andrey had already lost his, being adamant and merciless. They met, shook hands and the following dialogue ensued:

'She's been at death's door.'

'I'm very sorry to hear of her illness,' said Prince Andrey. He laughed a cold, harsh, nasty laugh not unlike his father's.

'So Mister Kuragin has not bestowed his hand on Countess Rostov?' said Prince Andrey. He snorted several times.

'He couldn't have married her, because he's married already,' said Pierre. Prince Andrey gave another nasty laugh, again recalling his father.

Tolstoy was fond of repetition as such, and I am sure he would have approved of repetitive music, had he lived long enough to hear a few samples of it. Actually he did not like 'noble' music to which he preferred his peasants' songs and dances. But peasants' songs are also repetitive, aren't they?

'Listen. Do you remember that difference of opinion we had in Petersburg?' said Pierre. 'Remember what we...?'

'Yes, I do,' Prince Andrey answered hastily. "I said that a fallen woman should be forgiven, but I didn't say I could forgive her, and I can't."

'Surely, there's no comparison, is there?' asked Pierre.

Prince Andrey cut him short. He cried harshly, 'Oh yes, go and ask for her hand again, be magnanimous, all that sort of thing?...Well, that's all very noble, but I'm not up to following on in that gentleman's tracks. And if you value my friendship, don't talk to me ever again about that...well, all this business.'

One gets bored with Prince Andrey's boredom as one reads the opening chapters of *War and Peace*. Then one gets bored with his presumptuous attitude towards the fallen woman. So does Tolstoy who knows that only a mortal wound can cure Prince Andrey of his arrogance.

Of course love is another cure and Tolstoy resorted to it, as any writer would have done, except for Charles Dickens who advocated killing a child. Tolstoy killed Andrey's wife, sparing his son; this death did not work within the framework of the novel. It is true that Andrey stayed in the country for two years – without a single break. In the spring of 1808 he set off to visit the Ryazan estates which now belonged to his son, with him as trustee. On the way his servant says to him, 'It's nice, isn't it, sir?' Andrey wonders what his servant is talking about. Then he realises that everything is turning green: the birch-trees, the wild cherries. 'Even the alders are just on the turn. But not the oak, no sign there.'

This oak is a splendid signpost to the future, but Andrey does not know it yet. At present the oak stands 'among the beaming birches, with its great gnarled hands and fingers sprawling out awkwardly and unevenly, a truculent, sneering monster'. Again Prince Andrey looks at himself in a mirror. Only he and the oak refuse 'to submit to the charms of spring'. (Natasha will prove to be far more submissive during her conversations with Anatole Kuragin.) Andrey is so subdued by his own reflection that several times he glances back at the oak tree as if 'expecting it to do something'. What can the oak tree do for him? He will learn it on his way back, after his meeting with Natasha, after her abortive attempt to fly off like a bird, coming to terms with the sky.

Andrey meets Natasha for the first time and she seduces him by talking about the moon and the night they spend together in the mansion of Natasha's father. They are separated by a wall, by a quantity of the night and air that do all they can to prevent them from tormenting each other in the near future. In the novel Natasha speaks of the moon she can see every night, provided it is a starry night and not a cloudy one. Prince Andrey does not come to her father's estate every day: she might speak about him at length, putting great emphasis on his intelligence and nobility of spirit. She does not and Prince Andrey leaves the estate empty-handed, as it were: he has no idea whether Natasha loves him or not. In the American film Natasha speaks about him in such a way that he cannot help smiling and thinking about a second matrimonial union: 'I'm a little frightened of him and yet, when I sang after dinner, I wanted to go up to him and take him by the hand, look in his eyes and sing just for him.' (In the epilogue she does not sing for her husband.) In the novel Andrey leaves the Rostovs, says good-bye to them, looks at Natasha waving her hand and he is still none the wiser.

In the novel Natasha blushes when Prince Andrey reminds her of their first night, of her abortive flight, saying he overheard her unintentionally. In the film he even touches upon Natasha's *Hymnen an die Nacht*. 'What a disaster!' says Natasha. 'You heard everything.'

In the novel Natasha is gearing up for her first ball as follows: 'It was then that she remembered how to behave on such an occasion, and she did her best to assume the majestic manner that she considered essential for

a girl to adopt at a ball. But as luck would have it she was too dazzled to see anything clearly, her pulse thumped a hundred beats to a minute and the blood rushed to her heart, so she was unable to strike a pose that might have made her look silly. She walked on, almost swooning with excitement and struggling to hide it. And this was the manner that suited her best.’ As usual Tolstoy is slightly pedantic and didactic: the last sentence hits the nail on the head, but the nail has already been hammered in the right place for some time.

In the film Natasha talks to her brother as they both slowly ascend a majestic staircase leading to the ballroom. She asks him if she looks disdainful; his negative reply dashes her spirits. She thinks she should look disdainful to delude everyone – with the exception of her family – into believing this is her umpteenth ball. She strikes a disdainful pose, with a disdainful expression on her face, and her brother hastens to applaud the metamorphosis. Then she tells him not to dance with her because some of the guests might conclude that the only man she can dance with belongs to her family; he vouchsafes to choose her as a partner out of pity.

Natasha is far more outspoken and theatrical in the film; in the novel, she keeps a lot to herself because we overhear her *thoughts* as we read the text. Of course, Audrey Hepburn could have provided the voice-over for the sequence in question, but she displays her charms to the utmost as she talks to her brother: her body gets involved in the conversation. And we need Audrey Hepburn’s body, her grace and elegance, to enjoy the picture fully; for all its beauty, her voice alone would not have risen to the challenge.

In the film somebody asks Natasha to dance. Prince Andrey played by Mel Ferrer, provides the voice-over for this particular episode: ‘If she looks back at me on the next turn, she’ll be my wife.’ Obediently Natasha looks back at him. Audrey Hepburn performs this complicated manoeuvre so gracefully that from now on Prince Andrey has no alternative but to marry her. In the novel, Prince Andrey says to himself as he watches Natasha choose two ladies for the next figure of the cotillion: ‘If she goes to her cousin first and then to another lady, she’s going to be my wife.’ Andrey is so self-assured that he thinks Natasha and her parents will accept his proposal on the spot, without a second thought. He is right, of course, but he might be less conceited, if only within the bounds of his own brain. Natasha goes to her cousin first and Andrey says to himself: ‘The stupid things that sometimes come into your mind!’ Nevertheless, from the moment Natasha stepped into the ballroom and went to her cousin first her fate was sealed.

I am acquainted not only with Tolstoy’s novel but also with the Soviet film version of *War and Peace* and Prokofiev’s opera. Only in the American film does Natasha look back at Prince Andrey instead of going to her cousin or anybody else. If asked about this occurrence, I would say without hesitation: ‘Natasha looked back at Prince Andrey.’ For some reason I forget what *really* happened in the ballroom as if only Audrey Hepburn had taken part in the story. Anyway, if you look back at someone you disclose, if only in part, your inner life and yearnings; if you go to your cousin and not to anyone else, you don’t disclose anything unless you are in love with your cousin.

‘But one thing’s for sure – that girl is so lovely and so unusual she’ll be married before she’s been out for a month since dancing here...’ I, for one, would not have married her.

CHAPTER 3

In my childhood I heard only two names: Natasha and Tatiana. Both were related to literature and not our life that we are inclined to define as real or ordinary. My life was not ordinary, judging from the names I heard and to which I grew accustomed in the long run – as if the world had been nothing but a playground of writers and

poets. To these literary names I added many other names in the course of my life: Hélène, Helen of Troy, Aglaya, Liza, Beatrice. I have never fallen in love with Tolstoy's heroines because they do not seem to belong in the domain of literature where ideas and ideals often coincide to create a woman one is unlikely to find in one's neighbourhood and even in distant countries.

Tatiana of *Eugene Onegin* fame never inflamed my ego or libido or whatever is concerned with female beauty and allurements. I did not like her shallow romanticism that was on a par with Natasha's flights and other élans she seemed to boast of as she shared her feelings with Sonya and even with her mother. I kept her at bay and my aversion to her shallowness also concerned the women who belonged to her 'type', as our teachers used to say while trying to inculcate us with a sense of responsibility prevalent in our communist society. There were only types in the Soviet Union and we were supposed to choose the right one so as to avoid being sent to prison or the Gulag or both.

Actually Natasha was the right type – even her metamorphosis did not jar with the opinions held by our teachers and other representatives of the Soviet dictatorship. Why do I recall their stupidity and one-dimensional way of thinking? Because there are many one-dimensional societies and individuals, whatever they say about democracy and freedom of thought. There are thoughts that move in their own prison, thinking they are free because they live in a free country.

Tatiana lived in a romantic country; and then she moved to a pragmatic country as she married an old general who had been injured in some war or other. And I don't like pragmatic countries; besides, I am keen on the women who remain what they are through thick and thin – like Aglaya and Liza Tushina. In other words, I prefer Dostoevsky's heroines; and yet, as an artist, he cannot hold a candle to Pushkin and Tolstoy. But do we really need artists and poets of genius to live happily in this world of ours?

I lived happily with Aglaya, for I never regarded her as a fictional character, as a woman conceived by a writer of genius. I dreamt of the hedgehog she had sent to Prince Myshkin – not on account of my love for domestic and wild animals. I knew what I would say to her about the feelings I experienced upon receiving her present. I would have been brilliant during the conversation that ensued at the dacha of Aglaya's parents. "Did you receive my hedgehog?" asked Aglaya. According to Dostoevsky, she put this question to Prince Myshkin 'firmly and almost angrily'.

'Yes, I did,' replied the prince, blushing and with sinking heart.

'Then please explain at once what you think of it? It is necessary for Mama's peace of mind, and for that of the entire household.'

What would I have said? My heart might have sunk, but that would not have prevented me from answering Aglaya's question to the best of my abilities. 'I think you wish to awake me from my intellectual slumber. I can assure you, however, that I woke up at the moment I saw you. I'm in love with you Aglaya. I hope you'll agree to become my wife because I can't live without you. I'm as romantic as you are and I'll commit suicide if you reject my proposal. I hope you won't reject it because you sent me this hedgehog. I wouldn't have sent it to a man you don't care about. It doesn't mean you love me more than anybody else – I'm not imagining things. Actually I've no imagination, like Proust. So I don't imagine anything. I just hope you're in love with me. Are you in love with me, with an idiot? You must pity me because you're sensitive to other people's feelings and

mental states. I'm sure that, in a few years' time, you'll organise charity concerts to collect money for the homeless and idiots.'

'This, this goes beyond all limits!' Aglaya's mother would have said.

'There are no limits here, Maman', the daughter would have replied sternly. 'I sent the prince a hedgehog today and wish to know his opinion. Well, Prince?'

And Prince Myshkin takes over.

'Er what sort of opinion, Aglaya?'

'About the hedgehog.'

'Er...I think, Aglaya Ivanovna, that you want to know how I received...the hedgehog...or, rather, how I looked...upon this sending...of a hedgehog, well...in that case, I suppose that...in a word...'

'Well, you haven't said much,' Aglaya waited for about five seconds. 'Very well, I agree to leave the hedgehog; but I'm very glad that at last I'm able to put an end to all the misunderstandings that have accumulated. Permit me, at last, to learn from you yourself and in person; do you seek me as a match, or not?'

I shout 'yes' several times in a row; I shout 'yes' whenever Aglaya says something. Not any more; I no longer shout 'yes' when Aglaya speaks to Prince Myshkin. I am too old for this and the other things described in Dostoevsky's novel that mostly trains its spotlights and cameras on young people. (I have seen three film versions of *The Idiot* and one theatrical play inspired by it.) I recall what I felt when reading and re-reading the pages on which Aglaya displayed many signs of emotion and wayward disposition. Even at the age of fifteen I knew I would not find a woman like her in real life that is less inventive and touching, for we have to struggle with the forces unknown in the arts. The force of gravity, for instance. Chagall's characters fly whenever they feel like it and no force can interfere with the trajectory of their whims.

I have never met anyone like Aglaya and in a way I am still faithful to her and Liza Tushina; and yet other women come and go, opening my doors and shutting them. They can come and leave in accordance with their desires that never cross mine, however much I endeavour to fall in love with the bodies and souls I see and feel around me – in my house, in my car. They never send me hedgehogs; they never say: 'I love Gavrila Ardalionovich.' And even if they did say something along these lines, I would not believe them, for I have never come across a man called Gavrila Ardalionovich.

The times have changed; our courtships look and sound trivial in comparison with Aglaya's brainwaves, with her inexhaustible supply of *joie de vivre*. Whatever happens to her, one may hear the beating of her fragile and stoic heart radiating optimism and pessimism, ecstasy and despondency.

'I love Gavrila Ardalionovich...' she said rapidly, but so it was hardly audible, and leaning her head forward even more.

'That isn't true,' the prince said, also nearly in a whisper.

'So I'm lying, am I? It is true; I gave him my word the day before yesterday, on this same bench.'

The prince was alarmed, and reflected for a moment.

'It isn't true,' he repeated, firmly. 'You're making it up.'

'Remarkably polite. You may as well know that he's mended his ways; he loves me more than his life. He burned his hand in front of me, just to prove to me that he loves me more than his life.'

If you burn your finger, you don't prove you love Aglaya more than your life: you should set fire to your whole body. I tried to burn my finger after reading the dialogue quoted above, but my instinct for self-preservation induced me to abandon the self-torture to which I had submitted myself for Aglaya's sake. Gavrila Ardalionovich tried nothing of the sort, needless to say: Aglaya did make the story up.

The prince again fell silent. There was no joking in Aglaya's words; she was angry.

'What did he do, bring a candle with him, if it happened here? Otherwise I can't imagine...'

'Yes...he did. What's so improbable about that?'

'A whole candle, or one in a holder?'

'Well, yes...no...half a candle...a candle-end...a whole candle – it's all the same, stop it!...And he brought matches, if you want to know. Lit the candle and held his finger in the flame for a whole thirty minutes, is that impossible?'

'I saw him yesterday; his fingers are unharmed.'

Aglaya suddenly burst into laughter, just like a child.

(David McDuff's translation)

Matches, thirty minutes. These details are poignant and pathetic, for Aglaya's heart radiates despondency at this point: appearances can be deceptive, as they say. She already knows she will not be able to triumph over the pity Prince Myshkin is bound to feel for Nastasya Philippovna. 'She is so unhappy,' he says to Aglaya as he looks at the pitiful woman in the crucial scene of the novel. Pity is an invincible sentiment: let us not forget that Prince Myshkin plays the part of Jesus Christ in Dostoevsky's corpus.

My Aglayas are no match for the young woman with whom Prince Myshkin failed to fall in love: her unhappiness and despondency did not rise to the dizzy heights of Nastasya Philippovna's distress. After all, Aglaya was not mad and no one had ever used her youthful body as an object one might buy or sell at will, at any time.

My Aglayas swallow dozens of sleeping pills and speak about death rather often in the hope of awakening my pity and love: these often go together, according to Dostoevsky and Nietzsche. They also speak about other men with whom they pretend to be in love, for they count on my jealousy, on its powerful support. I am not jealous by nature, but they do not believe me when I touch upon the void I feel at the spot where jealousy usually grows and prospers. 'You were consumed by jealousy when I told you I was about to marry Peter.' They seem to insinuate that no man can hear such an item of news without being tempted to challenge Peter to a duel.

'I told you about Paul to find out if you were in love with me or not. You said you didn't care so I concluded you *were* in love with me after all.' Oddly enough, these women never resort to Natasha's tricks in order to entice me into marrying them, for Natasha is not accustomed to any tricks and moreover has no idea how they could benefit her. Counts and princes fall in love with her and ask for her hand in marriage. She continues to talk about the moon without the slightest inkling of what such *Hymnen an die Nacht* will bring about in the near future.

Heroes and heroines are imitated on a regular basis, by different people; no one is able to imitate daily life. You should *live* it, otherwise you will find yourself beyond love and jealousy, beyond tenderness and cruelty. You will spend your life in the company of your books and descend to the Mothers in the hope of coming across either Helen of Troy or Aglaya Epanchina. On Mephistopheles' advice, Faust pays the Mothers a visit and returns to the surface of the Earth with Helen whom he treats as a living creature, disregarding the fact that she is just an image, a ghost, a figment of Homer's imagination: we need another Schliemann to dig up her bones.

At some point Helen of Troy might have lived in the vale of tears – not only in books and on stage, on screens. Aglaya does not exist beyond Dostoevsky's novel and the works devoted to it: critical studies, films and theatrical plays. And what about Natasha?

In October 1863 there was a ball in Tula – a provincial town situated in the neighbourhood of Yasnaya Polyana. The Tolstoy family were invited but Sofya did not go because she could not avoid pregnancy that had become a leitmotiv of her existence. Feeling unwell, she told her husband he must take her little sister by the name of Tanya. She went so far as to adapt a ball-gown for her rival who flushed with excitement as she appeared in her ball-finery first in front of a mirror and then in Sofya's room.

'How do I look?' she asked.

'You realise, don't you, Tanya, that even if I was well enough, I couldn't have gone to the ball?' asked Sofya.

'Why not?'

'Don't you know Leo's *views*? How could I have worn evening dress? It is unthinkable! He is always criticising married women who, as he puts it, "expose themselves". Besides, he needs to describe a ball in his novel *War and Peace*. You must know that his characters are always based on real people. That's the only way for them to become real in their turn. When I read his works, I never think they're just literary works and nothing else. They're slices of life or life itself.'

'I don't wish to become a character in his novel. I'd rather be part of his life, of his room, of his walks in the park.'

'I'm his wife,' said Sofya. 'You're supposed to expose your pretty shoulders and back for the gentry of Tula. In due course, you'll take your place in the novel, within the ballroom my husband is about to describe. You have no other duties, no other tasks to perform. I'll collapse in tears when watching your departure, my husband's betrayal, his coldness and hostility. How many departures are in store for me? He is as distant as Prince Andrey. And yet he often passes himself off as Pierre Bezukhov.'

Tolstoy was also Nikolay Rostov to whom he offered his early experiences in the army and addiction to gambling and debauchery. Anatole Kuragin merges with his creator when he indulges in guilty love; and he does that quite often, judging by his swagger, insolence and egotism. As for Sofya, she also participates in the novel, albeit in a roundabout way.

One day a young man called Pisaryov arrives at Yasnaya Polyana with the intention of staying there for a while and sits by Sofya during a tea ceremony. 'I was watching Tolstoy,' Tanya writes. 'Pale and very much upset, he would rise, pace the floor, leave the room, only to reappear again. In some way, his nervousness was contagious. Sofya became aware of it and was at a loss what to do. The situation came to a sudden end the next

morning when Tolstoy gave orders to get the coach ready and the manservant informed the young man that the horses were waiting...'

'Transpose the ages of the people involved; make Tolstoy the jealous father instead of the jealous husband, and you have a scene of old Prince Bolkonsky and his daughter at Bald Hills,' writes A. N. Wilson. And he goes on: 'In all the original versions, the old prince was simply a picture of his grandfather, and Princess Marya of his mother, solitary, as she had been in life. But as he meditated on the story, Tolstoy realised that he needed a hero to die at Austerlitz.' This need gave birth to Prince Andrey who also owed his existence partly to Tolstoy's brother Nikolay and partly to their own father.

Many people walk in the streets and dance in discos where they kill time and meet their future husbands and wives. So time is not dead, for all their exertions: it allows them to reach another landmark on their way towards death. Usually they do not know who they are and to what literary character they may give birth through the agency of a writer or a film director. Andrey's destiny was linked to Austerlitz where he might have turned out to be a mere cannon fodder; but he must have recalled Pindar's judicious counsel: 'Become what you are.' He looked at the sky that breathed new life into his veins and thoughts; he did not decline his enemies' assistance. Above all, he fell in love and rediscovered springtime, its symbols and promises.

Natasha also seems to have heeded Pindar's counsel: in the epilogue she really becomes what she is and should be in order to embody an unusual range of kind-heartedness, playfulness, seriousness and negligence. Why not add sloppiness to the list? And narrow-mindedness?

What must Natasha do to become what she was from the very outset, from birth? She dreams of marrying Boris, Countess Apraksin's son. Then Prince Andrey appears on the horizon, riding a horse – it is the American film I have in mind – and Natasha immediately falls in love with him. He is her new virtual husband and Natasha has another opportunity of becoming what she is – a faithful wife and caring mother. She is bound to miss this opportunity because it is Pierre who must marry her in the long run, after the war. This is what eventually happens, but in the meantime Natasha flirts with Anatole Kuragin who might have married her, but for Sonya's interference, her betrayal. There are many betrayals in the novel and I wonder if Tolstoy did not betray Natasha whose destiny might have been different from that of a housewife.

What else could she have done? 'Well, here we are then,' says Count Rostov as he and Natasha pay a visit to the Bolkonskys in Andrey's absence. 'I've brought my little songstress to see you, Princess.' He sees only Princess Marya in front of him, in the room where her father was to welcome them and thus consolidate their virtual family ties. Natasha might have sung for Prince Andrey in the course of their conjugal life; she will never sing for Pierre, according to what Tolstoy writes to this effect.

So she was not herself when she sang in her youth and met with applause: her father's guests were delighted by her performances. Or *was* she herself in those moments of partial recognition? Was she the only Natasha worthy of herself, of her place in the history of novel? Did her singing have anything to do with Pindar and Aristotle? Did she really become herself in the epilogue of *War and Peace*? Did she find peace – a happy ending – in the epilogue?

CHAPTER 4

'The clouds pass and the rain does its work, and all individual beings flow into their forms.' You open the Book of Changes and find what you are looking for: Andrey's clouds – the ones he saw at Austerlitz – and the rain I

hear as I sit by the window in my room. The shutters are closed but the sound of the rain goes through them; the ghost of the rain is in my room, in my thoughts and even in my sleep. I woke around 4 a.m. and watched a Russian film for a while. For once it had nothing to do with *War and Peace*; and yet I think that *War and Peace* encompasses this film as well, which does not mean that Tolstoy's novel is omniscient and omnipresent. There are many coincidences in our life and in the novel subjected to scrutiny.

This time Pierre and Natasha coincide with two people who go to a lake for their summer holiday. On the way the woman realises she cannot fall in love with the man whose character does not seem to suit her for many reasons: he is boring, too benign and not very handsome. At some point she commands him to stop the car he is driving and leaves him in the middle of nowhere. Actually she shares with him this predicament: she cannot remain in the middle of nowhere because she may die of hunger instead of enjoying her holiday at the lakeshore and on different boats. On the other hand, women should never hitchhike on their own; they would run the risk of being raped, murdered and thrown into a ditch where only scavengers could find them. Her former travelling companion has a car and so, in a manner of speaking, the lake and the delights associated with it are within his reach. And yet he does not want to spoil his holiday by spending it without the woman he fell in love with almost automatically: she is rather beautiful. She is actually far more beautiful than Natasha whose mouth did not square with Tolstoy's aesthetic criteria.

So they are together again and I cannot help comparing the situation with how Bezuchov and Natasha embarked upon *their* journey to conjugal life. Pierre is uncouth and certainly boring: his first wife, H  l  ne, must have died of boredom every time he spoke to her about politics and spirituality. The man I see in the Russian film does not talk about politics; nor is he tempted to touch upon God in his short monologues. He just speaks about his car and helps all those who happen to stand on the road, waiting for his car or any other car: a young man, an old woman. This woman is not afraid of being raped; she hitchhikes with the aid of a suitcase that stands in the middle of the road like a barrier. Kind-hearted to a fault, the driver stops and gives the woman a lift to the station, thereby delaying the beginning of the holiday – to his passenger's dismay. Again she seems eager to forsake him because she draws no parallels between his kindness and that of Pierre Bezukhov who would have acted in the same fashion, had he been able to drive a car. And she would not have refused to marry Count Bezukhov, would she? In the long run, she falls in love with the driver and forsakes her former companion. And Natasha forgets Prince Andrey, Anatole Kuragin and Boris.

I am watching the Soviet film version of *War and Peace* again; the book where the story is told in minute detail adorns my writing desk and I consult it whenever I need to compare what happens on the screen with Andrey's 'real' life. There is a battle in the offing and for once I have no idea which battle will be fought in the next sequence: I am lost amidst these battles and balls. There are only rifles and champagne glasses everywhere, and I take part in this celebration of life by drinking champagne from my favourite flute. I have no rifle and even if I had one I would not be able to handle it properly. In this respect I have a lot of affinities with Pierre who, before fighting a duel with Dolokhov, says to one of the seconds, 'Just tell me where to go and what to shoot at.' He picks up one of the pistols and asks how to fire it, never having held one before. 'Yes, that's it. I do know. I just forgot for a moment,' he says. Yet his memory can be relied upon when he needs to remember Natasha and the history of their relationship. He does not even need his memory on those occasions: his love is deeply embedded in his body.

Andrey's interior monologue is focused on the forthcoming battle and on his attitude towards life and military service. He says he yearns for glory and love. Let there be no mistake about it: he does not aspire to fall in love with a beautiful and charming woman. He wants his soldiers and even his superiors to love and respect him. He says there are no other desires in his whole substance; if his words are to be taken literally, he does not even care about his motherland and the outcome of the war. He says he does not live for anything else. 'It's not my fault,' he adds, as if somebody could overhear his thoughts and blame him for his egotism. I have failed to find this train of thought in the book: I don't know *exactly* what Andrey mused about on the battlefield. All I know is that *I* think along these lines without bothering about my virtual judges and their opinions. So I don't add, 'It's not my fault' because one is allowed to live beyond good and evil, beyond moral obligations and the Last Judgement.

Of course a great many minds echo Andrey's words; for once, I am not in a class of my own. Why do I speak of myself in connection with this episode? Because if you ask other people about their motivations, they will never tell you the truth, saying instead, 'I do it for my country, for the sake of humanity. I couldn't care less about glory and money. I don't mind sinking into obscurity.' What could I write about such people? It is better to speak of oneself, trying not to tell too many lies. But even if you explore your own consciousness and unconscious, limiting your contact with the outside world to quick forays into town, you are not shielded from untruth and errors. According to sages, it is difficult to disentangle hard fact from myth or truth from lies.

Anyway I might not have talked about myself and my ambitions, comparing them with Andrey's search for his private truth. What kind of coincidence is this, I wonder? There are many meaningless coincidences of *this* kind, I'm afraid. For instance, I agree with Andrey when he says to Pierre, 'Killing a vicious dog is a good thing, really.' I don't mean to say I would kill all vicious dogs on our planet: there are too many of them and their whereabouts cannot *always* be found on my ethical map. Once I said in an interview: 'I'd have killed Beria if I had met him in the early fifties.' (He used to live in the street where I stayed for a while: I know almost everything about *his* whereabouts.) Anyway I think we have every right to kill vicious dogs unless they are really dogs and not humans. Animals should be spared, even if they may kill nice people.

'No, killing is wrong,' answers Pierre. 'It's bad.' Perhaps he is right after all: I too am against capital punishment. There are coincidences and contradictions; I often contradict myself and even in my books one can light upon the opposites that have not been reconciled and adjusted to a common denominator.

'What's wrong with it?' retorted Prince Andrey. 'What's right and what's wrong is something we can't decide. People keep making mistakes and they always will, especially when it comes to right and wrong.' Andrey is also right because we are not in a position to know anything except that we think and therefore live. What is wrong in one country may turn out to be beneficial in another so the citizens of the latter regard this phenomenon or method as something 'right'. Even incest was allowed in some country – in Egypt, for instance; and there are countries where sons and daughters eat their parents' corpses, hoping to imprison their spirits within their own bodies and souls.

'Anything that harms someone else is wrong,' said Pierre. But a corpse eaten by a living creature – a descendant of this corpse – does not suffer and consequently the eater does not harm the corpse. The same goes for incest: mothers do not suffer when their sons make love to them because mothers are more qualified for this job than prostitutes. Mothers know their sons much better than any prostitute; they can initiate their sons into the art of love and conjugal life far more efficiently, with unparalleled skill.

‘And how do you know what’s bad for somebody else?’ asked Andrey. He is right again. What is more, my thoughts coincide with his to such an extent that I might play his part either in a film or in a play: my physique and face are of no importance. When you deal with Tolstoy’s works, you have to think about your soul reflected in your eyes; and there is nothing wrong with my eyes.

You meet a woman in a deserted ballroom; you want to kiss her then and there, without striking up a conversation that would allow you to penetrate her mind – the labyrinth where her thoughts hide themselves. But you don’t care about her mind: it is her body you lust after as you look at its curves and the smoothness of its skin. If you wish to explore someone’s mind, you have to talk to this person; there is no point in speaking to legs and breasts. You have to touch them – coincide with them, as it were; that is what I call ‘meaningful coincidences’. The woman you set your heart (and body) upon does not seem to appreciate your words and gestures; to all appearances, she has no desire to let you kiss her. As to your invasion of her body, you must postpone it until next year if you value this woman’s friendship and her presence in your life – otherwise she will leave you high and dry, running away.

But you are aware of appearances’ dishonesty, of their trickery, lies and betrayals. So you continue to seduce this woman and even touch her shoulders; shortly afterwards, you let your fingers slide down in the direction of her breasts and heart. She jerks her head up and looks at you angrily, but she does not speak any more and that is a good omen. She neither screams nor calls you names; she just makes a few movements that gradually subside as your fingers come closer to their destination. Appearances are not always deceptive and your caress proves it with mathematical precision. After all, your insistence and passion are not bad for her, judging from her eyes, from this reflection of her soul and body. Eventually she shuts her eyes because your fingers are already touching her soul, her innermost being.

“‘Bad! Bad!’ said Pierre. ‘We all know what’s bad for us.’” He is wrong, I think. At first the woman whose conduct I described in the previous paragraph might have found my meddling in her affairs objectionable. She might have thought she knew exactly what was bad for her. She realised, however, that she was wrong as she felt my fingers proceed with their ‘rite of spring’, as one of my friends – a born womaniser – habitually puts it.

‘Yes, you’re right, but just because I know something is bad for me, it doesn’t mean I can do the same harm to somebody else,’ said Prince Andrey. What is the meaning of his remark? Our thoughts coincide no longer, I’m afraid. This morning I took the trouble to look this sentence up in my Russian edition of *War and Peace*, but even my mother tongue did not enlighten me. If you know something is bad for you, it does not mean it is bad for anyone else. For instance, there are women with whom I would never spend an hour in my room, let alone a night in my bed; but these women may become very intimate with my friends or the passers-by I see from my window. Should I lock these women up in my attic so as not to harm the passers-by and my friends?

Why did Prince Andrey speak about ‘the *same* harm’? Can you do any *other* harm to somebody else? The sentence is ambiguous, not to say abstruse. According to Prince Andrey, you are allowed to kill a vicious dog. But can you really harm this dog? If you kill him, you don’t really harm him: he cannot feel his death unless you wound him and he suffers a lot before passing away. That is what actually happened to Prince Andrey; a French bomb did him a lot of harm because his body was not torn apart on the battlefield.

At this point, Prince Andrey switched to French. *Je ne connais dans la vie que maux bien réels; c’est le remord et la maladie. Il n’est de bien que l’absence de ces maux.* Contrary to popular opinion, Russian

aristocrats did not speak French perfectly. Tolstoy makes many mistakes when his heroes and heroines speak French as if it was their mother tongue. It is not and they forget articles and other nuances of the language they learnt from their French tutors. But the tutors are no longer there and articles fade away under the influence of the Russian language that has no room for articles. This time Tolstoy forgets the article ‘des’: ‘*Je ne connais dans la vie que des maux bien réels.*’ You can also say ‘deux *maux*’. French grammar does not permit the word ‘*maux*’ to reside in this sentence on its own.

Remorse is no evil, for you should not look back and regret what cannot be undone. Only what can be improved upon deserves our full attention and prompt action. Prince Andrey does not seem to have studied Spinoza’s *Ethics* as thoroughly as Stalin did. Remorse is a sad feeling and should therefore be banished from our life, otherwise we are not likely to hold out for a long time, let alone to die at the age of 120.

Prince Andrey forgets one evil – the death of one’s nearest and dearest. Doesn’t he torment himself when his wife dies? It is true that he draws comfort from his son to whom his wife gave birth on her deathbed. Incidentally, Tolstoy is keen on such coincidences: somebody dies and at the same moment a child is born. Or somebody dies on the battlefield, but a wounded soldier is back on his feet again. One of Beckett’s heroes says something along these lines in *Waiting for Godot*: as soon as someone stops crying, someone else bursts into tears as if God kept a fairly constant number of teardrops at our disposal.

Prince Andrey does not really regret his wife’s disappearance, but he thinks he might have been gentler with her *before* her agony: she neither recognised him nor heard his consolatory words. “‘My little darling,” he said, never having called her that before, “God is merciful...” The little princess was unable to answer him vocally; only her eyes told him what he had known for some time. “‘I love all of you. I’ve never done anybody any harm. Why should I suffer like this? Help me. It’s too late now. I turned to you for help and you did nothing. Even you did nothing. Too late, too late.”

That is why Prince Andrey utters the word ‘remorse’, disregarding Spinoza’s advice and the teaching of Epictetus. He ought to have shown more consideration for the mother of his only child. Of course, in Volume II he could not know for sure he would have no other children, no other wives. Anyway, he should not have ill-treated his wife as he did for instance in Volume I, Part I, Chapter 6. “‘Liza!” Prince Andrey spoke only a single word, but it contained a request, a threat and – clearest of all – an assurance that she would live to regret these words.’ Now it is Prince Andrey who regrets his words and actions – his treatment of the little princess.

Remorse and illness. “‘There is never any good unless these two things are absent. Living for myself and avoiding these two evils – that’s my philosophy now.” At that point Andrey might have begun to analyse Spinoza’s *Ethics*, and yet the only name he utters in the course of the conversation is ‘Herder’ about whom I know nothing.

Pierre speaks of everything, of a harmonious whole to which he belongs, according to his soul where he feels it. What *does* he feel? He feels in his soul that he is part of this vast harmonious whole that coincides with the universe. (Yet another coincidence.) “‘Don’t I feel that I represent one link, one step on the ladder that runs from lower forms of existence to higher ones in that vast creative infinity which gives token of a Godhead, a Higher Power – call it what you will.” Not only does Pierre *feel* the ladder – he actually *sees* how it rises ‘from plants to men’. He therefore concludes that the ladder is more or less infinite, being able to reach a Higher Power, a Godhead – God Himself. Much to Andrey’s annoyance, Pierre believes that the ladder is dissatisfied

with men (and women) to the point of going further and further until it finds itself in the Kingdom of God where it can rest on its laurels at last. 'Yes, this is Herder's doctrine,' says Prince Andrey.

I picked up two volumes of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and read two articles on Herder. From the short article I learnt about Herder's professions: critic, theologian, philosopher. The second enlightened me on Herder's output, on the works where the doctrine I am looking for might have been outlined and enlarged upon. Apparently Herder stresses the unity and indivisible wholeness of man's nature. The mind does not exist on its own: it does take notice of the body to which it happens to be assigned on God's instructions. There seems to be a ladder inside the body, which goes from the toes to the brain, allowing a lot of impulses and responses to penetrate it without delay. In a way, nature climbs this ladder to become a component of our life, for our instincts and sensitivity are subject to reflection. The body and mind make up the first unity I chanced upon in the article devoted to Herder's life and works. Pierre Bezukhov believes, however, that the ladder does not stay in the brain until doomsday, bent as it is on reaching a higher destination.

The second unity grows within the domain of history where two forces are in conflict; this conflict presides over the destiny of humanity. One force – Napoleon, for instance – strives to persevere and emerge from the whole as an individual structure. He is a dictator who does not care much about other people's views and desires – about the whole from which he has emerged during his military campaigns. Thus an individual opposes the world and even the whole of history as he tampers with borders and nations, creating a globe in his own image or rather in the image of his mind connected to his body. Yet the whole is not satisfied with any single form – with that of Napoleon or Alexander the Great. So the whole calls on Kutuzov to fight Napoleon and his army whose officers and soldiers are feeling on top of the world. The whole hopes to free itself from Napoleon's dictatorship in order to shape a new form of things. What for? Actually the whole needs this new form because something should be shattered when its time is past. Creation alternates with destruction and vice versa.

Kutuzov makes his appearance on the stage and soon takes centre stage in spite of his army's retreat and the ambiguous outcome of the battle of Borodino. But, contrary to all expectations, he does not usurp the whole and remains a general who is unmindful of the world that lies beyond the borders of his motherland. So the whole bears him no grudge and he dies in peace, unchallenged by European rivals and half-forgotten by his unappreciative contemporaries.

The Tsar was determined to go on with the military campaign inaugurated on the day of Napoleon's intrusion into Russia. Kutuzov candidly told the world that 'no new war could improve the position of Russia or add to her glory'. Consequently he quit the army at the earliest opportunity; anyway, his staff had already been removed and transferred to the Tsar. 'Kutuzov had no understanding of what was meant by Europe, the balance of power and Napoleon. All of this was beyond him. For this representative of the Russian people, once the enemy had been annihilated and Russia had been liberated and raised to the highest pinnacle of glory, for this true Russian there was nothing left to do. For this representative of the national war there was nothing left to do but die. And die he did.'

Kutuzov did not catch the meaning of 'the whole' as depicted in Herder's writings. He showed no eagerness to espouse the doctrine that used to encourage some generals to rule the waves, the Earth and humanity. At the end of his life he might have subscribed to Prince Andrey's point of view expressed in his conversation with Pierre Bezukhov: 'Leaving for myself and avoiding these two evils – that's my philosophy

now.’ Kutuzov could not avoid illnesses and death. (Did he die in his sleep?) But he had no grounds for giving himself over to grief and remorse: after all, he saved not only the army but Russia herself.

CHAPTER 5

‘A poet is the creator of the nation around him. He gives them a world to see and has their souls in his hand to lead them to that world.’ That is what Herder thinks about poetry and poets.

Here are three poems I wrote last week:

*There are no triangles, no forms. Just a movement
Leading nowhere or elsewhere or beyond any form, any
Triangle, any movement. There are things
That look beyond themselves and hear what they
Cannot hear. There are hearing aids
Everywhere. We can neither see nor hear them.*

*I unfasten a knot. There are knots and whatnots.
I chisel a figure out of the marble, out
Of nothing. Nothing is a figure; it is not and
It is everywhere. As usual, as usual. My window shows
A lot of landscapes that don't know they're nature,
Life and death. There are so many parts in nature one gets
Lost. I'm lost; I'm in nature, in a tree.
I'm building my nest in the small fir tree, in a puddle,
In the sky reflected in the puddle.*

*Destiny is a colour, a letter, an image
I saw only once. I'll sing a lullaby. Where is it?
In my babyhood. I'll sleep again
As if nothing had happened. I'll sleep tomorrow and
The day after. So many things will interrupt
My sleep, my life, my end. Will you
Interrupt my end? Surgical instruments,
Instruments of torture. A fugue, a theme, D Major.*

The world I can offer to a few individuals is right here – within these poems and outside them. They stretch out their hands and pick up the world to show it to those who are able and willing to see and enjoy it. I don't want my fellow creatures to enjoy my world the way they enjoy their soap bubbles and summer balls. There are no familiar forms in my gift; there are what and whatnots, some fugues. Whatever you write today, you cannot create any nation either around you or in the distant future. The future does not care about you; it has already forgotten you many times as if you had never been born. Are you sure you were born one day, in a room, in a

hospital, in a garden, on the Russian steppes? Perhaps not. What does it matter? You are here and elsewhere; nations turn around you slower and slower. Life stares you in the face, but asks no questions as if to spare you the necessity of telling lies and talking nonsense. Life looks at you like an animal; its glance is neutral and simple.

I'm not haunted by images of death and destruction.

*What's death? What's destruction? Another
Image, another sound, another touch. Someone strokes
My shoulder. And life goes by, comes
To a standstill and looks at me. I've got a long,
Thin face. What else do I have? A soul. Does anyone look
At my soul? Someone or something does.*

*So what? I don't know him or her or it: a stone, a plant,
A bubble, a drop of cognac. So many trees. Do they hear my
Song? A long, melodious song; a long, happy ending.*

Given my age, I can expect the end of the road at any time because this end knows no time and lives beyond space, steppes and boundaries. At the age of eleven I read *War and Peace* for the first time, inaugurating a new era in my earthly existence – that of fiery wars, icy patches of peace, stillborn harmonies. Today, I am watching the Soviet film version of the masterpiece; a hunt, a wolf on the brink of death. It would be impossible to capture his glance in a painting. What about poetry? A long, melodious song, an end, the simplicity of dying.

According to Herder, man is 'the first liberated member of creation'. What about our fear of death, our despair and torments? What do we look like if we manage to open our eyes on the deathbed supplied by a few members of the family to which we are said to belong? And what if we die in the open air, hunted down by the police? In the film *Odd Man Out* you can see the protagonist's eyes – whenever he succeeds in opening them. What do you see? The hunt, the fear of death, the whole concept of dread. Now look at the wolf – at the she-wolf depicted by Tolstoy in *War and Peace*. In spite of the war and the dogs, their razor-sharp teeth, her glance is peaceful; we look at an icy patch of peace. Or is it warm, lukewarm – a sunbeam on a carpet?

'The beast, flattening its ears in terror, tried to get up, but the dogs hung on. Danilo half-rose, then stumbled down, and as if he was going to bed collapsed with all his weight on top of the wolf and grabbed her by the ears. Nikolay was about to finish her off with the dagger, but Danilo whispered, "'No, don't. We'll string her up!'" and he changed position to put his foot on the wolf's neck. They put a stick between the wolf's jaws and tied her up as if they were putting her on the leash, and also tied her legs. Danilo swung the she-wolf from side to side once or twice.' If I read this description for the first time – only the sentences I quoted – I would not care about the identities of the hunters. Who are they? What are they doing there? Why do people still go hunting – is it the thrill of the chase? I wouldn't even ask myself these questions. I would just look at the wolf.

The following dialogue can be heard in the room where the odd man out is being looked after by a doctor of sorts. A painter is eager to immortalise the dying man because he expects to see *something* in his eyes. 'He's near death. He sees it. There's something to be said about him before he dies.'

'And about all of us,' says the doctor.

'I can see it,' says the painter.

'Take care. You might find something you don't understand.'

'I understand what I see in him.'

'What is it?'

'Some truth about us all.'

'Is that all?'

'He's doomed.'

'So are we all,' says the doctor.

There's no denying that we are doomed, as are wolves and even trees. In one of his stories, Tolstoy depicts the death of a tree – a beautiful death in comparison with how human beings set about this onerous task. The same goes for wolves and animals in general: they die more beautifully and stoically than the representatives of our species. What kind of truth does the painter see in the eyes of the dying protagonist? Fear, weariness, death, the absence of life. He understands the dying man's glance because he has also grown weary of the proverbial struggle for life and of the battle against ignorance and death. But this is just *some* truth about us all; the rest lies outside the scope of human experience. Only animals and trees are able to tell us the truth and nothing but the truth.

'The hunters were coming in now, proud of their booty and swapping stories, and everyone came over to have a look at the grand old wolf with her big broad head hanging down and the stick in her teeth, as she gazed with great, glassy eyes at the crowd of dogs and men around her. When they poked her, her tied legs jerked and she looked at them all, wild-eyed yet somehow innocent.' What are they proud of? Why do they poke her?

The translation isn't up to the mark, I'm afraid. 'Wild-eyed yet somehow innocent' doesn't correspond to what Tolstoy had in mind when writing about the truth that can be found in the eyes of an animal. The wolf depicted in volume 2, part 4, chapter 5 looks *wildly* and *simply* at her torturers. I think that the adverb 'wildly' refers chiefly to the wolf's *head* and not to her *eyes*. It is her simple glance I analyse as I watch this sequence over and over again. Borges speaks about 'modest complexity' that is supposed to differentiate a masterpiece from what a simpleton can write or paint in his spare time. But the simplicity to which Tolstoy draws our attention at the end of chapter 5 originates far beyond C Major and the sky hanging above a battlefield. The wolf's glance reconciles the opposites and hints at the unity in the bosom of which no single component aspires to domination. As an actor, the wolf is never over the top. This reminds me of what Napoleon said once to an actor: 'I'm surrounded by people who live through personal tragedies. They don't wave their hands about.'

The word used by the translator – 'innocent' – doesn't do justice to the neutrality of the wolf's glance which takes in not only the hunters and their dogs, but also the whole world and other worlds; even metempsychosis is included in it. Where will this wolf's soul reside in its next incarnation? Do animals – or women for that matter – have souls like boys and men who don't always turn them to good account? Be that as it may, that wolf's eyes reflect her soul much better than any human eyes for the simple reason that there is no fear, no innocence in them: the she-wolf murdered in Tolstoy's masterpiece is beyond Natasha's playful naïveté.

I saw the same neutrality and omnipresence in the eyes of my cat who died six years ago. She looked at me as if I had been capable of averting the disaster – death about which she knew nothing or next to nothing. She might have felt *something* despite her ignorance of the phenomenon that haunts men and women throughout their conscious lives. On the brink of death, however, cats are believed to leave their houses in order to die elsewhere. Why? Maybe to prevent their mothers and fathers from burying them with full military honours. My cat was too weak to go away and I buried her in my garden.

In this sequence the hunters are much inferior to the wolf they are bent on killing: their eyes see only her and nothing else. She, on the other hand, sees the hunt and many dimensions in which she might live today, having escaped from her persecutors. It is clear the hunters are intellectually and morally inferior to their prey – as it is often the case when the thrill of the chase makes one forget compassion and universal brotherhood.

I did not read Herder at the age of ten; at the time I read no philosophers at all, not even those I know almost by heart in my early seventies. I took no notice of Herder despite the fleeting glimpse I caught of him as I turned the pages of the masterpiece published in four thin volumes. Incidentally, I feel disposed to use the word ‘masterpiece’ as often as necessary when speaking about *War and Peace*: after all, it is a masterpiece *par excellence*, given its scope and poetic intensity. And yet there are no poems in it as if Tolstoy had disapproved of his Chinese and Japanese colleagues whose propensity for sprinkling novels with poems is well-known and understandably admired by any intellectual elite.

I read no philosophers in my youth because Tolstoy put me off unravelling their mysteries and walking around their labyrinths. Of course, one can light upon some droll analysis in *his* masterpiece, for instance:

If Napoleon had not taken umbrage at the demand for him to withdraw beyond the Vistula and had not given the order to advance, there would have been no war. But if every last sergeant had refused to go back into the army there could have been no war either. And war would also have been impossible if there had been no deviousness from England, no Duke of Oldenburg, no offence taken by Alexander, no autocracy in Russia, no French Revolution with its consequent dictatorship and empire, nor any of those things that led up to the French Revolution, and so on and so forth. If any one of these causes had been missing, nothing could have happened. It follows therefore that all of these causes, billions of them, came together to bring about subsequent events, and these events had no single cause, being bound to happen simply because they were bound to happen.

One may prolong the agony of nothingness by saying that if no human being had ever being born, there would have been no Napoleonic wars. But there would have been no peace either – and no Tolstoy masterpieces. His relatives and friends on whom he counted a lot when engrossed in his novels and stories would never have seen the light of day; Tolstoy himself would have stayed in the Limbo of Dante’s *Paradiso*.

In this paragraph I first came across the doctrine of determinism on which I often rely today as I sit brooding in my study. Whatever happens has been bound to happen and I have no alternative but to accept my destiny, even if I don’t always agree with the dramatic turns of events I am obliged to witness in both the outside world and my heart of hearts. The chief thing is to accept our life and its vicissitudes, excluding neither accidents nor happy endings that are part and parcel of our lot. Our lot, our life – everything is synonymous with life, not only our lot and existence. And everything is synonymous with a joy advocated by Spinoza whose works I am

reading as I continue to analyse the dialogue in which Pierre Bezukhov and Andrey Bolkonsky search for God, for their neighbours, for love and indifference, for universal brotherhood and solitude, for a logical response to evil.

What is very clear in Pierre Bezukhov's diary is his passionate hatred of his wife who betrayed him during his journeys and even in his presence: he was short-sighted and did not always see the men with whom his wife was flirting day in, day out. But when Natasha followed her example, yielding to Anatole Kuragin's charm and good looks, Pierre was bound to draw a parallel between his wife and the woman he had loved for many years. Of course, he did all he could to keep Natasha away from Hélène – even within the bounds of his mind where they never met. From time to time he said to himself that he should have proposed to Natasha instead of spending hours and hours in Hélène's company, but even in those moments they did not really meet in his head. This time, however, the word 'betrayal' must have put them together so that, in the space of ten minutes at least, Pierre both loved and hated his wife. I wonder if he ever hated Natasha.

Did he hate her when she unexpectedly got engaged to Andrey Bolkonsky? Let us not forget that during the legendary ball he played the part of a *svakha* – a woman whose profession and inclination would induce her to orchestrate marriages in tsarist Russia. Natasha was on the verge of tears because *other* guests were dancing the first round of the waltz. 'Pierre went over to Prince Andrey and took him by the arm. "You're always dancing. Look, my protégée is here, the younger Rostov girl. Ask her," he said.' Andrey complied with Pierre's dearest wish and the love story the former was engaged in slowly proceeded to the marriage. Then it stopped in the middle of nowhere when Natasha agreed to elope with Anatole Kuragin.

Pierre played the part of a *svakha* because he did not want Natasha to remain on the brink of tears for long – throughout the ball and on the following day. He had no inkling of what would happen in the aftermath of the ball – a disastrous event from *his* point of view. 'Natasha is getting married to Andrey!' he wrote in his diary. If you dance with a young woman, you should not feel obliged to ask for her hand in marriage; nor will you be imprisoned for sexual harassment. Of course it depends on *where* you perform this dance and on the state you are in during the performance. If you are drunk and inclined to use your partner's body in a vicious way right after the dance, you *may* go to prison unless your partner consents to her body being treated in this way. The film *The Last Tango in Paris* may supply us with additional information on the subject, though it bears no resemblance to Prince Andrey's love story and his attitude towards Natasha: he had no intention of having sex with her after the ball and even on the following day.

'I'd never have believed it, if anybody had said I could love like this,' said Prince Andrey. 'It's nothing like what I felt before, the whole world is split in two for me now: one half is her, and it's all happiness, hope and light; the other is not her, and it's all misery and darkness...'

'Darkness and gloom,' Pierre repeated. 'Oh yes, I know all about that.'

'I can't help loving the light. It's not my fault. And I'm so happy. Do you know what I mean? I know you're pleased for me.'

'Yes, I am,' Pierre agreed, and as he watched his friend, his eyes brimmed with sweet sadness. The brighter Prince Andrey's fate became, the gloomier his own seemed to be.

Once again we encounter yin and yang, gloom and light, women and men. Prince Andrey stares at the sky where, for once, there are no clouds, no flashes of lightning; even volcanoes are dormant. 'A volcano spewed a giant cloud of ash, dust and gases into the air,' he writes in his diary on the day when he learns about Natasha's betrayal. During the above conversation, there are two skies within Andrey's reach; after Natasha's crime, only one sky remains all around him, even beneath his shoes and boots. The volcano goes on spewing the cloud of ash, dust and gases into the air.

As for Pierre, he has got only one sky in spite – or because of – Natasha's presence in his mind. On the one hand, his love illuminates his life with strings of coloured lights; on the other, he cannot help thinking about the men who take Natasha away from him. This time it is Prince Andrey who bars him the way to Natasha's heart and body in general. 'What a paradox,' he thinks. 'Natasha stands in the middle of the road along which I walk day and night. I come to a standstill so as not to hurt her body. And yet I always bump into it whenever I resume my walk. If someone takes her away, the road is free and I can go as far as I wish – as far as the moon that she loves so much. Instead, I'm rooted to the spot and my fragile heart stops because there's no point in living without her. Darkness and gloom, darkness and gloom.' And he writes in *his* diary: 'God stands in the middle of my road. No one will ever take *Him* away from me. What's the point in going to the moon?'

CHAPTER 6

In the course of the novel, Tolstoy repeatedly demonstrates how God can be used by all and sundry: men, women, aristocrats, peasants. Here is Nikolay Rostov's usage of God:

Every second he expected a wolf to come his way. He had worked things out in a thousand different ways – how the wolf would emerge, where it would happen and how he would deal with it. Hope gave way to despair. Several times he prayed to God for a wolf to run out on him. He prayed with the kind of passion and sincerity which often overwhelms people in moments of deep distress over trivialities. 'Oh, what would it cost Thee,' he asked God, 'to do this for me? I know Thou art great and it's a sin to pray for this, but for God's sake please let an old wolf come out on me, and let Karay catch him and get his teeth into his throat and finish him off right in front of "Uncle", because he's watching me.'

Tolstoy rightly speaks of 'deep distress over trivialities'. We are prone to exaggerate the importance of trivialities to the point of bothering God with our futile supplications and going down on our knees as soon as a wolf appears on the horizon. But what does Tolstoy put beyond the realm of trivialities? Where could we find objects and subjects worthy of our prayers? In the epilogue, Nikolay Rostov becomes a country bumpkin to a degree as he rubs shoulders with his serfs and thinks only in terms of crops, scythes and ploughs, thereby following in Tolstoy's footsteps. (Levin will follow their example some years later.) In comparison with his military career, this amounts to no more than a down-to-earth collection of trivialities.

And what about his face contorted with fury? 'The one thing that worried Nikolay in the management of his serfs was his quick temper along with an old habit, acquired in the hussars, of being too ready with his fists.' He threatens to beat them to a jelly if they do not work properly. They cannot give up their drinking bouts punctuated by lovely deep sleeps. So Nikolay beats them to a jelly and they lie senseless in his fields, along his roads, among his bushes.

He promises his wife never to beat anybody again. “It won’t happen again. I promise. Ever,” he repeated in a trembling voice, like a little boy wanting to be forgiven. The tears flowed faster from the countess’s eyes. She took her husband’s hand and kissed it.’ Isn’t that an operetta or rather an opera *buffa*?

His wife puts the following question to him: ‘When did you break your cameo ring?’ ‘Today,’ answers her husband. The village elder comes to him; he goes out to the steps to meet him and immediately shouts and blows are heard in the hall. As usual Nikolay punches his enemy’s lights out. As he does so, he breaks the cameo ring his wife gave him one day, at the dawn of their conjugal life.

I promise, I promise. ‘And from then on, whenever he was having things out with his village elders and foremen, as soon as he felt a rush of blood to his face and began to clench his fists, Nikolay would twist the broken ring around his finger and look away from the man who had made him so angry. Even then a couple of times a year he would forget himself, and then he would go straight to his wife, make a full confession and promise once again that this really was the last time.’ I promise, I promise. Another act of Tolstoy’s opera *buffa*.

Nikolay may think there are French soldiers in front of him and even behind his back. He no longer has his sword that is hanging on one of the walls, rusty with disuse, but his fists are on top form and he seldom fails to recall this precept: Qualifications are important but practical experience is always an advantage.

And what about wars? Aren’t they trivial too? ‘On the 12th of June the forces of Western Europe crossed the Russian frontier, and war began. In other words, an event took place which defied human reason and all human nature. Millions of men set out to inflict on one another untold evils – deception, treachery, robbery, forgery, counterfeiting, theft, arson and murder – on a scale unheard of in the annals of law-courts down the centuries and all over the world though at the time the men responsible did not think of these deeds as crimes.’ Wars defy ‘human reason and all human nature’, but are they trivial? What is triviality?

Let us take an example. Sexual harassment in the workplace is not a trivial matter. And what about squares and streets? Does sexual harassment grow trivial as soon as you leave your workplace and go out? Such questions lie outside the scope of Tolstoy’s masterpiece, I’m afraid: even Anatole Kuragin does not harass his victims, judging from how he treats Natasha. He resolves to elope with her only after making sure she is prepared to follow him ‘to the end of the world’, as Liza says to Hermann in Tchaikovsky’s *Pique Dame*.

Having little value or importance. You cannot say wars are trivial, for they are important on account of their ability to alter our country’s frontiers and population. They wipe cities and even countries *off* the map; they put other cities and countries *on* the map. Off and on, off and on. Isn’t that trivial? Millions of men set out to do what they want and to undo most of the work of other men. Not to be outdone, the later do what the former do or undo. Then people shout, ‘Crime, crime, crime. Crime against humanity.’ Aren’t *all* crimes directed against humanity?

CHAPTER 7

At this point I interrupted my work on *War and Peace* because I had my internal war to cope with in order to find again what may be termed a ‘peaceful mind’. I had a few *external* problems in which my inner struggle might have originated to pester me for ten days at least. I am in no mood dwelling on them, all the more so since they continue to spoil my delights and even my meals: I have eaten very little in the course of those days and I don’t yet feel like going to my favourite restaurants.

I have written many poems in both English and Russian to compensate for my lack of inspiration in the domain of fiction and prose in general. Like Tolstoy I grew doubtful about the value of fiction and its usefulness – even in comparison with poetry. This Tolstoy-inspired event took place five days ago. Of course I realise that a thorough analysis of *War and Peace* – and any masterpiece, for that matter – might help a student to come to terms with a text, be it a novel or a poem. What I am writing, however, is rather futile and actually has no practical interest – from the common reader's point of view.

Here is a piece of useful information I have culled from Nabokov's commentary on *Anna Karenin*:

You will note that the coaches of this suburban train are of a different type from those of the night express between Moscow and Petersburg. In this suburban train, each carriage is much shorter and consists of five compartments. There is no corridor. Each compartment has a door on either side, so people get in and out, with a great slamming of five doors on each side of the coach. Since there is no corridor, the conductor, when he has to pass while the train is in motion, has to use a footboard on either side of each coach. A suburban train of this kind has a maximum speed of about thirty miles per hour.

Anna Karenina takes this train on the brink of death about which Nabokov writes with the same punctilious rigour. Another train – the night express – brought her from Petersburg to Moscow at the beginning of the book. That quote might and indeed *must* come in useful, especially if you take the trouble to *study* Tolstoy's works instead of *leafing* through them.

Tolstoy found his novels futile, if not pernicious; I therefore have every right to condemn *my* labours, for the work I am engrossed in now is also a work of fiction – at least to some extent. Nabokov says: 'Tolstoy ruthlessly sacrificed the giant of an artist that he was to a rather pedestrian and narrow-minded though well-meaning philosopher that he had chosen to become. Thus when he had just reached the uppermost peaks of creative perfection with *Anna Karenin*, he suddenly decided to stop writing altogether, except for essays on ethics.' As a philosopher, I certainly do not rank above Tolstoy, but I might drop this work and all the works to come – with the exception of poems – for the sake of my musical career upon which I shall not enlarge for once.

On several occasions, however, Tolstoy returned to fiction and created a few marvellous tales, including *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. After finishing *The Kreutzer Sonata*, he wrote in his diary: 'One joyful thing I do remember is that the awareness of life through the recovery of my talent has been restored to me.' I felt the same as I embarked on writing poems, both in English and in Russian, because I cannot write poetry in one language for days at a stretch. For some reason I thought that poetry was not futile, being closer to music than any other art with the exception of architecture.

Here are a few examples of my gloomy disposition:

Nerves, sinews. What to do with them?

What shall I do with this hour, this image?

The image tells me where I live. I live, I

Do what I can, what I can't do. Never.

*The image receded into the distance
Until finally it became invisible.*

A cloud, a coastline, a sail I can't hear.

*I touch. I say to you what I can't say.
Suspension points. What I begin
I end. Many endings, happy, unhappy. Another
Room. I don't know you. Are you my room?
You love shuffling through the fallen leaves. You are my
Room, my bride. I'll eat your leaves. Nothing will ever
Come and go. Whatever you are, stay,
Don't move. Don't move. Amen.*

Let these poems stand on their own, detached from their author and his life. After all, they are not *War and Peace*; there is neither war nor peace in them because, in fact, they stand far apart. I have no idea where they are; and yet they cannot be too far removed from the life I am living under my roof, under my sun.

I have no itch to write poems when I lead a normal life, waking up around 5 a.m. and working until noon when the sun or the clouds begin to talk to me about the woods where I am supposed to take my customary stroll. So I enjoy a leisurely stroll in the sunshine or in the rain. I look around and unfortunately find no material for any poem – whatever the elements – either in English or in Russian, for the material I *must* look for is somewhere in between myself and the outside world. It is neither really inside nor outside; if I decide to take the plunge and write two books of poetry, I lock myself up, watch TV and do everything the other way round, hoping to cross the threshold of the realm where poetry is lying in wait for me.

I don't hit the bottle, but I drink more than usual to blur all images and thoughts, their humdrum reality, their accuracy. They are too politically correct and I cannot trust them on my way to poetic licenses, to their detours and mazes. Often I just sit in front of my TV set, doing nothing, for nothingness is a breeding ground for rhymes and meters. (When writing in Russian, I am unwilling to free myself from rhymes, let alone from meters.) Little by little, the void I create becomes a tower or a brook and I grasp this brook and put it in my book from which it is unlikely to disappear. Signs of this illness include fever, nausea and vomiting.

The woods. I know what they are, what you

Are. Why did I love you? You were.

You still are. My hour and year, my house.

My god looks at me; he shakes my hand.

And love utters four letters, two syllables.

Let's go for a walk, forever. Our leaves.

Obviously I was thinking about the same woman, the same house and leaves: 'I'll eat your leaves.' What are they? And what about the woman? Is she really a woman, my bride? Isn't she rather Natasha Rostova? There are no answers to these questions because I am already elsewhere, far away from the state of mind I plunged into during this short period of inspiration. Anyway, Prince Andrey might have written this poem on his deathbed.

In September 1864, Tolstoy took leave of his book for a while, walking around and riding off to see a neighbour; and yet he wrote no poems during this period of laziness, of nothingness. *War and Peace* had grown too peaceful, not to say non-existent. Two of his dogs ran alongside him and, as might have been expected, at some point they caught sight of a hare and began to bark. Tolstoy's horse was not used to jumping, but the dogs inspired both the horse and its rider: they did not manage to resist the temptation to chase after the hare. At the first jump the horse stumbled and Tolstoy was thrown; he lay in agony with his right arm broken. There ensued another period of inactivity that did not last long, however: he resolved to dictate the book to his wife or to one of his daughters.

Every bout of insanity that permits me to write poetry in two languages amounts to the trauma from which Tolstoy did not recover at once. Did I think about *my* book as I wrote one poem after another? I thought

about Prince Andrey and his deathbed, about Natasha and their belated reunion. Another coincidence, another unexpected meeting with destiny.

I recalled my trip to Bayreuth where, among other operas, I saw *Tristan und Isolde* staged by Jean-Pierre Ponnelle. In the last act Tristan lies sleeping beneath a great lime tree. His wound does not allow him to enjoy life as he used to only a few weeks before, kissing Isolda during the only night they spent together. At his head sits Kurvenal, bending over him, grief-stricken. From without, a shepherd's pipe is heard, an interminable, desolate tune. The shepherd is supposed to reveal Isolda's arrival by playing a joyful, triumphant tune – unlike the one he is playing now. Tristan comes round, opens his eyes, but his ears outperform his other senses as they listen to the desolate tune; first he hears the tune and then looks at the world. He *briefly* comments on this world because there is no point in writing a book about it: only Isolda deserves such an honour. So he forgets the world and starts waiting for Isolda.

The sails are hollow, breezes follow.

With a gale of love behind her,

Isolda comes to find us.

It nears, it nears uncannily fast.

It waves, it waves, the flag at the mast.

The ship, the ship is rounding the rocks.

Do you not see?

Kurvenal, do you not see?

As might have been expected, Kurvenal does not see anything. Actually, he is even reluctant to *look* at the horizon because immediately the shepherd's desolate tune dashes his hopes. Tristan listens to it as well, but its meaning is lost on him: after all, the shepherd has every right to sit brooding on the seashore. Tristan *lies* brooding under the great lime tree:

Immortal ache! Longing that calls

For death's calm cure, calls from far my healer sure.

I lay dying, dumb, afloat,

When poison chilled my heart and throat.

I lay dying, dumb, afloat. I might have written this line during my recent bout of insanity. Tristan understands the meaning of the tune, but again throws his head back in ecstasy: he is under the impression that Isolda's ship is coming at last, in spite of the tune.

On board, Isolda! How she smiles!

Look, the cup that reconciles.

Look at her,

Do you see her now?

How she smiles in soft emotion,

Walking on the paths of ocean.

These ecstasies and requests eventually get under Kurvenal's skin: for all his loyalty to his master, he cannot bear the latter's hysteria. Besides, he is intent on restoring Tristan to his former glory and on saving him from death to which he aspires with frenzy and even fury as if hoping that Kurvenal will finish him off in accordance with the Roman custom. But Kurvenal is loath to comply with Tristan's latent wish so the latter vents his spleen on the shepherd and his tune: he cannot bring himself to scold his faithful friend and servant.

So Kurvenal signals to the shepherd that the time for the joyful tune has come, although Isolda's ship is not in view and no sail adorns the horizon. The shepherd does not mind playing the second tune: he is bored to death with the first one. Kurvenal says to Tristan:

*O glad pipe, heart's balm! Ah,
From northward, coming nearer.*

The stage was blacked out to emphasise Tristan's agony and approaching death. For a while he had visions of Isolda bending over him, grief-stricken. She had not come after all.

Prince Andrey is already on his deathbed, judging from *his* visions: he sees something white over the door. 'Was that a statue of the sphinx pressing down on him?' As he reflects on the sphinx he comes to the conclusion that it is nothing but his shirt lying on the table. Then his thoughts guide him towards Natasha and their love/hate relationship. 'And he formed a clear mental image of Natasha, though not as he had seen her in the past, with all the charm that had given him such joy. For the first time he caught an image of her soul. And he could understand all her feelings, suffering, shame and remorse. For the first time he could sense the full cruelty of his rejection of her, the break between them. "If I could only see her one last time...just once, to look into her eyes and say..."'

The white sphinx, his shirt. The vision begins to take shape at last, another shape on which there is a face someone has put on it. Prince Andrey thinks that he has put the face on the sphinx because this face reminds him of the young woman he was in love with and whom he hated more than anybody else – Natasha Rostova. She has just been in his thoughts; she now stands in front of him, as large as life. He does not think she is there in the flesh; on the contrary, he is sure she takes part in his delirium because she *cannot* be in his room. (Prince Andrey does not believe in coincidences.) "'Oh, this terrible delirium – it goes on forever!'" thought Prince Andrey, trying to rid himself of this face. But the face stayed there in all its reality; the face was coming closer. Prince Andrey tried to get back to the earlier realm of pure thought, but he couldn't manage it. His delirium kept dragging him back.'

The same goes for Tristan's delirium in which he saw Isolda coming ashore and bending over his body. His delirium kept dragging him back as long as it *could* drag him back: according to atheists, no delirium can lord it over us after our death. So Natasha did not come either. Tolstoy had tried every trick in the book to arrange their reunion on the brink of Andrey's death – without success. Tristan died shortly afterwards; Andrey had his visions for some time. After spotting the sphinx and Natasha's face he fainted away 'like a man disappearing under water'.

CHAPTER 8

I must pick up the thread of my narrative where I left it off at the outset of *my* delirium.

Napoleon said that the battle of Borodino had been the most terrifying experience in his life, given the number of victims and the quantity of blood lost by both armies. But from Pierre's point of view – he is an outsider of course – it all looks like a dance, although at some point he almost gets killed as he volunteers to fetch a few ammunition boxes. It is a dance of cannonballs he views on his way to the boxes he is destined never to make use of. 'A cannonball flew past him, then another, and another; they were raining down on all sides as he charged downhill. "Where am I going?" he was beginning to wonder, when suddenly he was there beside the green ammunition boxes. He hesitated – should he run back or go on? Suddenly a terrific bang sent him reeling backwards down to the ground.'

Pierre performs his own dance as he wonders where he is going and hesitates before resuming his walk through the battlefield. His adventure is more or less opposite to what happens around him – in spite of the shocks he gets from time to time. He represents an opera *buffa* on the stage designed for an opera *seria*, a Shakespearian tragedy, a Russian drama.

At the same moment, Prince Andrey watches the dance of a grenade that begins its pirouettes in the air before landing in front of him. "Look out!" yelled a terrified soldier as a grenade came over like a little bird zooming down with whirring wings on the look-out for a landing place, and plopped down with a dull thud next to the major's horse a couple of paces away from Prince Andrey [...] "Get down!" yelled the adjutant, flinging himself to the ground. Prince Andrey hesitated. The smoking shell was spinning like a top between him and the prostrate adjutant, near a clump of wormwood growing in the ditch between meadow and field.'

And here comes one of the most pathetic episodes in the whole masterpiece; Prince Andrey does nothing to prevent death overpowering him, for he thinks about life at the wrong moment. You must *act* the part of life instead of thinking about it, especially if the timing is far from perfect. "I can't die. I don't want to die. I love life. I love this grass, the earth, the air..." On the other hand, it is during a war that we are likely to recall our dear life and not just its different aspects through which we pass on our way towards death.

As for Napoleon, he thought neither about life nor about death as he fought his numerous, victorious battles. Once he was attacked by a group of Cossacks as he was riding with his companions near some Russian city. He did not feel his life was in danger, for he smiled throughout the ordeal – and not for the sake of posterity, as some sharp-tongued writers assert in their books. He had no fear of death and one might even say he was in love with it; at least that is what some of his contemporaries thought and talked about. He would cry when holding the bodies of his favourite generals, but except for those tears nothing proves he had any disagreement with death. Of course he did all he could to prevent other soldiers from killing the members of his army, but in this case he was thinking in terms of military force.

When a man sees an animal dying he is seized with horror. What he himself consists of, his own substance, is being visibly destroyed, ceasing to exist before his very eyes. But when the dying creature is a man, and a man deeply loved, there is more to it than the horror experienced at the extinction of life; it feels like a laceration, a spiritual wound, which, like a physical wound, may heal up or may prove fatal, but it always hurts and it shrinks away from any abrasive external contact.

Such is the opening paragraph of Part IV that precedes the Epilogue I am so fond of; and yet I did not read it in my childhood, being put off by many pseudo-philosophical reflections. (Nabokov would not have contradicted my point of view.) I disagree with Tolstoy who, I am quite aware of that, does not denigrate all animals to the point of turning them into automatons. But he does seem to believe that the death of a dog is less heartrending than that of a human being whom we may love or respect. And what about a dog or a cat we love so dearly we cannot part from him or her, even if our separation lasts only a few hours? Tolstoy speaks of an abstract animal and of a man Natasha used to love before her abortive attempt to elope with Anatole Kuragine. Even on his deathbed Prince Andrey could count on her love and they would certainly have got married, had the dud doctors succeeded in healing his wound.

What would happen if you loved your dog as much as your wife? Wouldn't the loss of this dear animal cause as much pain as your wife's departure for the Hereafter, for the world where she might wait for your arrival, as faithful as ever? And wouldn't the loss of your dog feel like a laceration, a spiritual wound no doctor can heal unless another dog gives him a helping hand? I have a friend who lost a dog and was so overcome with grief that he bought another dog in the wake of the first dog's death. Soon the second dog fell in love with another dog and now my friend has two dogs, which does not preclude him from recalling his first dog whenever he chances upon her photographs. If my wife fell in love with another man, I would not allow her to live with him under my roof. Does this prove I love her more than my cat? I am not married, by the way; but I do have a cat.

Tolstoy seems to be unfair to animals because he compares one of them – a dying one into the bargain – with the man Natasha lost after betraying him. No doubt she felt guilty about forsaking him so dishonestly and the feeling of guilt is often instrumental in bringing about the emotion we venerate to the point of making it into the symbol of our life. Love, love, love. Natasha loves Prince Andrey all the more intensely because she knows he is about to die. It is noteworthy that she cannot compare his death to that of her favourite dog or cat because only her father has animals at his disposal. She might have a favourite horse, though, but I have never heard about the death of Natasha's favourite horse. Should I reread the novel to find out if there is such an animal in it?

During the hunt in which the wolf takes centre stage, Natasha demonstrates her ability to ride all day and remain as fresh as a daisy. Anyway, dogs seem to outshine horses to whom Tolstoy does not pay tribute in spite of his infatuation with them. But there are some enjoyable dialogues focused upon dogs:

'Nice bitch you have there!' he said casually. 'Is she a good mover?'

'That one? Oh yes, she's a good dog. Catches the odd hare,' Ilagin said in a voice that suggested indifference, though only a year ago he had given a neighbour three families of house serfs for Yerza, the black-and-tan bitch who was now his.

'Now there's a splendid dog – the black-and-white one!' he said.

'Yes, she's all right. She can move,' answered Nikolay. ('I wouldn't mind seeing a good big hare run across that field, then I could show you what kind of dog she is!' he thought to himself.)

Some men prefer their dogs to their wives, even though the former cannot provide them with heirs and therefore will never contribute to the growth of their family trees. The question remains, however, and it relates to the

difference between animals and humans. What kind of difference is that? I have often asked myself the question when looking at my cat and comparing him with some humans I am not particularly fond of. I should perhaps compare him with the humans I love to bits, but Tolstoy proceeds otherwise and I am determined to follow in his footsteps.

The paragraph I quoted above refers to Natasha's feelings and the reader knows what she went through as she nursed and consoled Prince Andrey in the course of his illness. The horse she was riding on the day of the hunt was not with her in those moments of the dying man's agony and delirium. No parallel can be drawn between the death of an animal and that of a human – not within the scope of Natasha's mental and psychological setup.

Suppose you nurse a dying animal – a cat you love more than any wife you might have if you paid more attention to women. In this case your soul is sure to get involved in the situation; and yet some philosophers think that animals have no souls. If this assertion is true, our soul must remain unmoved at the sight of a dying animal. Only the *animal* parts of our substance get involved in the process as if they were dying alongside their counterparts. Our soul keeps herself or himself aloof from the whole ritual because there cannot be any communication between the sinews and nerves of an animal and our immortal soul. That is why Tolstoy does not speak about a *spiritual* wound in relation to animals. I do speak about it.

Tolstoy was keen on death – almost as much as Napoleon. Not only did he devote one of his unsurpassed works to him – *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* – but he also emphasised his importance in *Anna Karenin* where no chapters are entitled except one: *Death*. Oddly enough, in English death is rather a man than a woman. In French, Russian, Italian and Spanish death is a woman – *la femme fatale*.

In *War and Peace*, death is a man – *l'homme fatal*. Napoleon gives birth to death wherever he makes his appearance; Prince Andrey consents to him – to death of course – when he has another vision of his on the same deathbed. He sees himself lying in the same room, but he is not wounded; actually he is as fit as a fiddle. People come and go, talking to him, taking leave of him and bowing all the time as if he was an idol, a god or Napoleon. He answers them, but his answers and their words are of no importance; and everybody knows that. They seem to be getting ready to go on a journey. Prince Andrey joins them; on second thoughts, however, he decides to stay at home. Where is his home? In the Hereafter? Never mind, never mind. No point in going anywhere; death is everywhere. But these people are alive; so is Prince Andrey. Until further notice. These people, these people.

They begin to slip away imperceptibly one by one, and all that is left is the question of closing the door. He rises to his feet and goes over to the door to get it locked and bolted. Everything now depends on whether or not he will get there in time to shut it. He is walking forward, hurrying, but his legs won't move, and he knows he is not going to get the door locked, though he strains agonisingly to do so. And he is filled with a ghastly feeling of terror. This terror is the fear of death: beyond the door there is It. But while he is flailing helplessly towards the door, that horrible something is already pushing from the other side, forcing the door open. Something inhuman – death – is pushing on the door, and he must hold it back. With one last effort he grabs at the door – it can't now be shut – to try and hold it back, but his efforts are feeble and clumsy. Under pressure from the ghastly thing outside, the door opens and shuts again.

What is Tolstoy driving at? Of course, we are supposed to accept not only death but whatever happens to us, if we want to become free in this world and other worlds as well. *Amor fati* is a good precept and this lifelong tragedy reflects the notion of freedom much better than any other notion, any revolt or disobedience. Somebody or something knocks on the door. We go to the door but suddenly realise we should not open it, otherwise we may die and never see our relatives again. The door opens of its own accord and we see both death and life standing on the threshold.

Apparently, in Spain a lot of people sacrificed their lives during the Napoleonic campaign that was as ruthless as the Emperor himself. A division or a battalion enters a village where there is nothing to be found: all the inhabitants have fled, leaving nothing behind, not even a pie crust. And the French soldiers are as hungry and thirsty as many soldiers are during military campaigns, even if the population of the country they invade does not really resist their attempt and stays outside as if unconcerned, indifferent.

The soldiers go down the main street – there is only one street in the village – and see a hut inside which there sits a woman with a child on her knees. They seize the opportunity and get inside, thinking about the food they might chance upon, providing the woman has not resolved to starve to death – in defiance of the conquerors.

Once indoors, they inquire about the food and the woman points to a sack standing in a corner. The colonel smells a rat and asks if the food is not poisoned. The woman says it is not: she has no wish to be shot on the spot. The colonel says: ‘Please help yourself.’ The woman obeys and eats a lot of food as if unwilling to die of hunger. ‘Please give a morsel to your child,’ says the colonel. Once again the woman obeys his order and feeds her child. ‘It costs a lot to feed and clothe five children,’ she says.

‘Where are your other children?’ says the colonel.

‘They died of hunger.’

‘But you’ve got a lot of food.’

‘I let them die because I didn’t want your soldiers to kill them.’

‘Why don’t you poison us?’

‘I love human beings. I love them much more than horses and dogs. You’re not dogs, are you?’

‘No. The French aren’t dogs.’

‘So I don’t want to poison you.’

‘Would you poison a dog?’

‘No. But I would poison a cat. Dogs and horses work. Cats do not.’

The women’s facial contortions amuse the soldiers as they eat the same food. They all die of course. ‘More pushing from the other side. His last, inhuman struggles are fruitless. Both leaves of the door open without a sound. *It comes in. It is death.* And Prince Andrey has died.’

He has not. Once again he is dreaming and reality recedes into the distance until finally it becomes invisible, inaudible and untouchable. What is visible? Natasha’s face and death, death, death. What is death? He knows almost everything about Natasha’s face but death is still an enigma he cannot solve, for all his efforts. Actually Natasha is also an enigma, judging from her wish to elope with Kuragin. He thought she might fall in love with Pierre, with Napoleon; Kuragin was outside his calculations and fears.

Tolstoy writes that Prince Andrey ‘summoned all his strength and forced himself back to consciousness’. (Death and life shake hands.) In the next paragraph he says to himself, “‘Yes, that was death. I have died and

woken up again. But that's what death is – a reawakening!" His soul was suddenly ablaze with light, and the veil that had hidden the unknown from him was half lifted for his spirit to see beyond. He had sensed the releasing of pent-up forces within him, and he felt the curious lightness of being that had not left him since.' Another coincidence: awakening and death meet and greet each other.

What we really hear at this point is Tolstoy's interior monologue: these are *his* thoughts, *his* hopes and *his* convictions. He firmly believes in the afterlife where not only Andrey and Natasha but all lovers without exception will be reunited – for better or for worse. Prince Andrey may not believe in anything except Natasha's face and he is waiting for this face to appear once again near the door.

In his search for this face, he slips from one realm of dream into another because his dream is many-layered. The country he lives in on his deathbed is like Germany or Italy: there are many kingdoms and principalities in it. But he stays within the same life where Natasha moves and falls in love with Boris, Kuragin and Bezukhov. Actually he does not need the afterlife where he would have to wait for her and probably share her with Bezukhov. In his personal country, however, she belongs to him and nobody else because this country's borders are situated on his deathbed – right behind the pillow and not far from his toes and arms. And neither Bezukhov nor Kuragin are lying on this bed; anyway it is too narrow for three people.

But something did happen during the vision as if he had gone too far, leaving his bed and country behind in his search for Natasha's face that had suddenly lost its importance. One layer after another glided before his eyes and then he noticed that there were no more layers. You board a train and see a lot of landscapes; after a while, the train pulls into a station and comes to a standstill. You have arrived at last and there are no more landscapes in store for you. 'When he woke up in a cold sweat and stirred on the couch Natasha went over and asked him what was wrong. He didn't answer, he couldn't understand what she was saying, and he gazed at her with a strange look in his eyes.'

Prince Andrey forsook Natasha as if to avenge himself on the young and charming woman who had betrayed him twice: once before his death and the second time after his funeral. 'For Prince Andrey that day marked more than a reawakening from sleep; it was a reawakening from life. And in relation to his own life-span it seemed to take no longer than waking up does in relation to the span of a dream. It was a relatively slow reawakening, but there was nothing violent or terrible about it.' Prince Andrey is betraying Natasha with God.

Would he have found God without Natasha's presence? Do we need a treacherous woman to widen the space in our arteries? (According to some theologians, it is in our blood that the Kingdom of God is situated.) Or is it just another coincidence? Andrey would have found God anyway, for many people accept the Hereafter and the Almighty on their deathbeds. From this point of view, a deathbed is the only priest we can trust in our existence.

But suppose Natasha did play an important role in this metamorphosis. On the strength of what Tolstoy tells us through the novel we may come to the conclusion that her influence over men and women was rather positive. Let us take just one example. The Rostovs are on the point of leaving Moscow with their furniture and wardrobes. Natasha's father and mother are at loggerheads: her father wants to give all the carts to the wounded. 'We're like a load of Germans!' screams Natasha. And she continues to scream as she talks to her mother. 'The wounded men! It's impossible, Mamma. It's outrageous...No listen, Mamma, darling, it's all wrong. I'm sorry, but please darling...Mamma, it doesn't matter what we take with us. Just look down there in the yard...Mamma!...You can't do it!'

Napoleon also despised the Germans. Just another coincidence.

CHAPTER 9

Jung was fascinated by ‘meaningful coincidences’. He looked for a theoretical concept that would account for such paranormal ‘chance’ phenomena as the *I Ching*. One of his patients – a fat, unattractive woman – resisted his attempts to cure her: she was too rigidly logical and had no wish to let herself go, adopting another point of view, adjusting to another life. One day she recounted a dream in which she had seen a beetle lying in the palm of her hand. ‘Someone gave me a golden scarab beetle,’ she said. At that moment Jung heard a gentle tapping at the closed window behind him. He turned and saw a golden scarab beetle.

I am watching a Russian film; for a change, I don’t collect material for my book by focusing my attention exclusively on *War and Peace* and whatever is related to this masterpiece. But any film I watch and ponder over reminds me of Tolstoy’s heroes and heroines as if no one else had ever lived in the world. What Jung and the fat woman saw was not a golden scarab beetle; it was just a flying insect whose behaviour did not differ from that of any representative of its species. Besides, it was not lying in the palm of the woman’s hand; even Jung’s hands were relatively far from the flying insect which, moreover, was separated from them by the windowpane. Likewise, my comparisons or synchronicity do not really work, being too far-fetched and even ludicrous. But Jung set out to discover the meaning of such coincidences and I am longing to follow in his footsteps, all the more so since the *I Ching* has been my intimate companion for many years.

‘He towers high above the multitude of beings, and all lands are united in peace.’ The Book of Changes speaks about Napoleon this time: we should not always concentrate on love, Natasha, Pierre and Prince Andrey. ‘This describes the creative power of the holy man, who makes it possible for everything to attain its appropriate place, thus bringing about peace on earth, when he occupies an eminent ruling place.’ Napoleon was not exactly a holy man, although many people spoke about his greatness and genius; Pierre was no exception to this rule. But he did aim to create a harmonious world where everyone and everything would have been in the right place or rather at *his* place, not far from his throne. Unlike Hitler and his cronies, he had no itch to destroy Moscow where he lived for a while, staying in the Kremlin and watching the fire that eventually deprived him of his Asian capital and provisions.

The movement of heaven is full of power.

Thus the superior man makes himself strong and untiring.

Prince Andrey says to Anna Scherer’s guests, ‘You have to admit that Napoleon on the bridge at Arcola was a great man, and also in the hospital at Jaffa when he shook hands with the plague-victims, but...well, there are other actions it would be hard to justify.’

If the superior man undertakes something and tries to lead,

He goes astray;

But if he follows he finds guidance.

Napoleon never followed anybody except the Russian army that guided him to Moscow and to his irrevocable defeat: you have to choose your leader carefully.

You don't always know what is going on in front of you and behind your back. Sometimes you follow an army or an individual who leads you to the goal you have been longing to achieve for many years. You even amuse yourself by playing the game follow-my-leader, for you believe in the man whose figure is outlined in red on the horizon. And then you realise there is a lot of blood around you and you cannot do anything to prevent a bloodbath.

Going through to the end brings misfortune.

It furthers one to see the great man.

It does not further one to cross the great water.

Napoleon went through to the end instead of coming to a standstill somewhere in the middle of his numerous campaigns, keeping what he had already conquered. 'A cautious halt halfway brings good fortune.' He ought to have relinquished all hope to get the whole world under his thumb, which was anyway out of his reach despite his military genius. Many people were inspired by his example and became great in their turn without going too far, without crossing the great water. How many rivers did Napoleon cross in his life?

One cannot engage in conflict;

One returns home, gives way.

Napoleon seemed to thrive on conflict and stress. Giving way was out of the question. He had no inkling of what was to take place on the horizon of time; he saw cities and rivers, not the horizon.

Allow the foot to walk according to its capacity, and let the hand grasp according to its strength. Listen to what the ear hears and see what the eye sees. In knowing, stop at what cannot be known. In action, stop at what cannot be done. Employ [the faculties] as they would use themselves. Do things that would be done by themselves. Be unrestrained within your lot but do not attempt the least outside of it. This is the easiest way of taking no unnatural action. There has never been a case where no unnatural action is taken and yet one's nature and destiny have not been preserved, and I have never heard of such a principle according to which the preservation of nature and life is not a blessing.

Kuo Hsiang, *Commentary on the Chuang Tzu*

Beethoven dedicated the *Eroica* to the great man – to Napoleon or rather to the early days of his military and political carrier. But, upon hearing about his idol's coronation, he tore up the sheet of paper marred by the dedication and shouted: 'I need no emperors in my room.' Beethoven knew that Napoleon ought to have let his hand grasp the world according to its strength. Be unrestrained within your lot but do not attempt the least outside of it. Napoleon just did not know what his lot was and even if he had known he wouldn't have been happy with his lot.

Tolstoy was very fond of Rousseau to whom he paid many tributes in the course of his life. Sometimes he did not even know for sure who had written *Emile* – so similar the Savoyard priest's ideas were to his own religious outlook. We are all potentially good and equipped with a conscience that guides us in our thoughts and deeds. Religious dogma does more harm than good because it has nothing to do with 'natural religion'. We must turn towards ourselves, our conscience – the immortal and celestial voice embedded in us. Napoleon never heard this celestial voice and many Russians came to doubt the very existence of a soul within his body. 'Rumour has it that Napoleon's soul is *outside* his body and he does nothing to capture it and put it in the right place again,' says one Russian to another.

'Napoleon has no soul,' answers the second Russian.

'All people are endowed with souls,' says the first Russian.

'All of them except the Antichrist,' says the second Russian.

'Do you mean to say Napoleon is the Antichrist?'

'I do.'

'Are there other antichrists in the world?'

'No. There's only one antichrist, the Antichrist.'

'What about Napoleon's generals and ministers?'

'They're his victims. They'll betray him in the end.'

'Do you think Napoleon's soul can be saved?'

'If he captures it and warms it in his hands – yes.'

'Do you think his hands are holy?'

'No. But if he does capture his soul, God will reward his act and pick it up.'

'Do you mean to say Napoleon will die as a result of this personal salvation?'

'God will appropriate his soul and put it in heaven. Napoleon's body is so unclean it can't hold his soul.'

'Will he be able to live without his soul?'

'He's done so up to now.'

'But his soul hasn't been far from his body. His soul was within his reach. What will happen if God takes his soul and puts it among the stars? Will Napoleon die?'

'Yes. But at least his body will be cleansed of his sins.'

'Can't Napoleon's soul cleanse his body of its sins? What if he puts it inside his body instead of letting God pick it up?'

'His soul has become unclean over twenty years. It can't cleanse anything. First it should be cleansed by God because only the Almighty can perform this ritual.'

Thus the Russians spoke to each other at the beginning of the 19th century. In 1912, Russian priests spoke as follows:

Lord God of all power, God of our salvation! Look down this day with mercy and blessing on Thy humble people. Graciously hear us, spare us and have mercy on us. Thy land is confounded by the foe, and he would fain lay waste the whole earth. These lawless men are gathered together to overthrow Thy kingdom and destroy Thy holy Jerusalem, thy Beloved Russia, to defile Thy temples, overturn Thine altars and

desecrate our holy shrines. How long, O Lord, how long shall the wicked prevail? How long shall they wield their unlawful power?

Tolstoy despised Napoleon because the latter did not feel the beauty of nature and the sky at which Prince Andrey looked had no meaning for the conqueror whose only aim in life was to kill and rule. Had he been wounded at Austerlitz or elsewhere, he wouldn't have understood the sky – or God, for that matter – because even on the brink of death he was to regret the loss of power and not the loss of life. Napoleon did not believe that religious faith was crucial for human beings and never thought in terms of souls when dealing with them. He was destroying humanity without a second thought because destruction was his natural religion: his nature, his harmony, his *raison d'être*.

Once a foreign diplomat said to him: 'If you wage another war, 200,000 soldiers will die.'

'I don't care about their lives,' said the Emperor.

'Don't you think they want to live?'

'They've got immortal souls. What else do they need? I don't mind destroying their pernicious bodies where all passions lodge and flourish. And passions should be exterminated.'

'Is that why you're a warmonger? Are you really a benefactor of humanity?'

'Of course I am. Don't you know that?'

'And you're a great admirer of Rousseau and Tolstoy, aren't you?'

'Of course I am.'

'Why did Tolstoy hate you so much?'

'Because he was a Russian. He liked Moscow, its architecture.'

'So you're not a dictator with the blood of thousands on your hands, are you?'

'I am a dictator with the blood of millions on my hands. They didn't need blood.'

'You say you like Rousseau. But what about his *Social Contract*? He thought that each and every member of society should be involved in passing laws. People can't obey laws if they don't pass them.'

'His ideal citizens could only ever belong to a small city state or a sparsely populated island. I have in my possession the greatest empire in history. So I must prescribe what the laws are, but those who love me don't bother about their freedom. Love me, love my laws.'

Actually Napoleon liked neither philosophers nor the clergy, but if given the choice of a priest or Kant, he would have opted for the priest because philosophers had too many fanciful notions, in his opinion. 'Religion is better than philosophy,' he used to say.

'Why?' asked one of his ministers.

'Because we must observe universal traditions.'

'But philosophical tradition dates back to Ancient Greece.'

'There are traditions we should discard. Why waste our precious time on them?'

'What should we spend our time on?'

'When in a new city, we should study it because some day we might have to take it.'

'What about people? Should we study *them*?'

'No. We don't have to know our victims. But we should study their generals.'

What is the end of political association? The preservation and prosperity of its members. And what is the surest mark of their preservation and prosperity? Their numbers and population. Seek then nowhere else this mark that is in dispute. The rest being equal, the government under which, without external aids, without naturalisation or colonies, the citizens increase and multiply most is beyond question the best. The government under which a people wanes and diminishes is the worst.

Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Social Contract*

A journalist was eager to find out what Napoleon thought about this way of judging political power. 'Rousseau didn't think in terms of the future,' said Napoleon.

'What do you mean, Sire?'

'Do you have any idea how many people will replenish the earth in two centuries?'

'If you continue to conquer the world, we'll have only a few villages, here and there.'

'Don't you like rural life?'

'I do. But I also like human beings.'

'Don't you like animals?'

'I do. But they get killed as well.'

'Don't accuse me of cruelty to animals. Don't you know that animal welfare has recently become a major concern for my government? Personally, I don't think animals should be killed for their fur.'

'What about humans? Should *they* be killed?'

'I don't kill them for their fur.'

'What *do* you kill them for?'

'For the sake of France.'

'But the French also die under your rule.'

'We're doomed anyway. What does it matter *when* you die?'

'Do you think it's better not to be born?'

'Why should you be born if you can become neither Napoleon nor one of his subjects?'

'Not everyone can become Napoleon,' said the journalist.

'Not everyone can become my general,' said Napoleon. 'But everyone can and must become my subject,' he added flinging his hat on the floor.

CHAPTER 10

Tolstoy often thought about the Decembrists and the impact they had on Russian history. He wished to write about a Decembrist, about his return from Siberia in 1856. The man walks about St Petersburg, looking back to the days of 1825 when he challenged the autocratic way in which his native country was ruled. He looks around him but what he mostly sees is time, not space: everything reminds him of those days, of those hopes dashed by Nicholas I.

Tolstoy says to himself that he needs to go further back to understand this protagonist: to the times of Napoleon and his invasion of Russia. You need history to describe a life that belongs not only to itself but also to others and whatever makes up the tunnel through which we go in search of light. 'For the third time, then, I went back still further into the past, prompted by a feeling which to most of my readers may perhaps seem strange but

which I trust will be intelligible to those whose judgement I value. This feeling can only be described in one word – shame; I felt ashamed to tell the story of our victories over Napoleon and his army without mentioning also our own disasters, our own disgraces. Who can read the many patriotic accounts of the year 1812 without feeling secret shame?’

The same goes for my approach to the problem I was facing as I embarked upon this commentary designed to treat a subject of limitless importance and scope. *War and Peace*. ‘Love and battle, terror and desire, life and death. It’s a book that you don’t just read, you live.’ That is what Simon Schama says about Tolstoy’s masterpiece. Again we are confronted with a few pairs of opposites; and yet they meet up and embrace fraternally. Let us take Hélène and her brother Hippolyte:

The ‘charming’ Hippolyte bore a close resemblance to his beautiful sister; it was even more remarkable that in spite of the similarity he was a very ugly man. His features were like his sister’s, but whereas she glowed with joie de vivre, classical beauty and the smiling self-assurance of youth, her brother’s face was just the opposite – dim with imbecility, truculent and peevish – and his body was thin and feeble. His eyes, nose and mouth – all his features seemed to twist themselves into in a vague kind of obtuse snarl, while his arms and legs were always in an awkward tangle.

Actually, Hélène had a love affair with her second brother, Anatole Kuragin, whose involvement in Natasha’s life was to act as a springboard to Andrey’s spiritual progress and final revelation.

‘Those whom I love, I beat,’ say the Russians. Terror and desire are also inseparable, for terror often gives rise to desire, becoming its vital element without which desire is just an itch, nothing else. And Prince Andrey proved once and for all that life and death love each other.

I resolved therefore to *live War and Peace*, reverting to my childhood and dwelling upon my amorous misadventures that may be compared with what Tolstoy’s protagonists encounter in *their* lives. I don’t think I have ever been in love with my Natasha who is much older than her prototype, the one we meet in Prince Andrey’s company. Besides, my mistress goes into hysterics rather often and once I saw her rolling on the floor as if she had been having an epileptic fit. I cannot say Natasha is just another hysterical female, getting all worked up about nothing. On one occasion, however, she did show to what extent she could be all worked up, but it was not about nothing unless the elopement with Anatole Kuragin may be called ‘nothing’ in view of its utter sterility. Being unhappily married, he could not keep the promise he had given Natasha who believed in conjugal happiness and was not prepared to live with him illegally.

“‘Leave me...a-lone...I...just let me die...” was all she could manage to say before wrenching herself viciously away from Marya Dmitriyevna and flopping back down into her former position.’ A few seconds later, she resumes her verbal attack. ‘Oh, just leave me alone. Why did you have to interfere? Why? Why? Who asked you?’ But she was not rolling on a carpet, was she? My mistress let out a few screams that reminded me of Prince Myshkin, not of Natasha who was incapable of such fits and feats. ‘Then suddenly something seemed to open before him; an extraordinary inner light illumined his soul. This moment lasted for half a second, perhaps; but he clearly and consciously remembered the beginning, the very first sound of his terrible howl, that tore from his breast of its own accord and which he could not stop by any effort.’

My mistress made no effort to stop her howl – probably because she knew there would be several howls in succession. She might have stopped one of them, or two, or three. But how to stop ten howls, twenty howls? A lone wolf can howl a whole night. What about a woman on whose mouth there lies someone's hand? This hand belongs to the man she loves and worships. So she asks herself why he prevents her from howling, from doing her utmost to make all neighbours aware of her distress and his cruelty. And she gets no answer to the question she has every right to ask herself. She can even try and put the same question to the man she loves so dearly, but his hand stifles her words and she howls more often now as if this frequency could compensate for the lack of volume her howling suffers from.

Natasha wrenches herself away and flops back down into her former position. Then she raises herself up, flings herself back down on the sofa, all the while sobbing 'with the kind of despair that people feel when they weep for troubles they know they have brought upon themselves'. My mistress went into convulsions, sobbing and howling; her half-stifled howls sounded even more horrible than the howls of a lone wolf who had not eaten for three days. While doing so, she thought about the troubles caused by the man sitting by her side. She was in the habit of ringing her mother up to say how awful this man was and what kind of treatment he had subjected her to. 'He gave me a look of murderous hatred,' he would say, howling now and then. 'He's going to kill me, Mother.'

'I think you should call the police,' her mother would reply.

'I don't know their phone number. He won't give it to me. Don't forget I'm in France, not in Russia. Even in Russia I don't know their number.'

Natasha never did anything of the sort; she neither rang her mother up nor called the police when a porter was wrestling with her would-be husband or rather with his friend by the name of Dolokhov. The latter tried to push past him but the porter barred his way. Natasha did not call the police; she was just running back and forth, howling like a maiden in distress. Needless to say, her howls had nothing in common with those of a lone wolf.

Why do I then compare her to my mistress? Because they are both treacherous women and it doesn't really matter what they do when their projects are thwarted. Natasha raises herself up and flops back down; my mistress goes into convulsions and howls like a pack of wolves to wake the neighbours up. The latter might think the neighbours are sure to call the police, provided she howls long enough to awaken their suspicions and set their teeth on edge. What counts, however, is those women's betrayals – not their screams, yells and howls. Within this framework, my hussy's imitation of rolling stones is a secondary matter.

My hussy works in an orchestra where there are lots of musicians who may or may not fall in love with a violinist. I knew that sooner or later she would hear the words I had never uttered in her presence: 'Will you marry me?' Natasha heard these words from both Prince Andrey and Anatole Kuragin. Prince Andrey's wife had died already; Kuragin's was still alive and her husband had no intention of finishing her off for the sake of his forthcoming marriage with Natasha.

My violinist had been campaigning for years to get married and settle down at last. The success of her campaign exceeded her wildest expectations. She says that her future husband is the kindest man in the world. 'And he's the best percussionist in the world,' she adds with a triumphant smile that communicates its radiance to the cosmos, not only to nearby countries. "'Oh, Sonya, if you knew him as I do!' says Natasha. 'He asked me what kind of promise I had given Bolkonsky. He was so glad I'm in a position to refuse him [...] Just wait, Sonya, and you'll understand. You'll see the sort of man he is. Don't think too badly of either of us.'" Did

Natasha smile? ‘The softer and more appealing Natasha’s face grew, the more serious and severe Sonya’s became.’

‘I don’t love Kostya yet, but I *will* love him,’ said my hussy.

‘Because he’s the kindest man in the world? Do you know that Napoleon was furious when a journalist wrote he was kind. “It’s much better to be the opposite,” he said.’

‘I wouldn’t have married Napoleon.’

‘Do you still remember me?’ I asked. We were sitting opposite each other in the most luxurious Petersburg hotel.

‘Of course I do. I still love you very much. But you’re so far away.’

‘Like Prince Andrey?’

‘Kostya’s not as handsome as Anatole Kuragin, but he’s so kind, so wonderful.’

‘It’s better not to look and act like Anatole Kuragin,’ I said.

‘Why not? You can *look* like him. You should *act* differently of course.’

‘Your future husband is married like Anatole, if I’m not mistaken.’

‘He wants a divorce and he hopes his wife will let him marry me in the near future. He divorced his first wife on the grounds of mental cruelty. But in spite of the divorce there’s no awkwardness between them. In fact they seem very much at ease because he’s kind.’

‘So he’s used to this kind of procedure, is he?’

‘The author of the book I’m reading now thinks that people shouldn’t regard divorce as a disaster. Marriage is fragile and we’re likely to bungle our conjugal life, especially if we’re not used to it.’

‘You mean the first marriage is always a fiasco.’

‘The second one is much steadier.’

‘What about the third one? You’ll be his *third* wife – don’t forget that.’

‘I love you so much,’ she said kneeling down before me. She began to kiss my trousers and I did not interfere with this belated ritual of tenderness. She gently fondled my feet or rather my shoes. My mind flashed back to the day of our first meeting when she had performed the same ritual. For the life of me I could not recall what trousers and shoes I had been wearing on that occasion.

‘Do you want to see the SMS he sent me?’ she asked as she continued to fondle my new shoes.

‘Not particularly.’

‘It’s very touching,’ she said. At last her fingers left my shoes in peace and she fetched her mobile phone that was on top of the TV. The message went as follows: ‘All women are the same. Why should I trust you? You’re like other women. You’re all traitors. Why are you betraying me? What have I done? Every day I say to my wife I love another woman. What else do you need? Don’t I say every minute I love you more than anybody else, more than my mother and father? I can sacrifice my life for you. But you don’t need my sacrifices. Haven’t I sacrificed my family for the sake of your body and soul? I love your soul and I know that God loves it too. Isn’t that enough? Why are you doing that? Does evil appeal to you so much? You should purge your soul from sin. Aren’t you sinning now? You behave abominably towards the man who loves you more than his mother. When I say I love you, I mean it from the bottom of my heart. Don’t you know my heart yet? Every day I show it to you, but you don’t look at my heart. You look elsewhere. And now you’re looking at your lover. Is he better than my heart and my soul? He has never asked you to marry him. I have, haven’t I? But you don’t listen to my words.’

You listen to HIS words and he doesn't say anything. Whatever he says isn't important because he doesn't ask you to marry him. What is he saying to you now? Will you marry me? He is touching your breasts instead of talking to you about family life and children. I'm sure he doesn't believe in God. He is a godless man. How can you love a godless man? God is everything and he is nothing. You spend your time in the company of some nobody. Do you like nobodies? Well, let me say goodbye to you. I wish you a lot of happiness.'

'What do you think of it?' she asked.

'Very touching,' I said.

'Isn't it? Marvellous. Kostya *really* loves me. And he believes in God. It's important, isn't it?'

'Of course it is,' I said.

'He's waiting for his wife to start divorce proceedings.'

'Why?'

'Because of the alimony. He'd pay less money. Do you understand?'

'Of course I do.'

'All this may take some time, but I'm prepared to wait.'

'I admire your patience and courage.'

'I'm not very courageous, am I?' she asked.

'It doesn't matter,' I said.

In the Soviet film version of *War and Peace*, Natasha sings as Pierre comes in and follows her solitary figure through a ballroom. In the novel there are several people present and Pierre is eager to go home because he has no wish to betray his feelings towards Natasha. (There are only betrayals in our world of masked balls.) In the film Natasha thanks him for being so kind-hearted, benevolent and humane as if she had nothing better to do. 'If it hadn't been for you, I might have committed suicide,' she says, alluding to the aftermath of her failed elopement with Kuragin. I don't remember the exact wording of her declaration of love, but she did make this declaration – in the film, not in the book. But even in the book one feels a sort of sparkle or ray that unites the two protagonists in spite of everything. A ray of sunshine shone through a gap in the clouds – that is how the scene may be poetically and metaphorically depicted.

There are many clouds of course; both Natasha and Pierre are aware of that. One of the clouds is Prince Andrey who still belongs in the vale of tears and death does not seem to hasten his steps because he knows that Prince Andrey will be wounded at the battle of Borodino and not at his father's estate. Natasha loves Prince Andrey because he is imposing and intelligent; she loves Kuragin for his features and figure. What she singles out in the array of Bezukhov's qualities is his kind-heartedness. In this respect my mistress is almost identical with Natasha, for she sets kindness far above intelligence and gifts. 'How much do men share housework and the care of the children?' she asked rhetorically.

'I have no experience in this domain,' I answered.

'And Kostya takes care of all his children and wives. He's a very good cook, you know. He wraps a chicken in foil and cooks it for two hours. And his fish *solyanka* is wonderful. Hot soup is very comforting on a cold winter's day. It's very cold in Petersburg this year.'

At this point her mobile phone rang and we interrupted our dialogue to allow Kostya to vent his anger on both his mistress and myself. At first I did not hear what he was saying but then she brought the receiver closer to my right ear and I heard a few words I don't recall for the simple reason that I had no wish to memorise them.

‘There are many people in this room,’ she said. ‘No, I’m not alone with him. He’s got other women at his disposal. There are three of them in this room. No, I don’t count myself, or rather I count myself out. No, I don’t count myself in. I’ll come in a few minutes. Don’t ring off. Don’t ring off.’ He rang off.

Again she knelt down before me and rubbed her head against my knees and private parts. I don’t mind this sort of caress but this time it was out of tune with the situation; what is more, the timing was quite inappropriate, to say the least. As she started to undress I asked her to leave the room so as not to disappoint her future husband. ‘I may lose him because of this night,’ she said. ‘I must be crazy.’

‘You *are* crazy,’ I said.

‘I’m completely crazy about you,’ she said.

‘Don’t talk about *us* any more,’ I said.

‘Say one word, only one word,’ she said.

‘I’ve already said many words,’ I said.

‘Your words are wrong. Please find the right ones. One word would be enough.’

‘I forget this word.’

‘I’m a good prompter,’ she said.

‘But I’m not an actor,’ I answered.

At this point the mobile phone rang again. ‘Do you want to speak to him?’ she asked.

‘No.’

‘Why not? He’s very kind.’

‘I know.’

‘So why don’t you want to speak to him?’

‘Why *should* I speak to him?’

The telephone went on ringing as if there was only one sound in the world apart from our voices. Again she said, ‘Yes’ several times in row. At the same time she finished undressing and I saw her breasts and the rest of her body I would have forgotten by now, but for her untimely striptease. She rang off and climbed onto the only table in the room. I could not help looking at her; and yet I was sleepy and disappointed because I thought she had come to terms with life and would never try to live it perversely. But perversion was her second nature and I asked her to leave me alone, which was easy to do on account of my inborn loneliness. We all have our second natures and inborn qualities and whatever others do to us, we never part with them. We may part with others but not with ourselves, and when Faulkner says, ‘They’re running away from themselves,’ I wonder how they manage to achieve this result.

She was still standing on the table – stark naked, insolent and beautiful. What would Natasha look like under the circumstances?

Natasha let herself go to such an extent that her clothes, her untidy hair, her thoughtless jibes and her jealousy – she was jealous of Sonya, the governess and all women, pretty or plain – were a constant source of humour amongst her friends. The general opinion was that Pierre was under her thumb, and this was true. From the earliest days of their marriage Natasha had laid down what she wanted. Pierre had been taken aback by the novel attitude adopted by his wife – that every minute of his life belonged to

her and their home. He was surprised to discover what she wanted, but so flattered by it all that he gave in immediately.

I thought my former mistress would become like the mature Natasha in a few years' time, all the more so since she was already abnormally jealous. She was jealous not only of large-as-life women but also of photographs and films, even though most actresses I saw in these films were dead and buried. In her presence I could not permit myself to glance at a pair of legs, let alone to exchange greetings with a woman I had known for many years. She often undressed in front of television sets to prevent me from admiring other beauties, their legs, breasts and shoulders. She would often press her body against the screens as if *she* had been taking part in the films I was watching.

Her clothes were impeccable; and yet I did not buy *all* of them, which meant she had enough money or lovers to wear what she found suitable for her body. Her taste was impeccable too. I wonder why I am talking about her in the past tense. Her disappearance from my life does not mean she is dead, does it? The world is not limited to my life, is it? Let Schopenhauer answer this question.

Natasha no longer aspires to seduce the world and she does not care whether it is situated inside her life or outside it – in Petersburg or Moscow. In former times she would not mind climbing onto a table to show off to Boris, among other people. 'Suddenly she skipped up onto a tub to make herself taller than Boris, flung her slender, bare arms right round his neck, and flicked her hair back with a toss of the head. Then she kissed him right on the lips.'

My mistress often stood on tables, on beds, and I admired her legs, her curves about which I might have written a lot of poems. She was like a statue in the Parc de Versailles; now she is outside my life and I talk about her in the past tense. The present tense is reserved for Natasha and her likes – other heroes and heroines of *War and Peace*. That is where I am living now; it is better to live somewhere than not to live at all.

CHAPTER 11

Here in Petersburg Hélène had enjoyed the special patronage of an important dignitary, who occupied one of the highest positions in the government. Out in Vilna she had formed a liaison with a young foreign prince. When she got back to Petersburg prince and dignitary were both in town, both were asserting their rights, and Hélène was faced with a problem she had not previously encountered in her career: how to preserve her intimacy with both, without offending either.

What might have seemed to any other woman a difficult task verging on the impossible Countess Bezukhov took in her stride, and without sacrificing her reputation as a highly intelligent lady. Had she attempted to cover things up, or had she tried to wriggle out of her awkward situation by being shifty and clever, she would have ruined everything by acknowledging that she was in the wrong. But no, Hélène behaved like a great personality who can get away with anything; convinced of her innocence, she assumed the moral high ground, and looked down on everybody else as guilty people.

The predicament I found myself in was somewhat identical to that described by Tolstoy whose characters formed an eternal triangle without even trying to wriggle out of it. Of course I was reluctant to spend the night in the company of my former mistress, but she walked stark naked around my suite and, out of politeness, I was

looking at her instead of kicking her out. Her future husband would ring her up now and then to say he was leaving her forever, but I knew his car had been parked in front of the hotel: I did not have to accompany her to the front door and ask the hotel porter to call a taxi.

And she behaved like a great personality or Hélène: she told me she was mine and asked him to wait for her another ten minutes. She ought to have repeated Hélène's words: 'The selfishness and cruelty of men! Just what I was expecting. A woman sacrifices herself for you, she suffers, and this is her reward. What right have you to ask me, monseigneur, to account for my friendships and affections? This man has been more than a father to me!' Of course I did not ask her to account for her attachment to the percussionist who was waiting for her by the front door of the hotel. But she said he was more than a mother to her. 'You're my father,' she said. 'And he behaves more like my mother – he doesn't understand me. My mother's never understood my acts and feelings.'

She was really convinced of her innocence and had no qualms about claiming the moral high ground. But there was a problem she could not skirt round – not in the light of what her future husband had written to her.

A few days later, at one of the wonderful parties given by Hélène at her summer villa on Stone Island she was introduced to a M. Jobert, a fascinating middle-aged man with snow-white hair and brilliant black eyes, a lay member of the Jesuit brotherhood (a 'short-robed', lay member), who spent a long time in conversation with Hélène out in the garden under the illuminations and to the strains of music about the need to love God, and Jesus, and the Sacred Heart, and the consolations afforded by the one true Catholic faith in this life and the next. Hélène was deeply moved, and several times both of them found themselves on the verge of tears, with their voices trembling. A dance partner then called Hélène away, breaking the thread of the conversation with her future 'director of conscience', but the following evening M. Jobert called on Hélène alone, and soon after that he became a regular visitor.

One day he took the countess along to a Catholic church, and there she was led forward to kneel at an altar. The fascinating, middle-aged Frenchman laid his hands on her head, and she experienced a sensation that she later described as something akin to a breath of fresh air wafting into her soul. This, they explained, was the 'grace of God'.

Kostya was not a Catholic, but his religious fervour was akin to that of M. Jobert who talked to H  l  ne about Jesus and the Sacred Heart. ‘He thinks the soul is sacred,’ said my hussy. ‘And he speaks about light all the time. Do you know that light doesn’t come from the sun?’

‘Does it come from the soul?’ I asked.

‘Of course. You should open your soul because it’s closed. Our souls are closed and we face the daunting task of opening them.’

‘Otherwise we’ll go to Hell, I suppose.’

‘Don’t laugh at me. Do you think your soul is open? Do you feel your soul?’

‘No.’

'It's like a breath of fresh air. You should let the cosmos penetrate your heart.'

‘Are we speaking about the soul or the heart?’

'Kostya says they're synonymous. If you're heartless, you have no soul.'

‘Your logic is shallow,’ I said.

‘Logic is always shallow,’ she answered. ‘Only the soul is deep. And the soul is light and radiant because it is God.’

‘Is your Kostya a mason?’ I asked jokingly.

The highest wisdom is founded not on reason alone, not on the worldly sciences – physics, history, chemistry and the like – into which intellectual knowledge is divided. The highest wisdom is one. The highest wisdom knows only a single science – the science of the whole, the science that explains the whole of creation and the place of mankind within it. In order to assimilate this science it is necessary to purify and renew the inner self, and so, before we can know, we must have faith and be made perfect. And for the attainment of these aims we have had implanted into our souls the light of God, which is called conscience.

According to many scholars, the chapters devoted to the Masonic Order are the weakest part of *War and Peace*: Tolstoy was not a mason himself. He had a lot of books to draw upon, but the lack of personal involvement could not be replaced by second-hand opinions, guesswork and hearsay.

I suppose Kostya also talked about the light of God and the darkness of sin, otherwise my hussy would not have spoken about radiance while dancing stark naked on the table and on the carpet. Unlike Fred Astaire, she did not dance on the ceiling – not this time anyway. She said she believed in God now and, according to what she was saying during her dance, her life had undergone a metamorphosis. Frankly speaking, I did not notice any change in her conduct: she had always danced on whatever was handy with the exception of ceilings. She might have danced on the ceiling of my room – once or twice; but I was too drunk to take notice of it.

In *War and Peace* there are two characters who remind me of Kostya, though not of his doctrines. One of them is Captain Tushin whose voice Prince Andrey hears before the battle of Austerlitz. The voice says: ‘If we could know what’s going to happen after we’re dead not one of us would be scared of dying. There you have it, old man.’ Actually this sounds more like Hamlet’s famous monologue, but the didactic tone is comparable not only to Kostya’s teaching but also to Tolstoy’s style. ‘We’re scared of the unknown, that’s what it’s all about. It’s all right saying the soul goes up to heaven...we know for certain there isn’t any heaven – there’s only the atmosphere up there.’ Kostya might say just the opposite, in my opinion: ‘There’s no atmosphere up there, only heaven – nothing but heaven and God. We know everything about the Hereafter because we believe in God and his light illuminates our souls.’ And so on and so forth. To some extent, all teachers and preachers sound alike.

I have never been able to understand Tolstoy’s doctrine, if any: he rejects the Church and, from an ecclesiastical point of view, there are no doctrines outside the Church. What counts for him is life and the way we live it; from this point of view, Christ’s teaching is essential for us and the theology of grace is not. But Tolstoy also speaks about light and the door beyond which there is no darkness and whatever is associated with it: death, bones and tombstones. But ‘moral’ is the keyword of *his* teaching and he jettisons the rest because our life needs no miracles, no sacraments. And if you are asked what this is all about – the world, the Cross, the sky and so on – you just answer: ‘There’s nothing up there except the atmosphere. But what do we care? Our light is inside and we can share it with others. A beam of light radiates from every man and woman. Let us swim in this light as long as we live and love.’

‘It is terrible to say,’ writes Tolstoy, ‘but it sometimes appears to me that if Christ’s teaching, with the Church teaching that has grown out of it, had not existed at all, those who now call themselves Christians would have been nearer to the truth of Christ – that is to say, to a reasonable understanding of what is good in life – than they are now.’ Does Tolstoy discard Christ’s teaching as well? Are all teachings useless? You just live and let live. You take a loaf of bread and a jug of milk; you eat and drink, smile and sleep. If they beat you, your smile broadens and becomes a radiant smile. Whatever happens to you does not really happen. It is life and life goes on, goes by, walks beyond the window. There are leaves beyond the window and they are also life and not death. There is no death around you, overhead, in underground caves and passages. Where is death? In a closet? Is it a skeleton in the closet?

CHAPTER 12

As I have already pointed out, there are two characters who remind me of Kostya. One of them is Captain Tushin, the other Platon Karatayev. He is also a teacher, a director of conscience; and yet he is unaware of that. He teaches how to live by merely living his life. But sometimes he does say something that sounds like a doctrine, for instance:

‘Seen a lot o’ trouble in your time, sir, “ave you?” said the little man suddenly. And there was so much concern and such simplicity in the sing-song voice that Pierre couldn’t get an answer out through the trembling of his jaw and his rising tears. Barely a second later, leaving no time for Pierre to start looking embarrassed, the little man went on in the same pleasant tones:

‘There you are, sweetie, don’t you worry,’ he said, in the gently soothing sing-song voice of an old Russian peasant woman. ‘Don’t you worry, old pal. Trouble’s short, life’s long! Oh yes, me dear. And we’re gettin’ on fine, thank God. No nastiness ‘ere. They’m all men same as you an’ me, bad and good among ‘em,’ he said. He was still speaking as he got nimbly to his knees and then to his feet, and walked off somewhere, coughing to clear his throat.’

Karatayev is an old Russian peasant woman. Yang becomes yin; opposites are reconciled once again. Platon walks and talks; everything comes naturally to him. And if something does not come, he does not mind. He knows something has not come and he does not take the trouble to find out *what* he has missed. Actually he cannot ever miss anything because he does not expect this or that. A loaf of bread, a jug of milk. And if someone snatches the loaf from his hands, he smiles or goes away, leaving the jug of milk behind. He feels that destiny is loath to let him drink and eat. Well, he will eat some leaves on his way to the grave. What does it matter what you eat? If you can go without food, you go without food. Anyway, you are going somewhere and that is what really counts. And if you are rooted to the spot, then you stay where you are. What does it matter where you stay or kneel down? Is it an altar in front of you or just a haystack? Never mind: a haystack is also an altar, a messenger of God. Is there any needle in the haystack? There is one needle in it, but you don’t look for it. You don’t need a needle; you can live and die without it. What do you need to mend? A hole in your shirt? Why? Because this hole makes you look untidy? Well, from now on you will look untidy. Anyway, you always leave your clothes in an untidy heap on the bedroom floor or in the fields. Where are you now? In the fields, in the Elysian fields? Perhaps you are just in a ravine or in a ditch. You come from Beckett’s novels so you sleep in

ditches and a duchess often gives you a coin. You thank her and spend this coin on a loaf of bread. But again someone snatches this bread from your hands and you return to the ditch. There is no milk this time; you don't mind. You don't mind freezing to death because death is another life. And another life is another death. You go in circles and circles go around you. You are the sun and they are your celestial companions. Anyway, they are your companions in misfortune or fortune. You don't think they differ radically, significantly. Apparently you must consider every blade of grass as an aspect of the whole. And your shoulder blades are two aspects of the same whole. There is no other whole and you smile with satisfaction. It is easier to deal with one thing than with a variety of phenomena. So you deal with the thing and the thing deals with you: the thing reciprocates, as it were. Is that what they call love? You call it love and you think that everybody should call it love because there is no other solution. Either you love or you do not. But the absence of love is no solution. This absence is the void and the void does not exist. You do exist so you love and everybody loves you in return.

'You've had a bad time in here then?' asked Pierre.

'Not too good, me old darlin'. My name's Platon, Platon Karatayev,' he added, obviously wanting to smooth the path for Pierre to talk to him. 'The boys used to call me their little mate. Bound to get you down a bit, isn't it, matey? Moscow – mother of all cities. Sigh like that's bound to get you down a bit. But you know what they says: "A worm be in the cabbage, but 'e dies before 'e's done,"' he added quickly.

'What was that? What did you say?' asked Pierre.

'You what?' said Karatayev. 'What I says is this: we're at large but God's in charge,' he said, quite sure he was repeating what he had just said.

Karatayev forgets what he says because words are interchangeable; so are thoughts. One thought comes; so does another. Sometimes they meet, sometimes they do not. If these thoughts do not belong to the same idea, they may contradict each other. But in Karatayev's world there are no contradictions because all thoughts and ideas are brothers. They constantly embrace and kiss each other. It is easier to kiss an opposite than to fight it. You spend a lot of energy on fighting and the result is a sort of chaos. It is difficult to live in the midst of it; it is much easier to live in the midst of harmony or even on its border. Harmony is wonderful everywhere. All you have to do is swim in it as if it was the sea. It is the sea in which you swim. There is a sky overhead and yet another sky. How many skies are there? Up there, down there? The sky is everywhere; so is the sea.

'Fate picks you out. And 'ere we be, always passing judgement – that's not right, doesn't suit us. Our 'appiness, me dear, be like water in a drag-net. Swells out lovely when you pulls; take it out and it's empty. Yes, that's the way things be.'

Often he would come out with something that flatly contradicted what he had said before, yet both sayings were true.

Karatayev is beyond good and evil. He is a disciple of Spinoza and the Buddha is not far either. Nothing is far because everything is the sea in which you swim or the sky where you fly. Do you fly? Do you swim? Are you

motionless? Your motions are imperceptible so many think you don't move. No point in saying to you, 'Don't move.' You don't move; yet you do move, going somewhere, flying, swimming, riding a horse. Is it a flying horse? Of course. And history goes by, staring at you. 'What are you staring at?' you ask this history or another history. 'Haven't you ever seen a man? Do you need another man? Here I am. You can take me, if you wish. You can leave me where I am. I don't mind being left alone, in a corner, on a carpet, in a ditch, in a dish. You can put me on the table and my brothers will eat me. Why not? I don't mind. People have to eat because their survival depends on it. And if they have nothing to eat, they can eat my body. My body has been eaten already, if only in part. And my soul is eternal. No one can eat my soul. Even God can't eat it. I'd be happy if God could eat my soul. I wish to be inside God. I am inside Him. I've always been inside Him. God is the sea and the wind, the rain and the sun. Can you see seals on the rocks, basking in the sun? I am one of these seals. I am all of them. I am also basking in the sun. And the sun is inside me. No need to climb on the rocks, to lie on a beach. The sun is everywhere. So are the moon and the lake in which the moon floats calmly.'

Platon Karatajev never learnt anything by heart except his prayers. When he spoke, he would always launch forth without any idea of how he was going to finish what he was saying.

Sometimes Pierre was particularly impressed by what he had said and asked him to repeat it, but Platon could never remember what he had said even a minute before, just as he could never run through the words of his favourite song for Pierre's benefit. How did it go? 'My own dear mother...', 'my little birch-tree...', 'my sickening heart...' – a few words, but no meaning. It was beyond him. He simply couldn't understand the meaning of any words out of context. Every word and every action of his was the outward manifestation of the unfathomable process of ongoing activity that made up his life. But that life, as he saw it, had no meaning out of its own broader context. Its only meaning was as one small part of a greater whole that he was conscious of at all times. Words and actions flowed from him as smoothly, inevitably and spontaneously as fragrance from a flower. He couldn't see any value or meaning in an action or word with no context.

If you swim in the sea, you are in the context of the sea, within the Kingdom of the Sea. And every fish is your brother, your mother, your sister. And your father is Poseidon or Neptune or just a ship going somewhere. Where do ships go? To the moon, to the nearest harbour. And the harbour does not go anywhere except when it goes and meets a ship, a boat, a liner. The harbour is hospitable and it feels lonely without ships and men and women and children and dogs. And even birds are not out of the context, out of the compass that points to everything.

It is just an image because you are not involved in it. You are not out of the context, but you sit under a tree or lie in a bed. The tree is part of the whole; so is the bed. So are you, of course. You are also an image, nothing else. What is wrong with images? Do you mind being one, or two, or three? You are an image and somebody looks at you. Who is it? Why do you care about the identity of this person or thing? You no longer care about your name because your name is an Image. The Image looks at you, leaves you to your own devices. Another image comes and goes, looking at you. There are some looks, some glances, some comings and goings. There are trees, beds and stars. There are lakes and fishes and flashes of light. There are black spots that become white in the course of time. What is the course of time? The ship holds its course; so does time. That is all we know about time and its course. Why bother about the rest?

While the marshal had been driving past the prisoners had been hustled together in a bunch, and Pierre had caught sight of Karatayev for the first time that morning. He was sitting wrapped up in his little greatcoat, leaning back against a birch-tree. His face still wore the same look of joyous emotion as yesterday, when he had been telling the story of the merchant and his innocent suffering, but now it had another expression too, a look of quiet solemnity.

Karatayev was looking across at Pierre, and his kindly, round eyes, brimming with tears, held an unmistakable appeal, as if he had something to say to him. But Pierre feared for his own skin. He pretended he hadn't seen that look and hurried away.

When the prisoners set off again Pierre looked back. Karatayev was still sitting there under the birch-tree at the side of the road, and there were two Frenchmen standing over him, talking to each other. Pierre didn't look round again. He limped on up the hill.

A shot rang out from behind, back where Karatayev had been sitting. Pierre heard the shot distinctly, but the moment he heard it he suddenly remembered he hadn't finished calculating how many stages were left to Smolensk, the problem he had been working on before the marshal rode past. He started counting again.

There are only images and it is pointless to say: 'How can you be so indifferent to what is going on!' What is going on? You are going by and nothing is really on except another image, a mountain of images. But in spite of your indifference, sometimes you call for help. You don't know why you do it. It is usually done automatically because some instincts survive in your body. You look intensely at an image and this image becomes a man or a woman or a dog. This dog is sitting by your side. 'Back where Karatayev was sitting the dog started howling. "Silly creature! What's she got to howl about?"' thought Pierre.' Indeed what is there to howl about? An image is under a tree. There are other images under the same birch-tree. Doesn't the dog see these images? Does she howl about them too? About the grass, about the roots? Yet the dog howls and Pierre thinks about the dog and recalls Karatayev.

'Karatayev!' The memory flashed into Pierre's mind. And suddenly Pierre had a vision, like reality itself, of someone long forgotten, a gentle old teacher who had taught him geography in Switzerland. 'Wait a minute,' said the little old man. And he showed Pierre a globe. This globe was a living thing, a shimmering ball with no fixed dimensions. The entire surface of the ball consisted of drops closely compressed. And the drops were in constant movement and flux, sometimes dissolving from many into one, sometimes breaking down from one into many. Each drop was trying to spread out and take up as much space as possible, but all the others, wanting to do the same, squeezed it back, absorbing it or merging into it.

Spinoza says something along the same lines. 'Each thing, in so far as it is in itself, endeavours to persevere in its being.' Each drop tries to spread out, to live, to expand, to feed upon time and space as long as its destiny allows it to do that. But this drop is in the midst of other drops and also inside them, for they absorb it, merge into it.

'How could I have not known that before? God is in the middle, and each drop tries to expand and reflect Him on the largest possible scale. And it grows, gets absorbed and compressed, disappears from the surface, sinks down into the depths and bubbles up again. That's what has happened to him, Karatayev: he has been absorbed and he's disappeared.'

God is in the middle, on the right, on the left, up there, down there. God is on the southern fringe of the city and in the royal palace. God is a word and *War and Peace*.

CHAPTER 13

Pour the powder into the solution and stir it gently until the powder has dissolved. Drop two tablets into a glass of water and leave them to dissolve. We have to keep stirring until all the cubes of jelly have dissolved. That is what life is about.

After all the pain he endured Prince Andrey now felt blissfully at peace; he had not felt like this for a very long time. The nicest and happiest moments of his life, especially his earliest childhood, when he had been undressed and put to bed, and his nurse had sung lullabies over him, and he had burrowed down under the pillows feeling happy just to be alive, floated through his imagination, and instead of seeming like past events they seemed like the here and now.

Life is a long or short remembrance. The images you look at have been there for some time. They will be there tomorrow and the day after. These are your memories, even if you don't remember what they are related to. They seem to float on their own without any cause and consequence. Yet they come from our childhood and go beyond the present as if they knew a lot about the future. There are lullabies and funeral marches and they all sound alike as if there was only one melody in the world. And this melody is the harmony we aspire to and find at last when life becomes transparent and distant. The past events are here and now; so are the future events. They are here and now and elsewhere. If you wish to touch them, they dissolve in a glass of water. But you don't wish to touch them, do you? What for? Let them float through your room, beyond your window, under the sky. Let them float on the lake you saw last summer in Switzerland. It was too cold to swim in the lake; the water was cold and inhospitable. Now it is warm and you can swim to your heart's content.

Your desires are now tame and obedient. You say to your desires: 'Calm down. What do you need this for? Can't I live without it? Let it float somewhere and I'll look at it from afar. I don't even know whether it's a woman or a man or an object. I just see something and that's enough. I hear a wonderful piece of music. I'll listen to it as long as it lasts.'

A wise man remembers the future, for the future is both the present and the past. In my childhood I had a toy made up of rails, railway stations and trains. I still play with it whenever I go to the *Gare du Nord* et *Gare de l'Est*, whenever I take a train and look out of the window. I shall go to these stations and cities in the Hereafter.

It is easier said than done. From a distance, life looks harmonious. How to create this distance without losing life altogether? Tolstoy creates it by turning Natasha into a sloppy housewife, jealous and stupid. Instead of a charming young lady you meet a shrew under whose thumb our clumsy, endearing Pierre is doomed to

spend the rest of his life. 'Pierre was so much under the thumb that he didn't dare look at another woman let alone smile at one in conversation, didn't dare drop in at his club for a spot of dinner just to enjoy himself, didn't dare spend money on anything frivolous and didn't dare go away for long periods except on business, though his wife conceded that this included his reading and research. This was something she had no understanding of, but she did think it was very important.'

Tolstoy seems to say to us: 'You desire a young woman. You find her beautiful, adorable and you may be right. The Buddha also thought the women he saw in his father's palace were beautiful, but when he was about to leave it forever, he walked through their rooms in the dead of night and heard them snoring and producing other indecent sounds. Their mouths were open and an overpowering stench of rotting fish had already filled the air. I show you mature Natasha to demonstrate how ridiculous it is to fall in love with a woman and marry her. If you listen to me, one of your desires will die forever.'

Do you have ambitions? Tolstoy has an answer to that too. Prince Andrey is wounded by a grenade that performs an insolent dance as he watches it, paralysed by his love for nature, for the air he breathes, for space and time. Without moving an inch or firing a shot, his regiment has lost a lot of men and Prince Andrey paces 'the meadow next to the field of oats from one boundary-ditch to the next with his hands behind his back and his eyes on the ground'. Is that what you call glory, fame and recognition? You die for nothing and even the woman you loved could not resist embellishing the story of her life with an elopement that finally did not take place. If you listen to Tolstoy, you will never have ambitions of any kind.

You are a teenager and you dream of fighting for your country, a sabre in your hand. You make a daring raid on the enemy. Your horse flies towards their army and your sabre swishes through the air. Your enemies' heads fall on the grass and you cover yourself with glory. The Tsar is bathing in the reflected glory of his victorious military forces. That was Petya Rostov's dream. 'Petya was galloping through the courtyard. Instead of holding on to the reins he was cleaving the air with weird and wonderful movements of his arms and slithering sideways out of his saddle. His horse stepped on the ashes of a camp-fire still smouldering in the early-morning light and reared back. Petya fell heavily to the wet ground. The Cossacks could see his arms and legs twitching, but his head didn't move. A bullet had gone right through his head.'

You bought a house. When you moved in, the house had not been decorated for twenty years, and it showed. But you went to Paris and brought back a few pieces of furniture. You went to Iran and brought back a few carpets. You even decorated the spare room in anticipation of your friends' visit. Your friends did not come; your enemies did. 'The servants gathered round Natasha, reluctant to believe the curious instructions she was giving out, until the count himself appeared and on behalf of his wife confirmed that all the carts were to be made available for the wounded and the boxes put into storage. Once they understood this, the servants set to with a new will and much enthusiasm.'

Another coincidence. Prince Andrey lies on one of his deathbeds and hears 'Oh! Oo-ooh!' A man is sobbing like a woman; once again yang becomes yin. Prince Andrey recognises Anatole Kuragin whose 'trembling, swollen lips could not get a hold on the rim of the glass filled with water. They show him his amputated leg and he whines like a woman: 'Oh! Oo-ooh!'

He knew this wreck of a man who was moaning so pathetically, the poor devil who had just had his leg off: it was Anatole Kuragin. It was Anatole who was being propped up and encouraged to have a drink of

water [...] Anatole took a deep breath, gagging and sobbing. 'Yes, it's him. Yes, and that man is somehow connected with me, closely and painfully connected,' thought Prince Andrey, with no clear grasp of what he was looking at. 'What kind of contact is there between that man and my childhood, my life?' he wondered, and could find no answer. And suddenly another unexpected memory from that childhood world of innocence and love flashed through his mind. He remembered Natasha as he had seen her for the first time at the ball in 1810, with her slender neck and slender arms, and her startled, happy face, so eager for ecstatic pleasure, and in his heart he felt a pang of love and tenderness stronger and deeper than ever before. Now he recalled the point of contact between him and this man who was peering vaguely across at him through tears welling up in his swollen eyes. Everything came back to him, and his heart filled with a blissful surge of passionate pity and love for this man.

So Prince Andrey forgives everybody and falls in love with his enemies who have no strength left to slap the cheek he turns to them. He turns his head this way and that, exposing his cheeks to their cruelty, but they are no longer cruel: some of them lost their legs, others their hands. How can you hurt a man if you have neither arms nor legs? You can use your body and spit in his face. But if your legs and arms are off, you calm down, swoon and when you come round, the man you wanted to punch on the nose is no longer there.

Andrey sheds tears because he loves Natasha and the whole world; but he will have no opportunity to express his love except in the presence of Natasha who, presumably, comes to him in a dream, not in reality. She comes and he says to her:

'Pierre talked to me about God and love. Now I understand what he meant.'

'Yes, you must love me stronger than ever. I ask your forgiveness.'

'What could I forgive?'

'Don't you know I wished to elope with Kuragin?'

'Yes, I heard about it.'

'Don't you know I said he was much better than you? At least I loved him much more.'

'Did you?'

'Of course I did. Otherwise I wouldn't have agreed to follow him to the end of the world.'

'I am now at the end of the world and you are with me. So you've followed me to the end of the world.'

'I haven't. It's just a coincidence. I was in love with Kuragin. I forgot and betrayed you. Where's your cheek?'

'Do you want to beat me up?'

'Now I *could* beat you up. Even a child could do that – you're a dying man and can offer no resistance.'

'Why should you beat me up?'

'Because I'm a nightmare.'

'Are you?'

'I've always been your nightmare. Sometimes nightmares look like sweet dreams.'

'They do, they do.'

'I would die if I were you.'

'I will, I will.'

It is not worth the trouble forgiving everybody, falling in love with enemies.

'Pitty-pitty-pitty-pitty, itty-itty, pitty-pitty, pity, pity, what a pity, ET, ET, I'm an extraterrestrial creature, I'm about to become one, I'm dying.' That is what Prince Andrey hears on his last deathbed – his thoughts and a fly. He cannot swat the fly with a rolled-up newspaper: there are no newspapers within his reach and anyway his arms are almost paralysed. Horses swish their tails to get rid of the flies hovering around them. Prince Andrey envy horses, dogs and other animals who deal successfully with flies. And pity, *their* pity. *'Pitty-pitty-pitty-pitty, putty-putty-putty-putty. I'm putty in her hands. How nice being putty in someone's hands – in God's hands, for instance.'* *War and Peace* may drive you crazy.

*Because there is nothing as difficult as patient acceptance,
You must not allow an opportunity for indignation to arise.
The Buddha has proclaimed that, by overcoming indignation, you will attain
A state in which you will not return to a previous existence.*

Prince Andrey's indignation arose as he heard about Natasha's betrayal. He wished to challenge Anatole to a duel, but he could not find him: Russia is a big country. And Anatole might have been gone on a drinking or shopping spree to Paris. So the duel did not take place; the war did. Thanks to the fatal wound, Prince Andrey overcame his indignation and was prepared to kiss Anatole on the cheek. But he was unable to reach Anatole's bed; and Anatole could no longer walk.

Prince Andrey attained a state in which he would not return to the previous existence. But he *yearned* to return to the life in which he had met Natasha and fallen in love with her. At that point the doctrine of eternal recurrence suited him far better than the Buddhist precept and bonus. What to do? To grow indignant again? To challenge Anatole to duel? Prince Andrey was dying. He could neither slap Anatole's cheek nor kill him outright, using either his sword or any revolver. All he could do was put a curse on Anatole and Natasha whose white face continued to hover about him.

*Gambling, seeking out crowds, laziness,
Relying on evil friends, intoxicating drinks,
And going out at night are evil ways of living.
Reject these six which lessen your fame.*

In his youth Pierre was lazy and relied on evil friends with whom he went out at night. They enjoyed themselves to the utmost, drinking a lot of rum and catching bears. At least they had a lot of fun – there is no denying it. 'What's our life?' asks Hermann in Tchaikovsky's *Pique Dame*. And he answers: 'Gambling.' Gambling, drinking, riding bears and horses, chasing beautiful women. Now Pierre is under Natasha's thumb; his research, if any, leads him nowhere and he reads mostly trash with a view to killing time. But any reading is better than Natasha's jibes and jokes. With the passing of the years he might become a Decembrist. Once again he will be the laughing stock of high and low societies.

*Among all possessions, contentment has been described
By the Buddha as the best and most excellent.*

*Always be contented. If you know contentment,
Even if you have no possessions, it is a real treasure.*

Nikolay Rostov was happy at last. It was hard work on the farm but satisfying. 'I'm fairly content with my life,' he would say to himself, stroking his own cheeks. 'My wife's rich and she loves me. Of course I'll never take money from her, but the sense of security counts. I know I won't starve to death, whatever happens to my estate and serfs.'

Pierre is still under his wife's thumb and his so-called research goes through a period of stagnation. What kind of research could he conduct? Scientific research, economic research?

Pierre was compensated by having the complete run of the house and could do what he wanted with himself and all the family. In their home Natasha was happy to be a slave to her husband, and everybody in the house had to tiptoe about when the master was busy reading or writing in his study. Pierre had only to say the word and his slightest wish was fulfilled. He had only to say he wanted something and Natasha would jump to her feet and run off and get it.

No one will ever say about Pierre Bezukhov: 'His researches in the field of disease prevention produced unexpected results.' And he will never say to anyone: 'It took months of painstaking research to write the book.' He writes no books, but he talks a lot – not about his research, though. 'Well, everything's going downhill. Thieving in the law-courts. Brutality, round-the-clock drill and forced labour in the army. People are being tortured, and ideas are being suppressed. Anything youthful and honourable has had it! Everybody knows it can't go on like this. The strain is too great. Something's got to give.'

At the beginning of the 20th century, a man resolved to destroy Russia; his name was Parvus. When the First World War broke out, he got in touch with the German minister of foreign affairs. 'I'll wipe Russia off the map,' he said. 'Soon you'll no longer need to keep one of your armies on the Eastern front.' The minister was delighted to hear this piece of news and money flowed into the banks where Russian revolutionists had their accounts. Two Russian newspapers – they were under Parvus' thumb – published *their* news: 'It's all right pushing education and charitable work. Of course it is. It's all very well-intentioned, but as things stand we need more than that. We need a revolution.' The revolution came and Russia was destroyed. Parvus left for Germany where he died, forgotten by both the Germans and Russian revolutionists.

But Pierre wishes neither to destroy Russia nor even to overthrow the government. 'We're not hostile to the government, we're a society of real conservatives. A society of *gentlemen*, in the fullest sense of the word.' Pierre has never met Ulianov, alias Lenin; and he knows nothing about the Russian Revolution. The laughing stock. Parvus preferred the stock exchange.

My former mistress is also fairly content with her life. 'I have my breakfast in bed. Kostya brings me coffee, croissants and fruit.'

'So you're happy, are you?'

'Loving care. What else do we need? There are croissants in Russia now.'

'That's enough,' I said.

'What do we need?' she asked.

‘Tolstoy thinks we just need the space where we could be buried.’

‘And breakfast,’ she said.

‘And also Kostya’s soup,’ I said.

‘Of course. What a pity you can’t taste it. Do you want to speak to him? He might allow you to come to our place, if you’re kind with him. He’s very kind.’

‘I know.’

‘But you don’t know his soup. And you don’t know his *bœuf* Stroganoff.’

‘I can manage without them.’

‘Don’t you want to enjoy life to the utmost? By the way, could you lend me 5,000 euros?’

‘What about Kostya’s bank account?’

‘When the bank refused to lend us any more money we realised we’d reached the end of the road.’

‘But I lent you some money three or four months ago.’

‘It was most generous of you to lend me the money, but I’m a hedonist, as you know. I’d hate to live from hand to mouth.’

A wife who, like an executioner, is by nature linked with an enemy;

Who, like a queen, annoys her husband;

Who, like a thief, takes even small things –

Reject these three varieties of wife!

Nagarjuna, *A Letter to a Friend*

CHAPTER 14

Napoleon regards any war as a game that should be played in accordance with a set of rules. There are battles in it because this is one of the golden rules to which every self-respecting general should pay tribute. I don’t know if Kutuzov respected himself or not; he probably never asked himself this question. He was a practical man and the only rule he paid attention to when fighting a war was the final victory and the salvation of his country. Apparently he was loath to fight *any* battle with Napoleon, thinking it was unnecessary: the Russian territory and winter were the best army he could count upon. Why expose your own army to danger if nature and space are on your side?

Actually the Russian army could have run away all the time – as far as Siberia and the Pacific Ocean; Napoleon would not have pursued it anyway. What is more, no army was needed to repulse the enemy: the Russians should have let Napoleon go through Russia and take as many cities as he wished. Though a scorched earth policy might have been useful under the circumstances, I think the Russians overdid it, burning almost everything to deprive the enemy not only of food and forage but also of the grass and trees. Anyway, French soldiers had no time to lie on the grass, which would have permitted them to have lunch and thus prefigure Manet’s renowned painting.

Recently I had a conversation on the subject with another former mistress of mine. ‘Why do you think the Russians set fire to Moscow?’ I asked.

‘Because the Russians are bad losers,’ she said. ‘My aunt is quite a hotshot at chess. She beats almost everybody, with the exception of world champions. But if she happens to lose a game, she smashes the

chessboard to smithereens and sends the pieces flying in all directions. Actually she never finishes a game she's bound to lose. Or rather she does finish it by smashing the chessboard.'

'Tolstoy speaks about negligence and cigarettes butts,' I said. 'If I remember rightly, he thinks that no one set fire to Moscow. It was merely a case of spontaneous combustion.'

'The college in which I studied burnt down because of a cigarette butt,' she said. 'A pair of curtains caught fire. The flames grew larger as the fire spread through the building. I could see them from where I'm standing now. Where are they now, I wonder?' she added wistfully.

'What? The flames? Cocteau must have snatched them away.'

'He spoke about fire, not flames,' she said. 'A fiery temperament, a fiery speech.'

'When the enemy's in sight, the Russians burn whatever they can lay their hands on,' I said. 'They're not very hospitable, are they?'

'Why do you say "they"? Do you think you've become French?'

'I wouldn't have burnt Moscow in 1812. The French didn't burn Paris when Hitler conquered it.'

'And the Kremlin would have exploded if Hitler had set his foot in our capital.'

'You're so romantic. No French citizen would say about Paris: "Our capital." You must have recalled this song: "Our dear capital, our dear Moscow."'

'Of course I did. Our dear capital.'

Scorched earth is one of the policies that even Napoleon could not disregard, although he might have thought the procedure was rather barbarian and denoted the enemy's incapacity to win the war on battlefields and not by depriving the enemy of food and forage. For the Russians – at least in 1812 – this was the golden rule to which they adhered wholeheartedly, depriving Napoleon's army not only of food and forage, but also of houses and even of nature, of Arcadian delights. Such a system makes sense in the countryside where no precious monuments remind us of our glorious past and ensure our deep-rooted future. With a few exceptions, the Russian countryside exhibits only huts and trees among which there are a few imposing mansions where the Bolkonskys and the Bezukhovs used to live and talk to the members of their families.

Our white-stoned capital was a huge monument and we did not take care of it, thinking more about our enemies than about ourselves – our past, our future. Of course we shouldn't have greeted Napoleon with open arms, but a deserted city is a good answer to any invasion. You take whatever you can and leave for the country as if you were on a summer holiday. Why should you burn the city down? Don't you want to come back and settle again in your own house, amidst your own furniture? Instead you see a few pillars and a divan standing in the middle of the courtyard. You sit down and look around, doing your best to recognise the city you left a few months before. You don't recognise anything; you don't recognise yourself. You might as well have burnt yourself: your skin, your bowels, your heart. The enemy will not get your intestines, your Russian heart and lungs, but no one needs them except yourself and your soul that cannot live without your body. Actually the soul can live only in the body or in heaven. And you don't say to yourself: 'It's high time my soul went to heaven.' No, you want to persevere in your being, keeping your soul inside your body. Of course your soul may leave your body during your sleep, but you enjoin it to return as soon as you wake up, open your eyes and begin to recognise your surroundings.

The French couldn't have stayed in Moscow forever, all the more so since no one brought them the key of the city. Why should you stay in the city without its key in your possession? Without this proverbial key you will

never *open* the city; it is bound to remain closed, inaccessible, deserted, almost dead. Why should you live in a dead city? To the French, Moscow would have been a dead city, even if the Russians had not burnt it. For a while they would have walked along its streets and eaten *bœuf* Stroganoff. For a month on end, or even two.

Kutuzov said, 'The French will eat horse meat.' Why not *bœuf* Stroganoff? What does it matter what the French eat in Moscow! They ought to leave the city after a while – that is what matters in the final analysis. They will not spend the winter in Moscow, for the shops where they could buy fur coats were closed upon their arrival in the city. And there is not enough fire in the fireplaces.

Contrary to what Napoleon thought, Kutuzov did follow *some* rules or rather the set of rules laid down in Sung Tzu's renowned tract. Among other things, he says that if a general knows how to conduct a military campaign, he destroys the enemy without firing shots and drawing swords. He does not even have to get close to the invaders, for his main goal is to preserve his own army. He knows that he should not attack and he does not, for his task is to protect all those who might suffer from the invaders if he loses two or three battles. Kutuzov and the soldiers understood each other and that was far more important than bullets and cannonballs.

To win a war, you should become invincible. If you lose a battle, you must admit that you are vulnerable. Kutuzov was loath to admit the inferiority of his military talent and did his best to avoid Napoleon whose superiority in this domain was beyond reasonable doubt. But Kutuzov knew how to handle space and time, whereas Napoleon was imprisoned within his own brain where a gigantic computer was always at work. He could not get out of himself and take a walk in space and time, getting further and further from his own ideas, from his own self. Kutuzov was not himself when he decided not to fight for Moscow. At that point he was as large as Russia. He knew he could go elsewhere: to Siberia, to the steppes, to the Pacific, to the Caucasus. In a way he got as far as the Caucasus and Napoleon had no alternative but to leave Russia. His supply lines were too long already. He could not afford to go to the Caucasus; even Tula was out of his reach. He wouldn't have paid a visit to Tolstoy, had he got a letter from Yasnaya Polyana.

The general who knows how to defend his army and country will go as far as Hell to hide his soldiers. Kutuzov had a lot of patience and he won because what counted for him was victory, not strategy. He forgot about beauty as he waited for the French to eat horse meat. There was no forage in the suburbs of Moscow; horses were to die of starvation. To eat such horses was beyond the officers' dignity. So the French army left Moscow for Paris.

THE INTERIOR MONOLOGUE OF A DYING FRENCH OFFICER

Why do we have to go back? I'd stay in Moscow if I was Napoleon. I'm not, so I have to go back to Paris. I adore Paris, but it's more important to win than to enjoy life. How could I enjoy life after a defeat? My horse is half-dead. What would I do without my horse? I don't even have a new pair of boots. The Russian winter is awful. We tend to get cold winters and warm, dry summers in my part of the country. So I'm used to cold winters. But this winter is too cold and I'm not likely to get used to it. Why should I? Soon I'll be in Paris and then at home. I knew that sooner or later I'd have to give my horse to the wounded. Even Napoleon is walking somewhere. Why did we cross the Russian border? What did he have in mind? England? Is that how he intended to conquer England? By walking in the Russian snow? I wish I had a Russian fur coat. What a pity I couldn't buy one in Moscow. Why did they close all the shops? Don't they live in the world of commerce and industry? They won't last long in the world of commerce if they act like that. They also closed their restaurants and I'm

rather fond of Russian food. Their beautiful women spent the autumn in the country. Why didn't they take advantage of our stay in Moscow? These barbarians are really bizarre. Why did they burn their city? They don't care about beauty. The Italians built a beautiful city for them and they burnt it. Why didn't we pursue their army? Because it was too far away, in Siberia, near the Black Sea? I wish I could have a swim in the Black Sea this afternoon. It's not too cold there, is it? It's cold everywhere, as far as the eye can see. But I don't see the Black Sea, do I? I no longer know what I see and what I don't. Do I hear anything? Of course I do. I hear moans and groans. They all moan with pain before losing consciousness. I wonder when I'll begin to moan. Have I already lost consciousness? No, I haven't moaned yet. And what about groans? The Cossacks must have wounded some of our soldiers. Am I wounded? I was wounded two years ago. Should I groan because of this wound? Am I going to die? Why? I don't deserve it. I'm so young and handsome. Everybody likes me. My fellow officers love me. So do my soldiers. My battalion adores me and respects my decisions. Why should I die? What would they do without me? They would die too – there's nothing else to do. What else can we do in these steppes, in this snow? Throw snowballs? We haven't a snowball's chance in hell of getting back home safely. I remember my home, my wound, my wife. These memories will disappear if I die. My home will disappear forever. So will my wife. And what about my wound? The wound will remain. My wound will accompany me through Paradise, Hell and Purgatory. It's high time I gave a thought to God. What do I think about Him? I shouldn't *think* about Him. I should *believe* in Him. But doesn't my faith depend on my thoughts? Or do I have to call on my feelings? I'd better call on all my strength if I wish to survive. I don't want to die. I love the snow, the cold, my own feet, my old boots. Why should I give up hope? Where's my hope? In the snow? In the sky? I don't need it after all. I can live without hope, but I can't live without life. Please give me my life back. Why did you take it? I didn't allow you to take it. I didn't give it to you as a present. Why should I give you presents? Who are you? You're not God, are you? I don't use my life any more, but I'm very reluctant to dispose of it. Anyway, I won't give it to you. Who are you? A snowman? An abominable snowman? A cold woman? Leave me alone. I'll walk until I die in the snow, on the body of the cold woman. No, I'll walk on and on. How many stages are left to Smolensk? Let me count. One, two, three, four, five. What stages am I counting? I should count stages and pages. How many pages have I written? Where's my diary? Where's my death? I should look down at my feet and count my steps. As long as I count them I'll move forward, towards Smolensk. Towards death, towards death. Where does this dog come from? Scampering merrily at the side of the road. *Joie de vivre*. I wish I was a dog. I have a cat at home. I wouldn't hit it off with my cat. The crows perch on carrion. The dog barks at them. He barks at me. Is there a crow on my head? On the crown of my head, of my hat? Do I have one? I must have lost it. *Joie de vivre, joie de mourir*. I'm a happy camper.

CHAPTER 15

Ancient historians all employed the same technique for catching the apparently uncatchable – describing the life of a people. They would describe the activities of individual rulers and accept these activities as an expression of the activity of an entire people.

Questions arose. How did these individuals compel whole nations to act in accordance with their will? And what was it that directed the actual will of these individuals? The answer to the first question was that the will of a Deity subjected a people to the will of one chosen person; and the answer to the second question was that the same Deity directed the will of the chosen person to a predetermined end.

How does a Deity communicate His or Her wishes to mere mortals? Not personally, needless to say: today's mortals are not prophets, even if they'd like to think of themselves as such. (The same goes for the 19th century.) So the Deity sends an angel who signals the Deity's intention to conquer such and such country. The hero to whom the angel speaks either by means of gestures or verbal commands, takes heed of the Deity's wishes and his army goes in the direction shown by the angel. Let us suppose that the hero in question is Napoleon and that his army must invade and conquer Russia. But the Deity does not forget that Napoleon's enemy should be informed of what is going to happen. Another angel flies to Petersburg and talks to Alexander I who, alarmed and excited, sends for his generals and talks to them about the forthcoming war.

What did the angel say to Napoleon? 'If you invade Russia now, you'll conquer Moscow.' Napoleon thinks that it is enough to enter Moscow and wait for the keys to Russia: Moscow and Russia are synonymous in Napoleon's mind. So Napoleon does not ask the angel if the Deity is determined to let him conquer the whole of Russia. Alexander, on the other hand, asks a few questions as he learns about Napoleon's incursion into his country. He gets only one answer: 'Russia will be saved.' So he thinks that the French army will be destroyed on its way to Moscow. Upon hearing about his army's retreat, however, he goes red in the face and gives orders to fight and stop Napoleon before it is too late. But Kutuzov continues to move towards Moscow and not in the direction of Paris where Alexander would like to spend a few days as a victor, giving balls and proposing toasts to Saint Russia.

So he sends a letter to Kutuzov, asking him to give a battle and push the enemy back – away from Moscow and the rest of his Empire. Kutuzov submits himself to Alexander's wish and fights a battle at Borodino. The battle is neither lost nor won, but the Russian army has been decimated and Kutuzov orders yet another retreat. Napoleon enters Moscow and awaits the keys that are supposed to open the gates of Paradise. Didn't the angel promise him the victory over the enemy? But the angel promised nothing of the sort and Napoleon paces up and down his numerous rooms, a grimace of disgust distorting his features. He says to the angel: 'You swore I'd conquer Moscow. I've done that.'

'I've done that,' says the angel.

'All right, all right,' says Napoleon.

'The Deity has done that,' says the angel.

'All right. What should I do with this victory? Could you give me a quick explanation of how to take advantage of it?'

'You can do with it whatever you like.'

'What about you and the Deity?'

'Mission accomplished,' the angel rounds off.

Napoleon stands there in the corner of the room, a dark, brooding presence.

As for Alexander I, he keeps wondering why the angel told him Russia would be saved in the long run. Did he (or she) add 'in the long run'? Alexander does not remember the exact wording of God's message, but he knows for sure that Kutuzov will get the Russian army off the hook, otherwise the angel wouldn't have come to announce the final victory in the Emperor's presence. And what about Kutuzov's name? Did the angel utter it? Should Alexander find another commander in chief? Himself, for instance? He does not have to search for himself until doomsday. According to some philosophers, it is hard to find oneself, to get hold of one's mind and

heart, let alone one's soul. 'But the matter stood differently in those days of gloom and despair,' writes a famous historian. 'Alexander had no need to look for his soul. What he did have to decide concerned his place in the Russian army. Was he to guide it through the labyrinth of the war?'

Kutuzov heard no voices and saw no angels as he pondered his next move in the game of war. Is any war really a game?

...Pierre was stalking around his room, stopping now and then at the corners to make menacing gestures at the wall, as though stabbing some invisible enemy with a sword, then he would glower over his spectacles and stride up and down again, mumbling, shrugging and gesticulating.

'England is done for!' he announced, scowling and pointing as if there was someone there. 'Mr Pitt has betrayed the nation and the rights of man, and is therefore condemned to...' He never quite managed to pronounce sentence on Pitt – at that moment he was Napoleon, in whose heroic person he had survived a perilous crossing of the Channel and conquered London...

Sometimes Kutuzov got the feeling he was *not* waging the war against Napoleon and his army. He just watched the unfolding of a pattern in which some of his ideas had got embedded somehow, seemingly without his participation. Was *he* pulling the strings? Or did the Tsar's guardian angel intervene to destroy Napoleon's army? 'Don't let them subjugate Russia,' he murmured, kneeling in front of an altar. 'Only God can pull the strings,' he added as he rose to his feet and headed for the pillow on which a map of Russia was lying.

Tolstoy says that ancient historians' approach to history is no longer tenable in light of recent scientific discoveries. The Deity has slowly faded into the background, being replaced by supermen or heroes. Historians, keen to discard the Deity, replaced any divine intervention by heroes or 'simply men of widely differing qualities, from monarchs to journalists, who have become leaders of the masses'. This reminds me of a Russian story dating back to the Sixties when we had to queue for run-of-the-mill objects and products – even for toilet paper, in point of fact.

A man is walking down the street. Suddenly he stops and bends down to tie up his shoelaces. When he straightens up, he sees several people behind him: they think another queue is about to form. The man hates to disappoint them; besides, he is in front of the queue, which has never happened before. He remains where he is, waiting for more people to come and join the queue. The longer it is, the more important he will look and feel; and he needs to assert himself. More and more people join the queue that turns into a huge serpent. 'What are we queuing for?' ask the members of the queue. Nobody can answer this question, but people continue to queue because queuing is a thing in itself.

Then the leader says to himself: 'I'm a leader. I'm at the head of the queue. There's nothing to queue for, but we may go somewhere. There's something to queue for elsewhere. And I'll still be the first, whatever is available to us and wherever the source of our happiness is situated.' He starts walking and the people follow him because they trust his intuition and judgement: after all, he is at the head of the queue. They walk through the city and others join them because so many people cannot walk aimlessly for hour and hours.

Then the leader says to himself: 'All these people are following me closely and I shouldn't lose the initiative. Buying something is important, but history is more important than any object we can buy today or tomorrow. I've not wasted so much time for nothing, have I?' 'The leader is expected to announce officially his

candidacy for president early next week,' writes a journalist. The leader becomes the president of the country where he happens to march at the head of the longest queue. After a while, he becomes the Emperor. He has been granted the ultimate accolade – his face on a set of three postage stamps.

Tolstoy does not think that history is set into motion by the hero who wages wars and conquers England by means of an air and sea blockade. Napoleon was just a puppet – like anybody else. But Tolstoy gives no answer to the question: 'What kind of power is behind the throne?' Somebody *must* pull the strings, otherwise the puppet will remain motionless, inactive, dispensable. And Napoleon was not dispensable: no other soldier was able to replace him at the head of the state and the army. So he was no puppet; he was the Antichrist.

How to deal with the Antichrist? How to destroy him? Destroying the Antichrist is no easy matter, but destroy him we must and Tolstoy is aware of that. He would have agreed with Walter Benjamin who writes in *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*: 'The Messiah comes not only as the redeemer, he comes as the victor over the Antichrist. The only historian capable of fanning the spark of hope in the past is the one who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.' After all, Raskolnikov was one of Napoleon's successors.

Tolstoy does his best to debunk the myth that has grown up around Napoleon. In one of the drafts he speaks about the Emperor as follows: 'He kept on winning his battles, not because he was a genius (I am convinced he was very far from that) but on the contrary because he was more stupid than his enemies, could not be carried away by logical deductions and only bothered about seeing that his soldiers were well-fed, embittered, obedient and as numerous as possible.' In Offenbach's *Orpheus in Hell*, Jupiter turns into a fly as he attempts to seduce Eurydice. Napoleon might have been a fly – within the framework of an opera *buffa*. But *War and Peace* is also an opera *seria*: a fly cannot murder so many people. It can settle on Prince Andrey's nose, though.

The power behind the throne. The strings pulled by someone or something. *War and Peace* is a series of nightmares and sweet dreams. The worst nightmare can be found in Volume III, Part III. Count Rostopchin is the governor-general of Moscow. The French army is on the point of invading the city. Rostopchin is in one of his black moods today. A huge crowd of people is waiting for him in the courtyard. 'What do they want?' says Rostopchin. 'Sir, they say they are following your orders and they have come together to go and fight the French,' says the police-chief. Rostopchin needs someone to vent his fury on. He cannot vent his fury on the whole crowd: it is far too dangerous. 'These men are armed and dangerous, and shouldn't be approached,' he says to himself. So he must choose *one* person to vent his fury on. He catches sight of a young man with a long, thin neck. It would be easy to hang him. There are no gallows in the courtyard. There are a lot of gallows on the outskirts of Moscow, but the man should be dealt with very quickly. Rostopchin decides to act on the spot.

'Listen, men!' he says to the crowd. 'This swine has lost Moscow for us. He is a traitor to his Tsar and his country. He went over to Bonaparte. He is the only Russian to have disgraced a Russian name. It is because of him that we are losing Moscow. You judge him! Do what you want with him! Give him a thrashing! Let this traitor die and no longer disgrace the name of a Russian citizen! Kill him! That's an order!'

No one can hear what Rostopchin is saying, but the fury in his voice is enough 'to send a deep groan through the mob and make them surge forward'. But then they stop. They move forward and stop, again and again. The dance of the mob is terrifying. They get closer and closer to the victim, but they stop from time to time. They know they will tear him to ribbons. Why do they dally? When asked what kind of death he opted for,

Caesar replied: 'A sudden one.' A sudden one, a quick one. Caesar's death was on the slow side; so was the death of Rostopchin's scapegoat named Vereshchagin.

Which way soever he turned he met with blows, and saw their swords levelled at his face and eyes, and was encompassed like a wild beast in the toils on every side. For it had been agreed they should each of them make a thrust at him, and flesh themselves with his blood; for which reason Brutus also gave him one stab in the groin. Some say that he fought and resisted all the rest, shifting his body to avoid the blows, and calling out for help, but that when he saw Brutus's sword drawn, he covered his face with his robe and submitted, letting himself fall...

'Hit him!' the officer said to the dragoons in a voice not much more than a whisper, and one of the soldiers, his face suddenly contorted with fury, lashed Vereshchagin on the head with the flat of his sword.

Vereshchagin gave a quick gasp of surprise, and looked round in alarm, as if he couldn't understand why they had done this to him. An echoing gasp of surprise and horror ran through the crowd.

'O Lord in heaven!' came a pathetic call from one side. But Vereshchagin's instinctive gasp of surprise was followed by a heartbreaking howl of pain, and this was his undoing. The thread of human sympathy that had been holding the mob in check had been stretched to breaking point, and now it snapped. The crime was begun, it must run its full course. A plaintive cry of reproach was submerged in the menacing, furious roar of the mob. Like the legendary seventh wave that shatters a ship, one last, devastating wave surged from the back of the crowd right through to the front, swept people off their feet and engulfed everything. The dragoon who had hit Vereshchagin was gathering himself for a second blow. Vereshchagin gave a scream of terror, hid his face in his hands and dashed out into the crowd. He ran straight into the tall young man, who grabbed Vereshchagin's slender neck with both hands, and roared like a wild animal as they went down together under the feet of the stampeding, trampling mob.

Some hands lashed out and tore at Vereshchagin, others at the tall young man. And the screams coming from people getting crushed in the crowd and from some who were trying to rescue the tall young man only increased the frenzy of the mob. It took the dragoons some time to get the bleeding, half-dead factory worker out of the crowd. And all this time, however frantically the mob tried to finish off what had been started, the men who were beating and throttling Vereshchagin, intent on tearing him limb from limb, couldn't manage to kill him. The crowd pressed in on all sides, squashing them in the middle, surging back and forth like one great heaving mass, and they could neither finish him off nor leave him alone.

'Give him one with an axe, eh?...Look, he's been trampled to death...Traitor! Judas! No, he's still alive...he is, you know...He had it coming to him...Try this hatchet!...Isn't he dead yet?'

It was only when the victim had stopped struggling, and his screams had fizzled out into a drawn-out, rhythmic gurgling sound, that the mob began to step gingerly away from the bleeding corpse that lay there on the ground.

My memory fails me more often now, more often than last year. Even last week I could recall a few episodes from my life (or from books) that I have forgotten as if they were doomed to disappear anyway. I do nothing to

keep the data I have been gathering all my life because I shall lose them sooner or later and time does not count in these matters. Perhaps time does not count at all, but I have not reached this conclusion yet and I am not in a hurry to reach it. All conclusions are hasty; it is better to wait until they become slow and superfluous.

But I am not likely to forget this particular episode from *War and Peace*. For the first time I read it at the age of eleven and my life underwent a metamorphosis under the influence of this chaotic and ineluctable death. For two hours at least I could not go on with my reading. I was looking out of the window and whatever I saw took part in the lynching of Vereshchagin as if there was nothing else in the world. Still today, there is nothing else in the world.

At the age of fourteen, I read *Crime and Punishment*. Two years later, I spoke of this novel to my best Moscow friend. He asked me what I thought about Svidrigaylov. 'I don't remember him,' I said. And yet he is even more important than Raskolnikov. I have never forgotten Vereshchagin's death. And I am not likely to forget it on my deathbed: a crowd of demons will be tearing me limb from limb.

Another wave, yet another wave. A polonaise *macabre*. Corpses are strewn over the streets and squares. Hit him! Kill him! An order, another order. There are no more orders, but people continue to fall, unable to fight the laws of gravity. Sabres are at the ready; they are always at the ready. You don't need to say anything or to give orders: they are superfluous too. Shots are fired, grenades fly like birds. The Nazis drop a huge number of bombs on London. The British drop a huge number of bombs on Dresden. London, Dresden, Moscow, Guernica. Name-dropping.

Tolstoy describes a private death, but there is no such thing as private death; and yet we are entitled to speak about 'private life'. Every death is universal and the world expires whenever someone gets killed. I wonder how many ideas and memories die on this occasion. Vereshchagin is dead. And what about his murderers? 'Everybody came up to have a look at what had been done, and they all shrank back in horror, amazed and accusing.' A private death, an overall destruction.

In the Soviet film version of *War and Peace*, the battle of Borodino lasts for twenty-five minutes. At the end, during seven minutes no words are uttered with the exception of the word 'brother' repeated several times in a row. A soldier screams, 'Brothers! Brothers! Brothers!' Apart from that there are cannonballs and a goose. Pierre is crawling to safety. 'Where is safety?' he asks himself and others as he crawls across the battlefield. Some horses gallop across the field towards a cannon or a battalion or an army or Napoleon. A cannon rolls downhill. A few bodies roll behind it as if determined to catch up with it and stop it forever. The cannon comes to a standstill of its own accord; so do the bodies. Nobody attempts to put the fire out. The fire has already produced a pall of smoke visible twenty miles away.

What else did Tolstoy have to write about the war? It would have been enough to depict Vereshchagin's death. Instead, Tolstoy explains that such an event defies 'human reason and all human nature'. And Prince Andrey says on the eve of the battle of Borodino: 'People come together to murder one another, as they will do tomorrow; men get slaughtered and crippled in their tens of thousands, and then services of thanksgiving are held to celebrate the killing of vast numbers of men (they even exaggerate the numbers), and victory is proclaimed, on the basis that the more men slaughtered, the greater the achievement. How can God look down from heaven and listen to it all?'

What do we learn from this soliloquy? We know that wars are absurd and we cannot overlook the fact that thousands of soldiers and officers get slaughtered and crippled. By now we are used to Tolstoy's didactic

tone, but the episode devoted to Vereshchagin's death makes us forget it for a while. Why does Prince Andrey put this rhetorical question to Pierre: 'How can God look down from heaven and listen to it all?' Epicurus and Spinoza think that God does not meddle in our affairs, even if we suffer and die on a battlefield. Prince Andrey knows that God has no ear for cannon music: *Water Music* and *Fireworks Music* are more to His taste. So is air music, incidentally – the Aeolian harp. (I don't think He is fond of *Wellington's Victory*, op. 91.) God never looks down.

Tolstoy keeps on speaking about movements as if no one had ever been rooted to the spot. There is nothing to gaze at, so get a move on. And you are not Socrates who could remain immobile for hours and hours, tackling a moral problem. You move with the masses, nations, generals, horses and cannonballs – from west to east and from east to west. Why not from south to north and from north to south? The world is your oyster. Does anyone or anything incite you to move in any direction? Does anyone say to you, 'Go west, go east'? Someone does perhaps. Why do you obey this commander in chief or monarch? Why don't you say to the monarch, 'Your Majesty, I'd like to stay at home. I've got a huge vegetable garden and I must weed it. Besides, my wife doesn't want me to go. And I'm under her thumb, you know.'

'Absence makes the heart grow fonder,' says the monarch or the commander in chief.

'My wife loves me to distraction,' you answer. 'If her heart grows fonder, she may have a heart attack.'

'I need you,' says the monarch. 'Without you we'll never conquer Europe.'

'What do you need Europe for? Your palace is so comfortable. And your garden is even bigger than mine. Do you need another garden, another palace? Ask your cousin, Emperor of Austria, to invite you to his castle. I wonder what kind of vegetable garden *he* has got, and whether he weeds it himself. And what about his flowers? Does he take care of them? Japanese Emperors always take care of their flowers.'

'You must join the army,' says the commander in chief. The monarch gives a nod of approval.

'I'm sorry,' you say, shaking your head.

'You'll be court-martialled.'

'Do you know what Tolstoy says about you? You give orders but you're not directly involved in the action. The rank and file form the majority. We do all the stabbing and hacking and burning and pillaging. And we receive orders from you. What do *you* do? You drink champagne and we perish on battlefields. You dance and we lie wounded on the grass. Of course, we can look up at the sky and think about God and the beauty of life. Yes, we love the grass and the clouds. But we wouldn't mind drinking champagne as well. Why not drink champagne on the grass?'

'Somebody should give orders,' says the commander in chief. 'As a great admirer of Tolstoy, you must have heard about the force without which nothing can be done. If there's no force, you'll return to your village and weed your garden, taking no notice of wars and defeats. Our country would perish without this force.'

"The general does nothing but issue instructions to the army and hardly ever uses a weapon," says Tolstoy's admirer. 'Do you know how to manipulate a sabre? I challenge you to a duel.'

'I won't fight with you,' says the commander in chief.

'Coward,' says Tolstoy's admirer.

'I can't fight a duel with a common soldier,' says the commander in chief.

'All cowards say that,' says Tolstoy's admirer.

'You should join the army,' say both the commander in chief and the monarch. 'That's an order!'

‘Let me quote Tolstoy again,’ says Tolstoy’s admirer. “‘Historians have tended to study expressions of will by historical figures only in terms of the relationship between orders and events and they have jumped to the conclusion that the events were dependent on the orders. But our analysis of the events themselves and the link between historical figures and the masses has shown that historical figures and the orders they give are dependent on events. We have incontrovertible proof of this in the fact that, however many orders are given, the event will not take place if there is no other cause to produce it. But the moment an event does take place, whatever it may be, among all the expressions of will by all sorts of different people there will always be some that happen to coincide in meaning and time so that events correspond to orders given.’” Do you understand that?’

‘Obscure and confusing,’ says the monarch.

‘I’ll explain Tolstoy’s ideas to you. You think that if you give an order, an event will take place. For instance, I’ll join the army and won’t go back to my village, my garden, my wife and mother-in-law. I refuse to obey your order and the event doesn’t take place because your order and my desire don’t coincide in meaning and time. I might have joined the army three years ago, but you gave no orders and I didn’t join it.’

‘Three years ago we didn’t need you.’

‘And I don’t need you now. Do you understand that you need another cause?’

‘What cause?’

‘My wish to join the army.’

‘We couldn’t care less about your wishes. The order is issued and you must obey it.’

‘Listen to Tolstoy again: “The movement of peoples is determined not as historians have supposed, by the exercise of power, or the intellect, or both together, but by the actions of *all involved*; all the people who come together in such a way that those who participate most directly in the activity assume the least responsibility for it, and vice versa.” I assume no responsibility. Do you understand that? If you lose the war, nobody will blame my garden and wife. But I am as important as you are because Tolstoy speaks about the actions of *all involved*. *All involved*. These words are italicised. What else do you need? Should I italicise all my answers? Do you realise that Tolstoy speaks of my action as well? I *am* involved. Do you realise that?’

‘You are *not* because you refuse to join the army.’

‘Even if I go back to my village, I’ll be involved because the event will *not* take place. I’ll be involved in its absence.’

‘What about your own absence? You’ll be court-martialled.’

“‘Why do wars or revolutions happen? We don’t know. All we know is that for either of these to happen men must come together in a particular combination with everybody taking part, and we say that this is so because anything else is unimaginable, it has to be, it’s a law.’” That’s what Tolstoy says and he’s right as usual. The country seems to be heading towards revolution. Have you noticed that?’

‘No.’

‘I’ll call my friends and speak to them about our revolution. And this event will take place because it’s bound to coincide in meaning and time. I mean my words will coincide with time. In other words, my timing will be perfect because my friends will call their friends. You’re popular with the aristocracy but fail to win the support of the masses. That’s why the revolution will take place. I know why revolutions happen. I should speak to Tolstoy.’

What is the force that everybody speaks of? Does God stretch His hand out and give us a push? Does our will depend on firing squads? People wake up and go outdoors, saying, 'I feel like I've been cooped up in this flat for days.' They see somebody in the streets. Someone else opens a window and shouts, 'This man has betrayed our country.'

'We should fight for our country,' says someone else.

'Why should we fight for our country?' says someone else.

'Because it is *our* country,' says someone else.

'Who do we have to fight?' says someone else.

'Our enemy.'

'Where's our enemy?'

'Everywhere.'

'God is with us.'

On whose side is God? What does He want? Does he want us to love our enemies or destroy them?

Natasha was praying in a church. 'A deacon came out in front of the altar screen, and with his thumb sticking out he drew his long hair from under his robes, made the sign of the cross on his breast, and began the litany in loud and solemn tones.' He said among other things: 'May the hearts of Thy servants rejoice in Thy mercy. Strike down our enemies and be swift to destroy them beneath the feet of Thy faithful servants. For Thou art the defence, the succour, and the victory of those that put their trust in Thee; and to Thee be the glory, to Father, Son and Holy Ghost, as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end.'

In her state of heightened religious sensitivity Natasha was deeply affected by this prayer. She hung on every word about the victory of Moses over Amalek, and Gideon over Midian, and David over Goliath, and about the destruction of 'Thy Jerusalem', and she prayed with all the emotion and tenderness that filled her heart to overflowing, though she couldn't quite make out what she was praying for. She felt wholeheartedly involved in prayers for a righteous spirit, the fortifying of hearts with faith and hope, and the inspirational power of love. But she couldn't pray for her enemies to be trampled underfoot when only a few minutes earlier she had been wishing for more enemies to love and pray for.

The masses continue to go down the street. Then they go up the street and someone says, 'Let us pray for our enemies to be trampled underfoot.' Everyone kneels down and prays. Then the masses rise to their feet and begin to trample their enemies underfoot. First they trample to death the man who 'betrayed our country'. A few windows fly open and many names resound through the city. The masses look for these names, find them and trample them underfoot. And the force Tolstoy enlarges upon is about to manifest itself in a heartbreaking howl of pain. As soon as the masses hear this howl they trample its source underfoot. 'Hit him!' shouts someone. And the masses hit him. 'O Lord in heaven!' says someone. Everyone kneels down and prays for two minutes. Then the masses rise to their feet once again. They need their feet to trample their enemies to death. If you are on your knees, you cannot fulfil your duties.

'Give him one with an axe!' shouts someone. Everyone starts looking for an axe. The masses find many axes and make use of them at once. They find guns and machine guns. Every machine gun is a manifestation of

the same force. 'Traitors!' shouts someone. This is another manifestation of the same force; so is blood. Whenever the masses come across blood, they grow thirsty. 'Would you like a drink of blood?'

'Yeah, sure. Where is it?'

'In these bodies.'

'In hot weather, shops do a brisk trade in *cold* blood,' says an economist.

'Where are these shops?' shout the masses. They find the shops, drink the blood and trample the shops underfoot.

'Go to the battlefield,' says a general. 'The masses should turn into an army. Don't you wish to become soldiers and defend your country?'

'But we've already trampled all our enemies to death,' says someone.

'Not *all* of them,' says the general. 'There are many enemies on the battlefield. There's a lot of blood in their bodies. And there are no more shops where you can find cold blood. Aren't you tempted to drink some *hot* blood?'

'Of course we are.' And the masses go to the battlefield.

For what reason and in what way was battle offered and accepted at Shevardino and Borodino? Why did they join battle at Borodino? There was no sense in it for the French or the Russians. The immediate outcome was a clear inevitability: we Russians were brought one step closer towards the destruction of Moscow (the thing we dread most in all the world), and the French were brought one step closer towards the destruction of their entire army (the thing they dread most in all the world). At the time this outcome was as plain as a pikestaff, yet Napoleon offered battle and Kutuzov accepted.

Tolstoy seems to discard the psychological impact that the battle of Borodino had on Napoleon and his troops. His generals kept asking for reinforcements and therefore he was in no mood for eating and drinking: even cold blood wouldn't have appealed to him. The Russians stood their ground, which meant they would always stand their ground, whatever orders he might give to his subordinates. If some people stand their ground, others must go away.

CHAPTER 16

...the angel of history. His face is turned towards the past. Where a chain of events appears before us, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows towards the sky. What we call progress is this storm.

Walter Benjamin, *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*

I am not an angel, but my face is turned towards the past where I see a chain of events, a number of pages and one single catastrophe in which I have been involved all my life. It is my personal catastrophe and yet that of

humanity. No one can escape from this wreckage, not even those who do not think in terms of death and catastrophes: they never look at history through red-coloured glasses.

I have no idea how many times I have been trampled underfoot because I am reluctant to count feet and the deaths I go through to reach a point I cannot see from where I am standing or lying. I might be lying dead under some tree or other; a birch-tree would remind me of my motherland and I am likely to sing a Russian song if I see a birch-tree overhead. Today I see the canopy of my bed from which I will not rise, given my lazy disposition. I am leafing through *War and Peace* in search of luscious landscapes and other titbits I could comment upon in order to finish this book.

I used to skip landscapes as I read and re-read *War and Peace*, mostly interested in the mind that *may* occasionally take in a clump of daffodils, being mostly focused upon itself and other minds. So many abstract thoughts go through it that it has no time to look up at the sky unless the body to which it is attached has been wounded and therefore cannot act as promptly and efficiently as before the battle. Now I look at the landscapes described by Tolstoy: they are part and parcel of the peace he is so keen upon, alongside balls, dances and Natasha's songs. In comparison with human wars, even a storm and a tsunami are peaceful.

Sometimes nature mingles with battles and reflects them to some extent in spite of its fundamental neutrality and harmonious outlook. 'The returning soldiers and officers spoke of a brilliant victory in which the town of Wischau had been seized and a whole French squadron taken prisoner. It was a bright and sunny day following a sharp overnight frost, and the cheery autumn sunshine went well with the news of victory coming from the participants but also visible on the happy faces of soldiers, officers, generals and adjutants riding up and down in front of Nikolay Rostov.'

Tolstoy did not believe in heroes and the roles they might have played in the history of mankind. But his words often contradicted his thoughts and anyway nature knows better what happens around us, in our heart, in our mind, in our history and unconscious. 'Nine o'clock came. The low ground was engulfed in a sea of fog, but high up in the village of Schlapanitz, where Napoleon stood surrounded by his marshals, it was now completely clear. The sky overhead was bright blue, and the vast orb of the sun shimmered like a huge, hollow crimson float bobbing on the surface of the milky sea of fog.' This reminds me of Carlyle's *On Heroes and Hero Worship*:

One comfort is, that Great Men, taken up in any way, are profitable company. We cannot look, however imperfectly, upon a great man, without gaining something by him. He is the living light-fountain, which it is good and pleasant to be near. The light which enlightens, which has enlightened the darkness of the world; and this not as a kindled lamp only, but rather as a natural luminary shining by the gift of Heaven; a flowing light-fountain, as I say, of native original insight, of manhood and heroic nobleness; – in whose radiance all souls feel that it is well with them.

Not all of Tolstoy's characters share his views on the subject of heroes: Nikolay Rostov falls in love with the Tsar:

Coming to a halt before the Pavlograd regiment, the Tsar said something in French to the Austrian emperor and smiled. Seeing him smile, Rostov automatically began to smile himself and felt an even stronger spasm of love for his Emperor. He longed for some means of expressing his love for the Tsar.

His eyes watered from knowing it was impossible. The Tsar called up the colonel of the regiment and said a few words to him.

'My God! What would I do if the Emperor spoke to me?' thought Rostov. 'I think I'd die of happiness.'

The Tsar addressed the officers, too.

'I thank you all, gentlemen,' he said, every word sounding to Rostov like music from heaven, 'I thank you from the bottom of my heart.'

Rostov would have gladly died there and then for his Emperor.

'You have won the colours of St George and you will be worthy of them.'

'Oh, if only I could die for him, die for him!' thought Rostov.

I had to do my military service before going to the conservatoire, but my eyesight was too poor to allow me to see the enemy and also the grenades whose dances may prove to be fatal in the course of a battle or manoeuvres. So I have never had an opportunity to say, 'If only I could die for him!' Many Soviet people uttered these words when taking on the Nazis; they thought about Stalin for whom they were prepared to sacrifice their lives. I think that only the Soviet Union was able to triumph over the Germans in that war because both armies were fighting for one person, not for millions of fellow countrymen. When I asked my father why *he* had not joined the army during the war, he said, 'I couldn't fight for Stalin.' My father *would* have fought for the Emperor. And I would have fought *against* Stalin and Hitler – in the English army, for instance.

When I look at the past, a pile of debris disappears beyond the clouds. The Russians devote many TV programmes to those destroyed by the Soviet regime. Someone cried, 'Let this traitor die and no longer disgrace the name of a Soviet citizen!' And this cry resounded through the whole country. 'Isn't he dead yet? What are these trial proceedings for? His crime is as clear as day.'

'Stalin above us is our only...' said the victim.

And Hitler's concentration camps? How was it possible? Did God hear anything? Couldn't he look down for once? Every rule has its own exception. So many victims. Why didn't God put His arms around their shoulders protectively? Does He have no arms?

Universal wreckage. A lot of private wreckages too. Stalin did not like the idea that fate was subservient to biology and not to communist ideals. Marx thought that by changing environment the Communist Party could do whatever it wished. Genetics did not survive in the Soviet Union because the environment was hostile to it. Several geneticists were imprisoned and sent to the gulag. In 1940 Vavilov, one of the best, was arrested: the Soviet environment came to the fore once again. It reared its ugly head and, after 1,700 hours of interrogation Vavilov was found guilty in a five-minute trial of 'belonging to a rightist conspiracy, spying for England and sabotage of agriculture'. In 1943 he died of starvation in a prison camp.

A lot of imaginary wreckages. It is better to love one's Emperor than to beat one's serfs. Time degrades Nikolay Rostov.

As a prisoner of war Pierre Bezukhov follows the French army. He wants to talk to other prisoners and wanders off between the campfires to the other side of the road. A French sentry stops him and says he must go back. Pierre obeys the order and goes back to his side of the road. An hour later he bursts out laughing. "'The soldier wouldn't let me through. They've taken me and locked me up. They keep me prisoner. Me? *What me?* My immortal soul! Ha, ha, ha!...Ha, ha, ha!'" he laughed, and his eyes filled with tears.'

And then Pierre caught a fleeting glimpse of infinity lying beyond the other side of the road, beyond the French army and Russia. 'The full moon stood high in the limpid sky. Far away forests and fields that had been invisible beyond the confines of the camp were now coming into sight. And out there beyond the forests and fields lay all the shimmering, beckoning distance of infinity. Pierre glanced up at the sky and the play of the stars receding into the depths. "And it's all mine, and it's all within me, and it all adds up to me!" thought Pierre. "And they caught all that, shut it up in a shed and boarded it in!"' Microcosm. Tolstoy in *his* prison.

On his way back to Moscow Pierre comes across infinity once more. In his youth he was unable 'to see the great, the unfathomable and the infinite in anything'. Now he sees the great, the eternal and the infinite in *everything* – even in Natasha's apron. Karataev taught him to look down right in front of him. No point in peering into the distance over heads and forests. God is greater and more unfathomable than whatever you can see in the distance. God is right under your feet. Natasha is God; so is your son. Even your son's excrement is infinite and unfathomable. Pierre enjoyed much more freedom in the prison camp. At least he looked up at the sky.

Outwardly Pierre had hardly changed at all. To look at he was the same as before. He was just as absent-minded as he had always been, and he seemed to be permanently preoccupied with something that wasn't there, something that was all his own. The difference between his former state and the one he was now in was that in the old days, when he was oblivious to everything that was going on around him and what was being said to him, he would wince and furrow his brow in an apparently vain effort to see something that was a long way away. Nowadays he could still be oblivious to everything that was going on around him with the ghost of a smile, however ironical, and he also listened to what was being said, though he was obviously seeing and hearing something very different. In the old days he had seemed like a nice man who was unhappy, which inevitably kept people at arm's length. Nowadays a smile of joie de vivre played constantly about his mouth, his eyes shone with sympathy for others, wondering whether they were as happy as he was, and people enjoyed his company.

People enjoyed his company, although years of anxiety and searching for God have lined his brow with deep furrows. Be that as it may, this is just another outstanding example of degradation. Pierre never said to himself, 'I'm going to make an effort to be a bit more sociable.' He just looked down and spotted God under his feet. God was also in front of him: Natasha, her cousins, their guests, diplomats, crashing bores. Everybody was God and Pierre had no alternative but to smile. You smile in the presence of God, don't you? You are happy and so you smile. You know that if God is beside you, He can put His arm around your shoulder protectively. He will protect you from wars and from death. You have nothing to fear as long as God is right under your feet. But even if He lies under your feet, He can stretch His arm out and put it around your shoulder. He can also stroke your face to calm you down.

Pierre listens to what is said but hears something else, not even his own thoughts. Like an idiot, he smiles – just in case. He knows that others are waiting for smiles and he comes up to their expectations. He is a jolly good fellow now. No one performs this song in his presence – not even Natasha who does not sing any more. But he hears this song as he listens to others. Anyway, he is happy and people enjoy his company because they like happiness and dislike unhappiness. 'I'm fine, thank you.' 'I'm fine, thank you.'

Obviously Pierre lives in a fool's paradise. It is better to live in a fool's paradise than in a scholarly hell. So he lives in a fool's paradise and in a domestic paradise. He has got many paradises at his disposal. One of them is stuffed with his own ideas. 'All the time I was in Petersburg it was like seeing people in a dream. When I've got an idea in my head everything else seems a frivolous waste of time.' And what *is* the idea Pierre hints at this time? Before revealing it to Natasha he says: 'All ideas that have a huge impact are simple.' His idea is very simple indeed. 'And my idea comes down to this: if all the bad people can get together and show strength in unity, honest men must do the same. You see – it's as simple as that.' The Soviet film version of *War and Peace* ends with this big, paradisiacal idea. Our politburo was fond of simplicity.

Is it Tolstoy's own idea? Does the Pierre we find in the epilogue reflect Tolstoy's household and his idea of happiness? Many ideas of Tolstoy's can be found in *War and Peace*. What about his daily routine? Sophia Andreevna 'was happy to be a slave to her husband, and everybody in the house had to tiptoe about when the master was busy reading or writing in his study'. 'I think I shall kill myself with jealousy,' she wrote in her diary.

Natasha had much to tell: the details of her brother's lifestyle, how much she had suffered without him (it was no kind of life), all about her ever-growing fondness for Marie, and the fact Marie was better than her in every way. Even as she said this Natasha was perfectly sincere in acknowledging Marie's superiority, but at the same time she expected Pierre to prefer her to Marie and all other women, and now, especially after seeing so many women in Petersburg, to remind her of that. In response to Natasha's words Pierre told her that the soirées and dinners with all those ladies in Petersburg had been absolutely intolerable.

'I can't talk to ladies any more,' he said. 'It's just boring. All the more so because I was so busy.'

At the dinner table Tolstoy heard a great many tales of woe, opinions and judgements. One of his daughters said, 'The man's a complete fool!' 'What about you?' asked Tolstoy who might have borrowed his cruelty from old Prince Bolkonsky. 'I'll show you who's master in this house,' roared the latter glancing at *his* daughter sidelong. 'Go on! Get out of my sight!'

Natasha would never have doubted that Pierre's idea was a great idea, except for one thing that bothered her. He was her husband. 'Surely such an important man, a man of such value to society, couldn't also be my husband? How could it have happened?' She wanted to share this doubt with him. 'What man, what men could decide whether he really is so much cleverer than everybody else?' she wondered, and in her imagination she ran through the people Pierre admired. To judge by all the stories he had told there was no one he admired more than Platon Karatayev.

'Do you know what's just crossed my mind?' she said. 'Platon Karatayev. How would he have reacted? Would he have approved of what you're doing?'

Did Tolstoy copy this passage from his wife's diary? She knew that any country bumpkin was dearer to her husband's heart than intellectuals and aristocrats. Alas, being illiterate, his peasants were unable to pass judgments on his works.

‘At that moment he felt he was destined to give a new direction to Russian society as a whole, and the world in general.’ Who? Tolstoy or Pierre? They were both influenced by Napoleon.

Did Pierre leave his wife, children and estate at the end of his life?

‘I’m a jolly good girl, I’m a jolly good girl.’

‘I’m amazingly clever...Oh, she’s such a charming girl,’ she went on, speaking about herself in the third person and imagining that it was some very clever man, the cleverest and best of all men, who was talking about her... ‘This girl has everything, absolutely everything,’ he continued. ‘She’s incredibly clever, so charming and so pretty – she’s out of this world, she moves so well, she can swim and ride like nobody else, and that voice! – you’ve got to admit, that’s a wonderful voice!’

What would a clever man say about Natasha now? ‘She’s neither clever nor charming. She has nothing. She’s not at all pretty and her slovenly appearance turns my stomach. And she’s very much *in* this world – a down-to-earth sort of woman with no pretensions. She’s clumsy and she should take swimming lessons if she doesn’t want to drown in her lake. Whenever she climbs onto her horse, she falls from it. “There’s no need to hang back – you can sing as well as anyone,” I said to her once. And she sang for her guests. No, she can’t sing as well as anyone. What a horrible voice!’

There are a lot of wreckages in Natasha’s earthly existence:

‘Have you seen Duport?’

‘No.’

‘You haven’t? Duport, the famous ballet-dancer? Oh, you won’t understand then. This is me now...’ Forming her arms into a circle, Natasha held out her skirt like a ballerina, tripped a few steps away, twirled round in a pirouette and then did a little entrechat, tapping her toes together in mid-air, coming down on the very tips of them and tripping forward a few steps.

‘Look, I’m on points. Can’t you see?’ she said, but she couldn’t stay up on her toes. ‘That’s me from now on! I’m never going to get married. I’m going to be a ballet-dancer.’

Natasha did all she could to get married: Boris Drubetskoy, Andrey Bolkonsky, Anatole Kuragin... She did get married in the long run. In a last-ditch attempt to save her life from sterility, she married Pierre Bezukhov. In his fifties Pierre wrote in his diary: ‘Over a bottle of wine, we shared our despair over the emotional sterility of our marriages.’ Who was his boon companion? Tolstoy?

CHAPTER 17

At first I thought I would devote a short essay to *War and Peace*, analysing the novel in terms of opposites, of yin and yang. Then I added Jung to my project because I realised I had to talk about psychological types in relation to such opposing forces: light and darkness, men and women. In the course of the novel some men turn into women and vice versa. For instance, Pierre becomes a woman under the influence of Platon Karatayev. Only old Prince Bolkonsky remains yang from beginning to end as if he was an inveterate misogynist.

The longer I worked on the essay, the further I got as I watched the films where the same characters came to life – sometimes in disguise. I also watched Renoir's *La Règle du jeu* and admired it once again: the hunt, Saint-Saëns' *Danse Macabre*, this harbinger of doom. The hunt is also a harbinger of doom; dying animals and birds are linked to the murder that casts a long shadow over the badinage and light-hearted flirts. There are many dances in *War and Peace*; they are all *danses macabres* to some extent.

Pierre Bezukhov talks to Andrey Bolkonsky. 'You're always dancing. Look, my protégée is here, the younger Rostov girl. Ask her.' Another *danse macabre*, another harbinger of doom.

'Give me a bottle of rum,' roars Pierre as he climbs up into the well of the window. He is eager to repeat Dolokhov's exploit, but he is bound to fall and no one feels like taking care of his corpse. While waiting for the bottle, Pierre performs a dance that luckily ends in a brothel, not on a pavement. The people who take part in numerous balls dance on the edge of a precipice; and yet they are unaware of that. What *are* we aware of? In the film I am watching on Russian TV there is a gypsy who knows the future better than prophets. What a pity the Russians did not consult her at the beginning of the 19th century. What a pity *I* cannot consult her.

There are so many hunts in films, in novels, in real life, in dreams. There are wolves that look at us as they die; so do humans. So does Napoleon who, at the end of his military adventure, plays the role of Vereshchagin. In January 1814, France was being attacked on all its frontiers. The allies cleverly announced that they were fighting not against the French people but against Napoleon alone. 'Give him one with an axe, eh?...Look, he's been trampled to death...Ogre! The Antichrist! No, he's still alive...he is, you know...He had it coming to him...Try this hatchet!...Isn't he dead yet?'

That moment, the moment when Nikolay saw the dogs struggling with the wolf down in the gully, her grey coat visible at the bottom of the heap, one hind-leg sticking out, her ears flattened and her head gasping in terror (Karay had her by the throat) – the moment Nikolay saw all this was the happiest moment of his whole life. He had grasped the pommel of his saddle to get down and stab the creature when suddenly the wolf stuck her head up through the heaving mass of dogs and managed to get her fore-legs out on to the edge of the gully. With a snap of her teeth (Karay having let go of her throat), she heaved her hind-legs out of the hollow, tucked her tail back down, struggled free of the dogs and ran off again. Karay stumbled out of the gully with his hackles raised, hurt and perhaps badly wounded.

The Russian campaign, Elba, Waterloo.

Nikolay didn't see Danilo and didn't hear him until the gasping chestnut flashed past and he heard the sound of a falling body and saw Danilo lying in the midst of the dogs on the wolf's back, trying to grab her by the ears. It was obvious to them all, dogs, hunters and wolf, that this was the end. The beast, flattening its ears in terror, tried to get up, but the dogs hung on. Danilo half-rose, then stumbled down, and as if he was going to bed collapsed with all his weight on top of the wolf and grabbed her by the ears. Nikolay was about to finish her off with the dagger, but Danilo whispered, 'No, don't. We'll string her up!' and he changed position to put his foot on the wolf's neck.

When I was a child, my father went hunting rather often. One day he wounded a hare and heard a cry, a human cry. He threw his rifle into a river and swore he would never hunt again. I am horrified whenever I hear a cry that does *not* remind me of human beings.

Today I bought a French edition of *War and Peace*, for I think that such a novel should be read in several languages, even if the translations are not up to the mark. Foreign languages shed light on the work – another light revealing another angle, another approach. After all, this work is part of the universal truth. I'll read the French translation while listening to Saint-Saëns' *Danse Macabre*. Why not listen to Mahler's *Sixth* instead? Because it is too tragic and therefore does not do justice to the dance-like character of death. He does not really walk; he dances as he comes nearer and nearer to the door that is already ajar as if waiting for him. All doors are always waiting for death.

The manifesto, the Tsar's appeal. Sonya reads it out and eventually comes to the conclusion:

'And may the ruin with which he threatens us rebound upon his own head, and may Europe, delivered from bondage, glorify the name of Russia.'

'Quite right!' cried the count, opening his moist eyes, choking and snuffling once or twice, as if a strong vinaigrette had been held to his nose. He went on, 'One word from the Tsar and we shall make every sacrifice, and spare nothing.'

Just another example of hero-worship.

To some extent, *War and Peace* is a history book. Tolstoy kept widening the scope of the work and this longing for space induced him to add a map of Borodino to the description of the battle. Joyce said that *Ulysses* could help to rebuild Dublin after the Third World War. Yet there are no maps in it. I think we might stage the battle of Borodino after reading Tolstoy's description of it. The map is redundant.

Tolstoy's explanations are often redundant. Pierre saves a girl from the fire. Needless to say, she is not his daughter. When he comes back, carrying the girl and holding her tight, he begins to look for her mother and cannot find her. Pierre gives the girl to a peasant woman. When a French officer asks him what is going on and what the peasant woman wants, Pierre answers thus: 'She's bringing me my daughter. I've just saved her from the fire. Goodbye!' 'And he strode off solemnly between the Frenchmen, wondering why on earth he had blurted out such a pointless lie.' We are quite aware that the lie is pointless. We can even guess that Pierre wonders why he blurted it out as he strides off, leaving behind his daughter and her mother. Why does Tolstoy explain everything? Didn't he say that 'Pierre was behaving as if he had been drinking?' Isn't that enough?

When they were alone together and Natasha, wide-eyed and blissfully happy, crept over to him and grabbed him by the head, suddenly, swiftly, pressing it to her bosom and saying, 'Now you're all mine, mine! I'm not letting you go!' this moment marked the beginning of the conversation, and it transcended all the rules of logic not least because they talked about several different things at once. This simultaneous discussion of all sorts of everything far from marring any clarity of perception, was the surest guarantee of their mutual understanding.

There ensued a wonderful dialogue in which Pierre and Natasha forgot about logic, light-heartedly and delightfully skipping from one topic of conversation to another. Natasha was flying at last; so was Pierre. Why does Tolstoy explain what they were doing? Can't the reader see and enjoy this double flight? This bird-like dialogue is preceded by an important remark shedding *another* light on the dialogue. 'Natasha was so used to talking to her husband like this that she took any process of logical thinking on Pierre's part as an unmistakable sign that something was wrong between them. Whenever he started to lay out an argument, speaking calmly and reasonably, and she followed his example by doing the same thing, she knew they were definitely in for a quarrel.' I wonder if Natasha *could* talk reasonably. Anyway, I regard this explanation as a piece of advice that may come in useful whenever a man and a woman feel like talking and exchanging opinions. If your wife fails to see the logic behind your argument, you may count on a peaceful evening at home. If she thinks that what you say is not an argument at all, a tender night is on the agenda. What is the secret of conjugal happiness? We can sum it up as follows: There are irredeemable flaws in the logic of the argument.

Another *danse macabre*. All of a sudden Hélène dies – to allow Pierre to marry Natasha Rostov without losing the colossal fortune amassed by his father.

A lot of coincidences. Prince Andrey is wounded at Borodino. He leaves Moscow together with the Rostovs. But Tolstoy thinks that this departure needs yet another coincidence. A tragedy of epic proportions.

In Kudrino, and from every street, from Nikitskaya, Presnya and Podnovinskaya, came other trains of vehicles, just like the Rostovs', and by the time they got to Sadovaya the carriages and carts were two abreast all down the road.

As they turned past the Sukharev water-tower, Natasha, who was keeping a sharp eye on the walking crowds and passing vehicles, gave a cry of delight and surprise.

'Good Heavens! Mamma, Sonya, look over there! It's him!'

'Who? Who?'

'Look! For heaven's sake, it's Pierre Bezukhov,' said Natasha.

The walking crowds, other trains of vehicles. And Pierre is in the right place at the right time. Doesn't Napoleon say that the key to success is to be in the right place at the right time? This departure is another *danse macabre*.

Natasha's mother does not believe her daughter. She does believe in meaningful coincidences, but enough is enough. Too much of a good thing. 'That's not him. Don't be so silly!' But Natasha can be very obstinate at times. 'Mamma! I'll bet you anything it's him.' It was Pierre Bezukhov, 'a tall corpulent figure in a coachman's long coat'. He was determined to assassinate Napoleon. 'Kill him! That's an order!' he wrote in his diary. He might have killed the Antichrist had the latter howled like Vereshchagin. According to Tolstoy, history is a game of chance.

Killing is irrational, absurd and pointless. Once again I disagree with Tolstoy: war is all the more terrifying because it is *not* pointless. 'Only God could help us,' says Heidegger. I have already quoted this point of view many times and we are still fighting each other. Private wars are also horrifying. Nuclear weapons cause destruction on a massive scale, but there are other scales and other destructions. If one human being is murdered, humanity disappears in a puff of smoke. The puff of smoke disappears too. What is left? Destruction and murder.

Why did the Russians burn Moscow down? They should have burnt villages, the suburbs of Moscow. No forage, no French horses.

I open *War and Peace* and choose a passage at random as if Tolstoy's work was identical to the *I Ching*. A book of changes. At some point Prince Andrey says that nothing ever changes; he is wrong. Natasha is talking to Nikolay. 'Oh, er, wait a minute...I know. I was just thinking – here we are driving along and we assume we're heading for home, but we could be going anywhere, it's so dark, and all of a sudden we'll arrive somewhere and we'll see we're not at Otradnoye, we're in fairyland. And then I was thinking...oh, but that'll do.'

She did land up in fairyland, *another* fairyland. How does family life suit her? 'Only the old countess, whose maternal instinct had told her that Natasha's wild behaviour had sprung from the need to have a husband and children of her own – as Natasha herself had declared more than once at Otradnoye, and more in earnest than in jest – had known and the only thing that amazed her was the amazement of other people who simply didn't understand Natasha. She never stopped saying she had always known that her daughter would make an ideal wife and mother.' Is she an ideal wife and mother? Perhaps. Wouldn't I be delighted to feel a woman's hands on my head and hear a voice saying, 'Now you're all mine, mine! I'm not letting you go!' Don't ever let me go.

A stream of consciousness. Nabokov says that on the brink of death Anna Karenin comes up with this astonishing literary device. Nikolay does it before her, before Dujardin and Joyce. Now I like Joyce less than I used to in my youth. Musil and Proust are more to my taste.

'Wait a minute, what was I thinking about? Mustn't forget. Oh yes, speaking to the Emperor! No, that's not it – that's tomorrow. I know! Na – tasha, mount an at – tasha. Hussars and moustaches...that hussar with a moustache dashing down the Tverskaya, I was just thinking about him...opposite Guryev's...Old Guryev...Ah, Denisov, he's a good fellow! Oh, this is all stupid. The main thing is – the Emperor's here. He looked at me and he was dying to say something, but he just didn't dare...Wait a minute... it was me...I didn't dare. Oh, it's all stupid...the thing is...not to forget...I was thinking about something important, yes, Natasha, mount an attasha, yes...yes...I've got it now.'

Opposites. There are a lot of opposites in *War and Peace*. To begin with, war is opposite to peace. Nikolay Rostov is opposite to Nikolay Rostov. Natasha is opposite to Natasha. The comet of 1812 is opposite to itself. Many people fear it but Pierre is in love with Natasha and he identifies the comet with his love as he drives into the Arbat. Yin and yang; darkness and light.

And there in the middle, high above Prechistensky Boulevard, amidst a scattering of stars on every side but catching the eye through its closeness to the earth, its pure white light and the long uplift of its tail, shone the comet, the huge, brilliant comet of 1812, that popular harbinger of untold horrors and the end of the world. But this bright comet with its long, shiny tail held no fears for Pierre. Quite the reverse: Pierre's eyes glittered with tears of rapture as he gazed up at this radiant star, which must have traced its parabola through infinite space at speeds unimaginable and now suddenly seemed to have picked its spot in the black sky and impaled itself like an arrow piercing the earth, and stuck there, with its strong upthrusting tail and its brilliant display of whiteness amidst the infinity of scintillating stars. This

heavenly body seemed perfectly attuned to Pierre's newly melted heart, as it gathered reassurance and blossomed into new life.

When you listen to Schubert's last sonata, you are struck by the difference between your first impression and what you feel as you listen to it for the second time. I am speaking about the exposition of the first movement, about the transition that upsets the apple cart. *War and Peace*. You read the epilogue and then go back to the day when Andrey Bolkonsky meets Natasha Rostov for the first time. Ridiculous, isn't it? Let her fly away; we shall stay on the surface of the earth.

'Oh, to be a soldier, just an ordinary soldier!' thought Pierre as he nodded off. 'To enter into that communal life with your whole being, to be absorbed into whatever it is that makes them what they are. But how can you cast off everything that doesn't matter, everything sent by the devil, the whole burden of the outer man? There was a time when I could have been one of them. I could have run away from my father. God knows I wanted to. And after that duel with Dolokhov I could have signed on as a soldier.'

To get lost in the crowd. Peter Ustinov wished to become a spy. And they said he would stick out in a crowd. He did not become a spy. It is better not to stick out in a crowd or elsewhere. To be an ordinary soldier; to die an ordinary death. To become the universe. Isn't the universe another crowd, another army? Star wars. To spy on the stars. To love the stars. To be at one with them.

EPILOGUE

*The maiden
Is given in marriage.
Good fortune.
Perseverance furthers.*

Prince Andrey did not persevere; he went away for a year. A lot can happen during a year; and it did happen. The maiden was given in marriage; she was no longer given in marriage. Development. It is better not to go away: any development is fraught with difficulties. Had Prince Andrey stayed with Natasha Rostov, she wouldn't have fallen in love with Anatole Kuragin. What does it matter! It is all over now. There are only dreams, nothing else.

*On the mountain, a tree:
The image of DEVELOPMENT.
Thus the superior man abides in dignity and virtue,
In order to improve the mores.*

Prince Andrey does not care for the mores. He is on his deathbed. He still cares about Natasha, though: he cannot help it. He no longer abides in dignity and virtue. He has forgiven Natasha and his own dignity. What remains is love, love, love. He loves her on the mountain, under the tree, on his deathbed.

You love a woman, but you have to go away. She betrays you with a rake, a man unworthy of your attention. You do pay attention to this man and the woman who is unfaithful to you. What is to be done? You have no wish to meet her somewhere, on this earth, in real life. So you have no alternative but to meet her in unreal life. What do you know about the whereabouts of this new life? You know it cannot be found in the streets, even if coincidences play up to you. Nor can you meet this woman at home, be it her home or yours. You retreat into a fantasy world where she may be alone with you, without other men and women.

On May 1901 Strindberg married Harriet Bosse; he was fifty-two, Harriet only twenty-three. Harriet and Strindberg divorced in 1904. The news of Harriet's engagement to Gunnar Wingard threw Strindberg into a state of abnormal excitement. He wrote a play about it. The play's eroticism shocked audiences when it was first performed. The thought that Harriet belonged to another man was intolerable to the point of driving him to abandon real life. He did not commit suicide but he was sure he had cancer of the stomach; and he was right, as usual. Strindberg resorted to telepathic intercourse with Harriet.

'Harriet seeking me mournfully all morning. When I responded she stormed me with such violence that I had to embrace her several times and she received me without reservation or doubt, and in great and infinite love.' 'Harriet seeking me all this morning, in endless love and eros, giving me roses in my mouth.' 'God help me now so that I may free myself!!!' Strindberg died of cancer on May 14, 1912, in Stockholm.

If we imagine that a thing that usually affects us with the emotion of sorrow has any resemblance to an object which usually affects us equally with a great emotion of joy, we shall at the same time hate the thing and love it.

Spinoza, *Ethics*

Prince Andrey used to hate and love Natasha. Now he loves her and there is no room for hate in his heart. He has no time for hate: he is on the brink of death. Death has already opened the door. Andrey looks in his face for some response, but death just stares at him blankly. Natasha is the sphinx and death and life. He has no wish to choose between them. Anyway he has already chosen Natasha.

Prince Andrey loved dancing. He had been anxious to get away as fast as he could from the political or high-minded conversations that everyone was trying to draw him into, and also keen to break the irksome ring of constraint caused by the presence of the Tsar. This was why he had gone off to dance, and he had chosen Natasha as a partner because Pierre had pointed her out, and also because she was the first pretty girl to catch his eye. But the moment he put his arm round that slender, supple, quivering waist, and felt her stirring so close to him and smiling so close to him, the champagne of her beauty went to his head. He felt a thrill of new life and rejuvenation as he drew a deep breath, left her and stood there watching the other couples.