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Limited Absolutes: A Study of "War and Peace" and the Pluralizing Experience

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Limited Absolutes: A Study of *War and Peace* and the Pluralizing Experience

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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Introduction

A number of complications arise in this particular study of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, that "wonderful mass of life" that Henry James described once as a "monster harnessed."¹ The first complication comes naturally out of James's quotation: in what way can a "wonderful mass" be broken down, made manageable, how *can* it, in a word, be "harnessed"?

I attempt a specific reading of *War and Peace* which is concerned, on the one hand with the book's style, and on the other, with its content or form. The two terms which occur throughout the paper: the "absolute" and the "limited," reference two contradictory authorial modes which Tolstoy switches between. By reading into potential *limitations* in Tolstoy's "absolute" mode, I go some distance into a reading of the book as "a process, a passage" and not, say, the "thing,"² immobile, complete or "absolute" as a work.

Perhaps most significant within the paper, however, is the repercussions of this "limited" reading. In one letter, Tolstoy writes, regarding *War and Peace*, that: "people will praise the sentimental scene of the young lady. . .and such rubbish, which is on their level," and that "nobody will notice the main thing."³ I cannot be sure that I really understood the "main thing" during this paper. But, at the same time, Tolstoy's belief that there is a "*main thing*," is of great significance in the study of "absolute" and "limited" modes within his book. While his expansive theory of history, making up a considerable part of *War and Peace*, might be the most hulking example of Tolstoy's "absolute," (maybe also "the main thing" to him), the scenes of the "young woman," those intricacies and textures of the every-day, ordinary human experience, also contain multitudes of "absolute" statements, and are textually much more frequent, and much more "main." What Tolstoy regarded as "rubbish" is the grounds for my paper.

I have found perhaps the most useful aid in a study of Tolstoy's limitations through Isaiah Berlin's reading of Archilochus's "fox" and "hedgehog."⁴ The "hedgehog," in Berlin's representation, is the embodiment of the "absolute" as an *idea*, not precisely as it is manifested in terms of authorial mode, but in close alliance with it. In more precise terms, the "hedgehog" understands itself through "a single, universal, organizing principle"; Tolstoy's idea that there is a "main thing" in his book points to this single-minded quality. So when Mirsky calls *War and Peace* a "monument" of "objectivity" he favors this more "hedgehog" reading. I favor the "fox" in my study, which moves on "many levels" and through "a vast variety of experiences,"⁵ thus belying the need for a definitive *end*. This leads to the heart of what this paper is all about: a close examination of transient experiences throughout Tolstoy's book. The experiences I study—realized through a number of characters—are linked through their *multivalence*. Instead of opting for the "universal" or "absolute," I emphasize the variousness and subjectivity, understood through limitation, which each experience uniquely has to offer. This naturally tends away from a monistic interpretation of singularity or oneness, and towards pluralism.

The ideas of scholars Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Kelly play into this study not inconsiderably. Although I turn to them only in the third chapter, the possibility of reading *War and Peace* with a pluralistic eye was realized through my reading of their scholarship. Dreyfus and Kelly come as a source from our contemporary, secular moment, in which the potential for a "nihilistic existence"⁶ is more apparent than ever. A reading of limitations throughout a narrative characterized by "absolutes" contains elements which, although distinct in terms of its historical moment, runs the risk of taking a "nihilistic" turn. Tolstoy has been linked to the Russian "netovshchik" or "negativist," an "early version

of . . . nihilism,”⁷ so such a reading is not altogether out of bounds. The potentials of reading subjectivity or limitation in a variety of experiences, ranging from aesthetic moments of realization, or “turns”—can be expanded, I hope, beyond the purview of this study.

The other potential complication, to return to my beginning words, is in the relationship between author and artist. Although I have kept closely to the text of *War and Peace*, there are a handful of examples I draw from other works by Tolstoy, some from after the publication of *War and Peace*, during or after what R.F. Christian calls his “so called conversion,”⁸ a period in which he was regarded as “pacifist,” “sage of Yasnaya Polyana,” and the Tolstoy who turned “ascetic.”⁹ Any reference to the later period of Tolstoy’s writing serves to move forward and develop ideas within the project. In defense of this, a particular decision which might seem out of line, I would argue that ideas of an artist do not function linearly; especially in Tolstoy’s case, the thoughts and problems which encompass *War and Peace* were, both in his young and late life, circling. In a project about limitations in “absolute” language and form in Tolstoy’s fiction, including the later writing of that “baffling man,” “notorious for his self-contradictions”¹⁰ is not out of place. In an entry from his diary, dated from March of 1856, ten years before *War and Peace* was first published, a younger Tolstoy writes: “last night I was tormented by sudden doubts about *everything*. And now, though they don’t torment me, they are still with me.”¹¹ While it may seem dangerous to link the work of the writer with various periods within his life, the actual issues which Tolstoy, both early and late, grappled with most extremely stayed with him, and had to do with these “doubts about *everything*.” While the specific scope of this project is concerned with limitations in “absolute” specifically in *War and Peace*; the implications of the paper correspond, at least to some degree, with far greater issues within this divide.

Three characters are principal to my study, and for each I have devoted a chapter. Although each chapter deals primarily with its title character: Pierre, Andrei, and Natasha, respectively, these three characters each offer specific examples of the limitation in forms of the “absolute” through different manifestations of “revelatory” experience, and they are closely connected within the narrative of the book as a whole. They also complete a triangulation in their personal fates—Natasha is engaged to Andrei, Andrei is killed, Natasha marries Pierre.

The first chapter devotes itself to the two authorial modes which I mentioned earlier, and in greater detail. Gary Saul Morson’s term “absolute language” figures into the chapter’s structure, and Morson’s influence will maintain significance throughout each chapter. Through Pierre’s external and internal descriptions, I attempt to set up the two contrary modes, and to complicate these two modes through the language in which they are expressed. The first chapter also introduces the concept of pluralism, and makes a case for it in Pierre. The second chapter has a similar devotion, but to a radically different end. Through Andrei, a different expression of the “absolute” is embodied, one corresponding most accurately to monism, and which offers a secular reading. The third chapter presents a final and, I would like to think, an alternative to the two possible modes evidenced in the two previous chapters—not quite pluralistic, not quite monistic, with the intention of presenting what might be another look into the potentials of living directly through transient experience.

Before the first chapter, I have included two poems. They be read as preface, of sorts, for the entire paper.

Introduction End Notes

¹ Tolstoy, Leo, et al. *War and Peace: the Maude Translation, Backgrounds and Sources, Criticism*. Norton, 1996. [A Monster Harnessed], *From Henry James*, Preface to *The Tragic Muse* (New York, 1908).

² Percy Lubbock, *The Craft of Fiction*. Jonathon Cape, Eleven Glower Street, London. 1921.

³ Tolstoy, Leo, et. al. *War and Peace*. [*Letter to M.P. Pogodin*—March 21 or 23, 1868]. 1086-1087.

⁴ Berlin, Isaiah. *Hedgehog and the Fox*, New York Simon and Schuster, 1953. page. 1.

⁵ *Ibid*.

⁶ Dreyfus, Hubert; Sean Dorrance Kelly “Homer's Polytheism.” *All Things Shining*, Free Press, A Division of Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2011, p. 60.

⁷ Berlin, Isaiah. *Hedgehog and the Fox*, 9.

⁸ Tolstoy, Leo. *Tolstoy's Diaries Volume One: 1847-1894*. Translated by R.F. Christian, Faber and Faber Ltd. [Introduction], xiii.

⁹ Tolstoy, Leo, et. al. *War and Peace*. [The Book That Became *War and Peace*]. Kathryn Feuer. 1142.

¹⁰ Curtis, James M. “The Function of Imagery in *War and Peace*.” *Slavic Review*, vol. 29, no. 3, 1970, pp 460.

¹¹ Tolstoy, Leo. *Tolstoy's Diaries Volume One: 1847-1894*. Translated by R.F. Christian. [1856-1862], 132.

Hedgehog

The snail moves like a
Hovercraft, held up by a
Rubber cushion of itself,
Sharing its secret

With the hedgehog. The
hedgehog
Shares its secret with no
one.
We say, Hedgehog, come
out
Of yourself and we will love
you.

We mean no harm. We
want
Only to listen to what
You have to say. We want
Your answers to our
questions.

The hedgehog gives nothing
Away, keeping itself to
itself.
We wonder what a
hedgehog
Has to hide, why it so
distrusts.

We forget the god
Under this crown of thorns.
We forget that never again
Will a god trust in the
world.

—*Paul Muldoon*

The Idea

For us, too, there was a wish to possess
Something beyond the world we knew, beyond
ourselves,
Beyond our power to imagine, something
nevertheless
In which we might see ourselves; and this
desire
Came always in passing, in waning light, and in
such cold
That ice on the valley's lakes cracked and
rolled,
And blowing snow covered what earth we saw,
And scenes from the past, when they surfaced
again,
Looked not as they had, but ghostly and white
Among false curves and hidden erasures;
And never once did we feel we were close
Until the night wind said, "Why do this,
Especially now? Go back to the place you
belong;"
And there appeared, with its windows
glowing, small,
In the distance, in the frozen reaches, a cabin;
And we stood before it, amazed at its being
there, And would have gone forward and
opened the door,
And stepped into the glow and warmed
ourselves there,
But that it was ours by not being ours,
And should remain empty. That was the idea.

—*Mark Strand*

Chapter One: Pierre

“The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows the one big thing.”

—*Archilochus* via *Isaiab Berlin*¹²

I

The Absolute vs. Artistic Subjective in Tolstoy

In 1868, Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy published an article reflecting on *War and Peace*. In the brief essay, he attempts to systematically define what the great book *really is*. His desire, he tells his readers, is “to direct their attention to what [he] wished to say but owing to the conditions of work could not enlarge on.”¹³ Tolstoy also takes time to respond to criticism of his masterpiece, addressing, for instance, his use of both Russian and French throughout the book. He writes that:

the reproach that in a Russian book people speak and write French is like the reproach of a man who, looking at a portrait, notices black spots (shadows) on it which do not exist in nature. The painter is not to blame if to some people the shadow he has put on the face of the portrait appears as a black spot nonexistent in nature, he is only to blame if such shadows are put on wrongly or coarsely.¹⁴

Here, Tolstoy argues in favor of the primacy of subjectivity in art, and the need for “absolute” truth to be thrown into relief by experience—that, in fact, the singular truth a “portrait” captures might not be evidenced in “nature” at all. That said, for Tolstoy there is a “wron[g]” way of going about this; he acknowledges that the subjective approach risks a great deal, failure even, if “such shadows”—the very human, discrete gradations—are not rendered in the way of hard, honest precision. Tolstoy’s defense of *War and Peace’s*

bilingualism serves as an excellent conduit into discussing his complicated relationship with realism. The previous passage reveals Tolstoy's approach to be a rather liberal one. Indeed, he assiduously avoids laying claim to the mantle of absolute truth, so long as the "shadows" cast over his own book are not "put on wrongly or coarsely." This standpoint places an enormous degree of importance on conditional experience, and—to that end—the great Russian author opens his essay by commenting that "no idea is being put forward" in *War and Peace*, and "nothing is proved."¹⁵

One might also keep in mind Tolstoy's letter to one of his contemporaries, P. D. Boborykin, in the year *War and Peace* was first published. There, he writes:

the goal of the artist is not to solve a question irrefutably,
but to force people to love life in all its innumerable,
inexhaustible manifestations¹⁶

This quotation may point to a more hopeful way of reading subjectivity in *War and Peace*, complicating the text's penchant for sweeping and proverbial assessment, or "absolute language,"¹⁷ the term Gary Saul Morson has coined to describe Tolstoy's statements of truth that flirt with the universal and often occur at seemingly random moments (i.e., the much discussed and famous opening of his other masterpiece, *Anna Karenina*: "All happy families are alike, but each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way"). I will discuss the implications of Morson's term more extensively in the second section of the chapter.

Speaking in terms of the tenuous relationship between "style" and "content," one senses a major contradiction: on the one hand, Tolstoy's repeated assertions gesture towards some sort of singular truth that form a major cut of the book; on the other, the narrative's depiction of life, "in all its innumerable, inexhaustible manifestations," gestures towards a

much more multivalent, even fragmentary, account of the texture of experience. These two authorial positions seem diametrically opposed, of course. And perhaps this is what Henry James means when he writes of *War and Peace* that: “a picture without composition slights its most precious chance for beauty. . .there may in its absence be life. . .but what to do with such loose baggy monsters?”¹⁸

A case can be made, I would argue, for a more subjective, pluralistic understanding of *War and Peace*, one which goes a not inconsiderable distance towards problematizing Morson’s notion of “absolute language.” In order to make this claim, however, I assert that the two authorial positions Tolstoy assumes might not neatly accord with the reading that I have favored here; and, admittedly, I do not exclude myself from those other words that Henry James wrote regarding certain critics’ approach to understanding Tolstoy: “disciples not elephantine he can only mislead and betray.”¹⁹

II

Pierre’s Confusion and the Dissolving of Two Forms

These two apparently oppositional modes—the “absolute” and the “limited” or subjective—are perhaps most persuasively expressed in the character of Pierre, where the “nonexistent” aspect of artistic depiction is most vibrant and fleshed out. In fact, the first thing one notices about him is his name, French of course, and, moreover, it seems a subtle joke that Pierre, the illegitimate son of a Count “well-known grandee of Catherine’s time,”²⁰ is the character most often described as “natural.”²¹ From the first moment the reader

encounters Pierre, it is very clear he is ill-suited to the life in he finds himself living. Look no further than his first description, his first utterance:

Pierre murmured something unintelligible, and continued to look round as if in search of something. On his way to the aunt he bowed to the little princess with a pleased smile, as if to an intimate acquaintance.²²

Pierre's mumbling, bumbling introduction gives him away immediately; his smile to "the little princess" further reveals the unaware tactlessness we come to love. But this scene does much more than set up Pierre as a young man ill-suited to high society. In this brief glimpse, one senses a towering dilemma forming, one that will reoccur throughout the rest of *War and Peace*. It is in the continual "look" that Pierre surveys his surroundings with that most illuminates this problem. The "search" for "something" occupies the young Count Bezukov from this point on. This "something" has no set definition. And it may be in the moment that this word—paramount to the entire book—might earn a solid meaning would also be the moment of its undoing.

Pierre moves most fluidly between Tolstoy's two authorial modes. This is because Pierre's preoccupation—rendered as his externalized unawareness, his physical enormity (always "rather bigger than any other man in the room"), and his "shy, but observant natural expression"—is at odds with his inner emotional life, which is sensitively preoccupied with broad questions of human existence.²³

In the peculiar split between Pierre's inner and outer appearance, the issue becomes one of divided attention. On the one hand, a reader might pay close heed to Pierre's external or physical descriptions. These appear to correspond with "absolute language." Take, for example, the moment in which Pierre sinks into despair over his situation:

Pierre was one of those people who, in spite of an appearance of what is called weak character, do not seek a confidant in their troubles. He digested his sufferings alone.²⁴

The description seems to issue from a position of complete moral authority. Not only is Pierre's character broadened to fit a wide spectrum of possible people *like* Pierre, the generalization makes a moralizing claim: that people like Pierre, "in spite of what is called weak character," act in a way that closely aligns with his current condition. The sentence fuses Pierre's internal life with his external appearance; he definitely "was one of those people." Yet Tolstoy's portrayal—although it seems absolute in its definitive characterization—yields to a significantly more complex vision of the relationship between "appearance" (what names itself as the broad "weak character") and the reality of such a character. The implicit moralizing terminus of such a descriptions feels lacking, leaving a reader to wonder whether some nuance might exist in the definition of such a "weak character." Whatever subtlety might reside in the narrow wedge, between what seems-to-be and the truth of Pierre's specific condition, is one of the most perplexing, if not infuriating, aspects of Tolstoy's universalizing use of language. All the reader can be quite sure of comes at the conclusion: "he digested his sufferings alone." Looking Tolstoy's own words offers the most coherent way out of this dilemma, and one must remember that the arc of human life can never be boxed into a precise, overwhelming generality, but exist as "innumerable." To believe the author's "absolute" statement would be to go against that same author's own words. The reader must be careful, therefore, not to judge immediately, but rather take heed.

Pierre's internal life is much richer than his universalizing descriptions betray. The richness of his character is most stark in moments when he turns over and over, in his own

mind, deep unanswerable questions. During these moment, when a statement of “absolute” or authoritative truth is suddenly introduced, it seems absurd, and out of place. Moreover, when these “absolute” claims appear directly after Pierre has been in the process of deeply thinking through something, they do nothing to forward the narrative at all. The difficulty in reading Tolstoy’s “absolute language” as a sort of scripture, Morson likens them to be, is because, for all his statements of apparently objective truth, “no idea is being put forward” at all. Another moment evidences this curious particular within the text:

“I understand the deception and confusion,” he thought, “but how am I to tell them all that I see? I have tried and have always found that they too in the depths of their souls understand it as I do, and only try not to see it. So it appears that it must be so! But I—what is to become of me?” thought he. He had the unfortunate capacity many men, especially Russians, have of seeing and believing in the possibility of goodness and truth, but of seeing the evil and falsehood of life too clearly to be able to take a serious part in it.²⁵

Pierre sees something which he cannot identify, in himself not yet unrealized, but attempting to be understood. He still does know “what is to become” of him. There is a sudden change of register, from actual “confusion,” to universalizing statement about people *like* Pierre, (especially “Russians”). When one reads the statement itself—concrete or authoritative as its style may be—it does not offer much concerning Pierre’s particular situation at all. These statements appear, and continue to appear, as a particular kind of Tolstoyan cliché, but because they seem to so definitively outline “many men,” the “absolute” is complicated; Pierre’s subjective experience is of much more interest.

When he is immersed in philosophical daydreaming, Pierre appears the most unselfconscious and unaware. What formerly might have appeared as absolute becomes inverted or distorted. It is during these moments, as I have outlined above, that Tolstoy’s authoritative mode is revealed as faulty. Pierre—the character scholars often argue most

closely resembles Tolstoy—continually redefines his position within the text. Although the structure and cadence of expression appears to come from a position of power, what is missing? Namely: broad strokes make little allowance for the nonexistent, for those “black spots,” those “shadows,” discrete and unassimilable into the wide breadth of any absolutist’s project. Take this other example of Pierre, after he has challenged the young rake Dolokhov, whom he believes to be carrying on with his wife. Pierre wins the duel and flees to Saint Petersburg from Moscow in a state of despair. As he waits at a station between the two cities, his interior life comes into full display:

Pierre gave no answer, for he neither heard nor saw anything. He had begun to think of the last station and was still pondering on the same question—one so important that he took no notice of what went on around him. . . Without changing his careless attitude, Pierre looked at them over his spectacles unable to understand what they wanted or how they could go on living without having solved the problems that so absorbed him. . . no matter what he thought about, he always returned to the same questions which he could not solve and yet could not cease to ask himself. It was as if the thread of the chief screw which held his life together were stripped, so that the screw could not get in or out, but went turning uselessly in the same place.²⁶

Tolstoy relates Pierre’s crisis in two ways: first through exterior depiction, his “careless attitude” and the same searching “look” with which he surveys his surroundings, that appeared in the introduction of his character; following this, Pierre’s internal life becomes visible to the reader. Surprisingly, all that appears “careless” in Pierre dissolves when the eye turns inwardly. Although he *seems* unaware as in his look, Pierre’s principle concern is in the lives of those around him. He cannot comprehend the possibility that those he sees might “go on living without having solved the problems that so absorbed him.” In this thought precisely, the particular exists within the purview of the universal. The crux of Pierre’s entire character lives in his ability to view the world as is, in “all its innumerable, inexhaustible

manifestations,” to even “love” expansively everything that he encounters equally, and still to search endlessly for resolution.

In this way, Pierre becomes entangled within the universalizing language that claims him as a person of “weak character” and stops there, and the multitudinous particular that one universal might contain, that continues to turn without any conceivable end. That useless “turning” of Pierre’s mind complicates Tolstoy’s authorial voice and renders the “absolute language” of the moment inadequate. Whether or not Pierre’s unresolved “question” *can* be answered proves itself as worthless as the pursuit itself. Indeed, that very unknowability is what excites Pierre the most, and most succinctly captures his struggle. These universal questions defy Tolstoy’s characteristic “absolute language” because, by nature, they precisely deflect any attempts to answer their contradictions. The reader will encounter, again and again, moments that evince Pierre’s dilemma, in which it is: “as if the thread of the chief screw which held his life together were stripped,” and the “turning” does not terminate in any fixed place.

There are innumerable examples in *War and Peace* that further confirm the disjointed parallel between the absolute and the limited. Gary Saul Morson describes the Tolstoyan narrative as that which “does not say; it is a saying. Admitting no authorship, it condescends to no dialogue.”²⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin, an avid lover of Dostoevsky and equally avid abhorrer of Tolstoy, lurks behind Morson’s claims. Bakhtin’s distinction between the “dialogic,” which engages in conversation between separate, subjective voices, finds its foil in the “monological”²⁸ dimensions Morson points to in his term “absolute language.” Bakhtin identifies Tolstoy’s fictional “world” as one without “a second autonomous voice,”²⁹ and Caryl Emerson follows up with the assessment that any “unity” framed as absolute or

necessary rings “false because it is one an apparent oneness; in fact, monologism demarcates, abstracts, excludes, and it is only from within this closed. . . system that everything can be seen.”³⁰ Morson harps on Bakhtin’s original idea when he pegs *War and Peace* as stylistically closer to “Scripture”³¹ than fiction, a statement that comments on Tolstoy’s autonomous voice, leaving room only for “unity” while shunning all that goes against an “apparent oneness.”

While both Morson and Bakhtin make enlightening claims, I might tend away from identifying Tolstoy as simply a relay of absolutes. Turning to Tolstoy’s own life, one might describe him, at one point, as a “teacher of life.”³² But to look only at this singular aspect of “teacher” within Tolstoy—a role that he himself desired more fervently than any other—would be to forsake that other part of him which was perpetually in the throes of anguish and doubt. I might turn to a description of another author which, although it may appear an aberration, offers an interesting insight into Tolstoy’s world. In 1868, Nathaniel Hawthorne depicted Herman Melville as a man:

wandering to-and-fro over these deserts, as dismal and monotonous as the sand hills amid which we were sitting. He can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other.³³

These words, in another context, might be written of Tolstoy, and they highlight problem that Morson and Bakhtin overlook in their descriptions of the Russian author’s fictional world. This is because Tolstoy, as much as he might have bounded after the comfort of absolute truths, could “neither believe nor comfortable in his unbelief.” The many halts and “crises” that arise throughout *War and Peace*, although they may contain fragmentary moments of “absolute language,” do not mark the book as an emblem of “oneness” or the

perfected “organic process” that Emerson and Bakhtin both see in Tolstoy. The screw does not cease “turning,” and, however scriptural Tolstoy’s authorial style might be, the crises that continually trouble characters like Pierre disclose knowledge’s limitations. Take, for example, another moment with Pierre, at the same point of crisis after his duel:

“And I” continued Pierre, “shot Dolokhov because I considered myself injured, and Louis XVI was executed because they considered him a criminal, and a year later they executed those who executed him—also for the same reason. What is bad? What is good? What should one love and what hate? What does one live for? And what am I? What is life, and what is death? What power governs all? There was no answer to all of these questions except one, and that not a logical answer and not at all a reply to them. The answer was: “You’ll die and all will end. You’ll die and know all, or cease asking.” But dying was also dreadful.³⁴

In this string of questions, it appears that only one “answer” is available to the young Count. But this proves “not a logical answer and not at all a reply” to any of the questions Pierre asks himself. The moment does not identify any absolute—indeed the effect is quite the opposite—and Pierre realizes that no possible answer can be presented until his death, when “all will end” and he will “know all” or “cease asking.” This moment almost causes Pierre to plunge into despair, but the crisis is brief, and shortly after this spiral he will meet an inspirational Freemason and join the Brotherhood.

III

The Aesthetic Experience and Conversion-in-Progress

The oscillation between crisis and revelation often comes successively. Usually the crisis comes first, incited by an external event; the character sinks into despair, as we see

Pierre thrash in the throes of despair at the station. The turn—at which point the crisis transforms to realization—also relies on the stimulus of an external or aesthetic experience. The great distinction between crisis and realization manifests almost exclusively in this way. If these oscillating moments occurred less frequently, perhaps, the reader might deign to believe that they could be significant conversion points in the lives of Tolstoy's characters. But these turns crop up everywhere. Turgenev criticized *War and Peace* because of these insistent shiftings, condemning them as “vacillations of one and the same emotion, or state, placed so relentlessly by Tolstoy. . .I love, so I say, but actually I hate, and so on.”³⁵ Turgenev does have a point—the same issues that plague Pierre plague other characters in a similar way. The aesthetically charged realizations that pervade *War and Peace* can be interpreted in their instant as true revelation, and those characters involved feel them intensely as such. The “vacillations” throughout the narrative could be chalked up to the search for a singular meaning, as Turgenev believes, but these experiences vary. They occur spontaneously in a manifold of characters and vanish as soon as they are taken up. The many crises led by these rapid shifts of mood offer one example of the incompleteness and plurality of revelation, and the rejection of a singular “truth.” The experience of “crisis” for Pierre most often manifests in his internal confrontation with the hard questions of human meaning. But moments of realization do not always occur in this way. Often, the experience slips in, incited by an everyday event.

Take the example of Rostov, a young count who does not wander too far into the deeper quandaries that trip up and agonize a character like Pierre. He has lost 43,000 rubles in a foolish bet, and faces the guilt of asking his father, the older Count Rostov, for money—his father has already given him an allowance and told him he must be “economic this

time.”³⁶ At the height of his guilt, Rostov falls into a sudden, unexpected joyful mood as he hears his sister, Natasha, singing.

How moved was something that was finest in Rostov’s soul! And this something was apart from everything else in the world and above everything else in the world. “What were losses, and Dolokhov, and words of honor? All nonsense! One might kill and rob and be happy..”³⁷

This mood quickly passes from Rostov, as soon as Natasha ceases singing. But the moment accomplishes two interesting things. It first reveals the presence of something universal, “finest in Rostov’s soul, while at the same time “above everything else in the world.” This suggests that to find what is most precious in the soul transcends all that might exist in the world, while it remains specifically present only in the soul of one particular, in this case somewhat peripheral character. But the feeling is transient, and soon vanishes—it is nothing but a feeling that moves Rostov to this reverie, prompted by the voice of an external figure. It “vibrates” a “chord” both in the real, physical sense and moves toward the ephemeral, “above the world.” The effect is a division, or splitting of realities, at the very least. The extraordinary can be found only in the ordinary, for Tolstoy. The ellipses as conclusion is a favorite move for Tolstoy, precisely because its effect does not conclude anything. By lengthening the final moment, the possibility for a contradiction is always present: “one might kill and rob and be happy..” The sentence lingers, suggesting that a turn might be revealed as it trails off..

By leaving Rostov’s momentary reverie unresolved, the emphasis is placed on the process through which the experience is understood. In this case, a brief lapse incites no self-awareness; he simply hears, is moved, and returns to life.

But sometimes there might be a gleam of awareness, even in the moments leading up to and within the realization, an awareness that the experience is powerful only because of the conditions surrounding it. This is the case in Pierre when he meets the Mason, Bazdeev, after the crisis I outlined previously concerning his adulterous wife. Although Pierre remains a Freemason for some time after his initial encounter with the Mason, the reason for his “conversion” is the source of some skepticism even as it is occurring.

Pierre listened with a swelling heart, gazing into the Mason’s face with shining eyes, not interrupting him or questioning him, but believing with his whole soul that the stranger said. Whether he accepted the wise reasoning contained in the Mason’s words; or believed as a child believes, in the speaker’s tone of conviction and earnestness; or the tremor of the speaker’s voice—which sometimes almost broke—or those brilliant aged eyes grown old in this conviction. . . at any rate, Pierre longed in his whole soul to believe and he did believe, and felt a joyful sense of comfort, regeneration, and return to life.³⁸

Because of the multiple conditions of Pierre’s “believing,” it is apparent that Pierre simply believes because he “longed in his whole soul to believe.” There is even a glimmer of awareness within Pierre, perhaps, in his acknowledgment of a fervent desire for confirmation and meaning in a life that, only a little prior to this moment, was filled with unanswerable questions. Morson points out that Tolstoy’s fictional world is filled with the “implicit ‘for instance’ ” that creates an impression of conditionality which is often really “close to explicit.”³⁹ The passage I have provided functions in a slightly different way: instead of the conditional “for instance,” the reader is faced with a host of possible motivations for Pierre’s reaction. The reader is not left with a good answer as to which motive impels Pierre, and this is precisely the move that Tolstoy makes throughout. The reader implicitly recognizes that Pierre feels “joyful” because this is what he wishes for and needs and because he sees in the Mason a man whose “conviction” suggests an alternate way

of living. Pierre is able to “return to life” anew once he sees his own position from an alternate vantage point. The changing of perspective is of utmost importance specifically for Pierre. Although he cannot settle on one singular perspective or “answer,” he remains open to the multiplicity of all possible experiences. Because of this, Pierre appears as the character who most rejects an “absolute.”

The major distinction between Pierre and Rostov does not reside in the feeling of revery—in this way Turgenev is correct in his assessment of sameness within the various “oscillations and vacillations” of experience. But in Pierre, the transience of these moods is tinged with self-awareness. This does not lessen the moment itself, but allows for the possibility that, despite Pierre’s constant attempts to find a solid, absolute truth in his life, this does not overwhelm his more intense desire for an alternative perspective. The “absolute” can, in Pierre, be seen as in a pluralized sense because of this. And in no other character do these two positions exist in such harmony.

IV

Monism and Pluralism Through Pierre

For the last possible reading of Pierre’s relationship with the absolute and the limited, I might introduce two other terms. These may be found in Isaiah Berlin’s study of Tolstoy, and identified as “monism,” which sides with Morson’s notion of “absolute language,” and the belief in an overwhelming unity. The opposite pole on this spectrum is “pluralism,” which survives through multiplicity and, naturally, disunity. Although the use of “absolute language” does not necessarily line up in complete harmony with “monism,” the two terms function

well in a discussion of Tolstoy's fictional life. Berlin's definitions of "monism" and "pluralism" might be helpful in moving forward.

For there exists a great chasm between those, on the one side, who relate everything to a single central vision, one system . . . in terms in which they understand, think and feel—a single universal organizing principle in terms of which alone all that they are and say has significance—⁴⁰

Before moving on, one can see a certain likemindedness to Morson. Turgenev too would agree that the Tolstoyan lives function in a "single universal organizing principle" which does not entertain the possibility of variousness or alternate perspectives. If a reader believes, as Bakhtin did, that Tolstoy's characters offer only the singular truth Tolstoy himself places in their mouths, this first definition would be perfectly suitable. Morson's "absolute language" lives here, alongside that manifestation of Tolstoy as "teacher of life." But Berlin goes on:

on the other side, those who pursue many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory, connected, if at all, in some *de facto* way. . . these last lead lives, perform acts, and entertain ideas that are centrifugal rather than centripetal, their thought is scattered or diffused, moving on many levels, seizing upon the essence of a vast variety of experiences and objects for what they are in themselves, without, consciously or unconsciously, seeking to fit them into, or exclude them from, any one unchanging, all embracing, sometimes self-contradictory and incomplete, at times fanatical, unitary inner vision.⁴¹

Initially, the characters in *War and Peace* appear to fit into the first unitary and "centripetal" system with more ease than this "centrifugal" one. But, as we see in *Pierre*, the *inclination* or *desire* to settle on a "single central vision" takes on far more intensity than the unified system. Pierre listens to Bazdeev hoping to move closer toward the heart of something which he does not understand. In effect, by continually searching for what Berlin calls the "one big thing,"⁴² Pierre immerses himself completely in "a vast variety of experiences."

Each time Pierre finds himself in a situation which he believes—believes in his whole soul—will be the answer to his continual uncertainty, he is turned away. Pierre most accurately fits into this second category, not because he does not desire to find that “inner vision” but because he has the ability to place himself in the multiplicity of experience. He cannot be persuaded in full to accept that “incomplete, at times fanatical” system that allows only for the absolute, for the unreconcilable.

Berlin is quick to notice this discrepancy in Tolstoy. “When we come to Count Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy” he writes, “and ask this of him—ask whether. . . he is a monist or a pluralist, whether his vision is of one or of many. . .there is no clear or immediate answer.”⁴³ This leads back to the issue that I have mapped out in Pierre’s external and internal conditions, a chart which leads in two divergent directions. While appearing unaware, Pierre’s interior is in fact brimming with far too much awareness, and while searching for an absolute, Pierre finds immerses himself in a multiplicity of possible absolute, etc. Although it appears that Berlin is correct to state that no “immediate” response can be found to reconcile these two parts of Tolstoy, Pierre, at least, favors “many ends” rather than “one unchanging.” His journey straddles both, but his actual stance falls to the side in which action is involved with action itself.

Perhaps the best example of Pierre’s pluralized position occurs when he sees the comet of 1812 pass across the sky. His reaction to the event is preceded by an encounter with Natasha, the most significant female character in the book. Natasha, who will be discussed extensively in the third chapter, often prompts momentary halts within the narrative, as noted previously with her brother, Rostov. After Pierre parts from Natasha, Pierre has already been primed for the experience he is about to have. Despite his passion for Natasha,

Pierre's moment with her leaves him in a state bordering on crisis, in which his reality appears to him ugly in comparison to his previous rapture.

At the entrance to the Arbat Square an immense expanse of dark starry sky presented itself to his eyes. Almost in the center of it, above the Prechistenka Boulevard, surrounded and sprinkled on all sides by stars but distinguished from them all by its nearness to the earth, its white light, and its long uplifted tail, shone the enormous and brilliant comet of 1812—the comet which was said to portend all kinds of woes and the end of the world. In Pierre, however, that comet with its long luminous tail aroused no feeling of fear. On the contrary **he gazed joyfully, his eyes moist with tears, at this bright comet which, having traveled in its orbit with inconceivable velocity through immeasurable space, seemed suddenly- like an arrow piercing the earth- to remain fixed in a chosen spot, vigorously holding its tail erect, shining and displaying its white light amid countless other scintillating stars.** It seemed to Pierre that this comet fully responded to what was passing in his own softened and uplifted soul, now blossoming into a new life.⁴⁴ (my emphasis)

It seems that Pierre's response to the comet is situated wholly in his own individualized experience. Although the event “was said to portend all kinds of woes and the end of the world” in a collective sense, the personal experience surpasses and forgets this collective sensibility. Much could be said concerning Pierre's reaction; for my purposes I am most interested in the final moment of the experience—which I have bolded—when Pierre's situation finds parallel in the comet itself. On the one hand, Pierre feels a singular connection in the “fixed” “spot” that the comet appears to occupy. It seems that, for an instant, the “bright comet” has one specific place in the sky. But this is far from the truth. On the contrary, Pierre is moved by the “immeasurable space” through which that comet has travelled. Although it appears to occupy a “fixed” position, the significance of the experience relies on the inconceivable movement of the comet. Those “countless other scintillating stars,” surviving alongside the singular one, do not discount the particular comet's significance. But in pairing the one with the many, without any logical cause in doing so, it is possible for Pierre to witness both sides, and revel in the multiple that might

exist alongside the singular. Pierre is allowed this moment *precisely* because of this multiplicity. He cannot see singular unity, but he can feel intensely his own experience, knowing all along that his particular experience exists “amid countless other scintillating stars.” By understanding that the impossibility of remaining “fixed in a chosen spot,” Pierre can fully appreciate his own position as the same as the “other.” Instead of moving inward, Pierre expands outwardly, and thrives only when he allows himself some form of acceptance.

Pierre, though, does not always accept this position. He does not complete any full turn, even by the end of *War and Peace*.⁴⁵ The peace that Pierre does find by the end functions through seeing that “everything... was worthy of being loved.”⁴⁶ The flexibility that I have attempted to outline in Pierre makes more sense when related to an equally flexible system, one corresponding to the “innumerable and inexhaustible” rather than the absolute.

Chapter I End Notes

¹² Berlin, Isaiah. *Hedgehog and the Fox*, New York Simon and Schuster, 1953. page. 1.

¹³Tolstoy, Leo, et al. *War and Peace: the Maude Translation, Backgrounds and Sources, Criticism*. Norton, 1996. *Rusky Arkhiv, (Russian Archive)* 1868. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1942. 1353-61.

¹⁴ Ibid. 1090.

¹⁵ Ibid. 1087.

¹⁶ Ibid. [Letter to P.D. Boborykin—July or August, 1865], pg. 1084

¹⁷“Tolstoy's Absolute Language .” *Hidden in Plain View: Narrative and Creative Potentials in "War and Peace"*, by Gary Saul. Morson, Sclar Press, 1988, p. 9.

¹⁸ Tolstoy, Leo, et al. *War and Peace: the Maude Translation, Backgrounds and Sources, Criticism*. Norton, 1996.
Henry James, [Loose Baggy Monsters], 1114.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ The first description of Pierre evidences his naturalness: “Though he was certainly rather bigger than the other men in the room, her anxiety could only have reference to the clever though shy, but observant and natural, expression which distinguished him from everyone else in that drawing room” (8).

²² Ibid., 8.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid. 277.

²⁵ Ibid, 477.

²⁶ Ibid. 303.

²⁷“Tolstoy's Absolute Language .” *Hidden in Plain View: Narrative and Creative Potentials in "War and Peace"*, by Gary Saul. Morson, Sclar Press, 1988, p. 9.

²⁸ Emerson, Caryl. “The Tolstoy Connection in Bakhtin.” *PMLA*, vol. 100, no. 1, 1985, pp. 68–80. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/462201.

²⁹ Ibid. 69.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ "Tolstoy's Absolute Language ." Hidden in Plain View: Narrative and Creative Potentials in "War and Peace", by Gary Saul Morson, Sclar Press, 1988, p. 9.

³² Emerson, Caryl. "The Tolstoy Connection in Bakhtin." *PMLA*, vol. 100, no. 1, 1985, pp. 68-80. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/462201. 68.

³³ *Call me Ishmael*, pg.

³⁴ Tolstoy, Leo, et al. War and Peace: the Maude Translation, Backgrounds and Sources, Criticism. Norton, 1996. *Russky Arkhiv, (Russian Archive)* 1868. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1942. 304.

³⁵ Ibid. 1113. [*Letter to P.V. Annenkov—Baden-Baden, 2 February, 1898*]

³⁶ Ibid. 294

³⁷ Ibid. 299.

³⁸ Ibid. 307.

³⁹ "Tolstoy's Absolute Language ." Hidden in Plain View: Narrative and Creative Potentials in "War and Peace", by Gary Saul Morson, Sclar Press, 1988, p. 17.

⁴⁰ Berlin, Isaiah. Hedgehog and the Fox, New York Simon and Schuster, 1953. page. 1.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² In his book, *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, Berlin makes a wonderful study of Tolstoy's theory of history. Ibid. 1-2.

⁴³ Ibid. 3.

⁴⁴ Tolstoy, Leo, et al. War and Peace: the Maude Translation, Backgrounds and Sources, Criticism. Norton, 1996. *Russky Arkhiv, (Russian Archive)* 1868. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1942. 534.

⁴⁵ This is an arguable point. Pierre is described after his engagement to Natasha as coming to a resolution: All the views he formed of men and circumstances at this time remained true for him always. He not only did not renounce them subsequently, but when he was in doubt or inwardly at variance, he referred to the views he had held at this time of his madness and they always proved correct."

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Chapter Two: Prince Andrei

“Vanity of Vanities, says the preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.”

—*Ecclesiastes I, L. 2.*

I

Prince Andrei as a Possible “Hedgehog”

While a character like Pierre presents an ideal example of flexibility and pluralism, another character invites an alternate reading of the relationship between the limited and the absolute. This is Prince Andrei Bolkonski, a possible foil to Pierre. Andrei possesses all that Pierre lacks, he is: “handsome,” “measured,” well-mannered and decorous.⁴⁷ While a character like Pierre appears unaware and ungainly in society in an *unconscious* manner, Andrei actively loathes this society. While Pierre relates to his surroundings in a “natural” way—and this often gets him into trouble—Andrei’s affected and ironic persona illustrates his antipathy towards the society and its artificiality; he is, in a word, “unnatural.” The initial description of Andrei, like Pierre, presents a major element in his character which will follow him for the rest of the book.

Everything about [Andrei], from his weary, bored expression to his quiet, measured step, offered a most striking contrast to his lively wife. It was evident that he not only knew everyone in the drawing room, but he found them to be so tiresome that it wearied him to look or listen to them.⁴⁸

So, in Andrei we find a man who is “weary,” “bored,” with the life of the “drawing room.”

While Pierre is often unaware of his environment, it is also clear that the lives of others

concern him deeply. In Andrei, not only is he unaware he is *actively* so. The qualities these two characters have in common complicates matters. Again, the reader sees Tolstoy in the act of writing an absolute when Andrei's motivations are, apparently, unmasked: "it was evident that he not only knew everyone. . .he found them so tiresome that it wearied him." Remembering the first moments with Pierre's searching "look" might be helpful in reading the look with which Andrei surveys in this scene. This moment tells much concerning Andrei. Unlike Pierre, Prince Bolkonski does not passively wander "to-and-fro," absorbing and turning over in his mind all that he comes across. Rather he must shed his indifference before he can undergo a dramatic turn. Usually this occurs to Andrei during intensely stimulating periods—while in battle, for example, many of his experiences resemble Pierre's pluralistic turn.

The major difference between the characters has everything to do with Andrei's relation to the self. Pierre's impulse towards the plural is, at the core, relative, a sort of radical openness utterly irreconcilable with Prince Andrei, who he can view himself exclusively in *relation* to the other, centrifugally. Andrei cannot fully appreciate the fondness for the pluralistic, which, for Pierre, offers a kind of comfort. In every place that Andrei finds something certain, something absolute, Pierre brushes up against a barrier. This determines Andrei's fate, and dooms his character to death.

"Andrew Bolkonsky⁴⁹ is nobody. . ." Tolstoy writes, in a letter to L.I. Volkonskaya in 1865, while at work on *War and Peace*. Again, six months later he reiterates himself in another letter: "I don't like Prince Andrew."⁵⁰ Of all principal characters in *War and Peace*, it seems that Tolstoy struggled most with the younger Bolkonski. Although, of course, one must take the musings of an author deep in the of writing process with a grain of salt, there is surely

something quite fascinating about the quote; it offers a kind of voyeuristic look into how Tolstoy thought of Andrei's character, just as he was developing him—yes, “a nobody.” The negative term is essential to Andrei, who continually faces crises that culminate in a nihilistic realization that “all is vanity,” that there is “nothing” for him in a world of “falsehood.”⁵¹ These moments are of paramount significance, and I will return to them in the third section of the chapter. Tolstoy also tells his readers that he intended to kill of the Prince: “I needed a brilliant young man to be killed,” but he soon realized that the young aristocrat would be useful to him later. “He caught my interest. . . and I took mercy on him, only wounding him severely instead of killing him.”⁵²

Tolstoy's apparently personal animus towards Andrei is interesting because, it turns out, the Prince's actions are underpinned by a monistic, single-minded, even absolutist way of thinking. As a necessary foil, Pierre succeeds when he can sense and understand a pattern inherent to the world—an order, hidden, which gives meaning to an otherwise chaotic otherness; simply put: Pierre is most comfortable when, as Morson notes, “there are *no* choices to be made.” Andrei is most at ease when he can seize the initiative and, by extension, “maximize choice and action.”⁵³ In this reading, Pierre, it *seems*, might even favor the absolute, unified system, which of course contains obvious similarities to Morson and Bakhtin's assessment of Tolstoy's style and language. Taking into account Pierre's capacity for pluralism, however, it would appear that it is Andrei, in fact, who evidences more singular unity, at least within his character.

Pithily put: Pierre flourishes amidst indecision, Andrei flounders. This contrast, I argue, distinguishes Andrei as a character who's brand of personal monism eventually portends his downfall. The major issue in this reading is borne out in this very distinction,

which concerns the tension between the limited and the absolute, the monistic and pluralistic—and if Andrei’s approach to life does in fact corresponded to a “monological” one, it is of an ultimately failing sort. This might be due to Andrei’s inability to relate his unified experience to his exterior world, thus continually devolving into investigation of the self. But, in light of this, it is interesting to observe that Tolstoy perhaps accidentally placed Andrei’s foil in a position of pluralism. Andrei finds, in his in his most intense experiences, a connection that is unfailingly personal. This relates to his desire to exercise “free will” and play an “active” role in his interactions with the exterior world. To understand Andrei’s situation, and why his private monism presents an issue in the relationship between the absolute and the limited within *War and Peace*, it will be necessary to address Tolstoy’s own fractious theory of history, which serves as a great example of the disjunction between Pierre’s pluralistic, subjective and turning vision—a disjunction I plan to address in greater detail later.

Through Andrei, the limitation of experience can be seen through the self, in a way in which a reader cannot find in Pierre; that limitation itself resides in Andrei’s inability to engage in a search for meaning, in which he is not fixed, the center of the circle. The hopeless conclusion echoes that famous formulation in Ecclesiastes: “vanity of vanity, all is vanity. . .all things are full of weariness, man cannot utter it.”⁵⁴ This statement Andrei’s mantra of sorts, and this reliance—a reliance which is absolute for the Prince—precludes the possibility of comprehending a meaningful existence.

II

Implausibility of Pluralism in Andrei and His Contempt

Although Andrei's movements seemingly coincide with a more unified system, his problems spring around that very way of relating to the ambiguities of a world defined by chaos and an impenetrable order. This manifests itself clearly in his attitudes toward society. Unlike Pierre, Andrei *can* function in perfect harmony with the system; he has mastered it, but his disregard for the functioning "mill" of social events reveals that, although he may understand the minutiae of the sitting room, he feels nothing but contempt for everyone in it. The contempt that the Prince feels does not totally rise above self-loathing. But because he is himself aware of the inadequacy and insipidness of society life, the majority of Andrei's spite never results in self-reflection. He feels above his own situation, thereby distancing the flawed external world from himself. So when Pierre asks his friend why he has chosen to join the army, the Prince replies:

'What for? I don't know. I must. Besides that I am going. . .
I am going because the life I am leading does not suit me!'"⁵⁵

Andrei finds the "life" he is currently "leading" unsuitable. Although he participates in this kind of society, he repeatedly refuses to admit that it is his own life which "does not suit" him, but rather the set system; he regards *that* as, at root, faulty, something which exists entirely separately from himself.

When Andrei departs society to go to war, his predictably finds the soldierly life much more suitable—not an altogether bewildering development, considering, as we have established, he favors choice and action over the philosophical rumination and indecision of

Pierre. After he has left Saint Petersburg, Andrei's entire "expression" undergoes revision. He "has no time to think of the impression he makes on others," and his indolent and weary gaze is replaced: "his face expressed satisfaction with himself and those around him."⁵⁶ The rigid world of the war paradoxically offers him agency, the hope for glory. Despite this hopeful development, the very system undergirding the way of being in the army consistently dismays him. He feels again and again the inadequacy of those around him. His judgmental gaze, however, never returns to himself. For Andrei, singular, self-involved perfection involves an idealized view of honor, which might be construed as the ambitious "careerist," as Patrica Carden notes.⁵⁷ But Andrei's major concern can be located in his disappointment and disenchantment with a system which consistently lets him down, a system made-up of people who are passive participants. His disillusionment is "prompted by an activity he has previously respected is nothing but a performance,"⁵⁸ as Morson correctly notices. This disenchantment undergoes various mutations, and leads only by degrees to Andrei's eventual loss of faith, not only in a variety of systems, but in life itself.

After a meeting with the council of war, Andrei's dissatisfaction, finally, folds inwardly.

The council of war, at which Prince Andrew had not been able to express his opinion as he had hoped to, left on him a vague and uneasy impression. . . "But was it really not possible for Kutuzov to state his views plainly to the Emperor? Is it possible that on account of court and personal considerations tens of thousands of lives, and my life, *my* life," he thought, "must be risked?" . . . "Yes it is very likely that I shall be killed tomorrow," he thought . . . "Yes, tomorrow, tomorrow!" he thought. "Tomorrow everything may be over for me! All these memories will be no more, none of them will have a meaning for me. Tomorrow perhaps, even certainly, I have a presentiment that for the first time I shall have to show all I can do."⁵⁹

Andrei views the council's inability to "state" "views plainly" as a structural issue, one which carries with it grave consequences for the soldiers who are exposed to the peril of its very human whims. Still, Andrei's animated uneasiness is not entirely selfless; he is concerned with his own fate, the only vessel of action that deeply interests him. Because of this, Andrei's thinking wanders from the external multiplicity (those "tens of thousands of lives") directly to his own life, "*my* life," which is emphasized. "Tomorrow, tomorrow!" Andrei thinks. While Pierre sees his fellow man curiously, wondering where in the world a perfect and "worthy sphere of activity"⁶⁰ might be, Andrei clearly cannot direct his attention toward an ideal beyond himself. When Prince Andrei falls into reveries, they occur linearly; "tomorrow everything might be over" leaves open the possibility for direct action. Although Andrei's attention during this particular scene is focused on the possibility of heroic action, which effectively turns his mind away from terror "tomorrow" might bring, another side of the young Prince Bolkonski is revealed in the process:

"But death and suffering?" suggested another voice. Prince Andrei, however, did not answer that voice and went on dreaming of his triumphs. . . The next battle is won by him alone. Kutuzov is removed and he is appointed . . . "Well and then?" asked the other voice. "If before that you are not ten times wounded, killed, or betrayed, well. . . what then? . . ." "Well then," Prince Andrei answered himself, "I don't know what will happen and don't want to know, and can't, but if I want this—want glory, want to be known to men, want to be loved by them, it is not my fault that I want it and want nothing but that and live only for that. Yes, for that alone! I shall never tell anyone, but, oh God! What am I to do if I love nothing but fame and men's esteem? Death, wounds, the loss of family—I fear nothing."⁶¹

The other "voice" in this moment will continue to surface. Andrei's doubt is dangerous, alternating between personal ambition which is part and parcel with a set, codified system, and the reality that every system he encounters fails to appeal to him. Andrei vows to keep

his own motivating impulse—that possibility that he loves "nothing but fame and men's esteem"—a secret. The voice in Andrei, which returns to the portentous prospect of "death and suffering" leads him to a hopeless question: "Well, and then?" Aylmer Maude notices a clear relationship between this exact doubt—doubt which foreshadows both Andrei's despair over the all-permeating vanity in the world, and which leads him to dramatically conclude "I fear nothing"—and the doubt that permeated Tolstoy's later life, outlined in *Confessions*.⁶²

Andrei's fearless declaration leads us to two possible readings. One centers on soldierly virtue, the sort of mordant brittle realism that serves an officer well. This reading comes from that first voice, discussed above, which daydreams of "triumphs." Here, Andrei in a literal sense fears "nothing," as no tragedy can touch him in his pursuit of glory and virtue. And thus the significance of the absolute in Andrei's mind is at the forefront; he can take only one possible action and it will be of his own design. Alternately, another reading travels in a much bleaker direction: the argument that Andrei's statement has less to do with an absence of fear and everything to do with terror—the terror of fearing "nothing," of a pervading sense of worthlessness that renders the pursuit of any abstract virtue like glory or valor meaningless, a terror at fundamental unknowability. "Nothing," then becomes not a subject, but an object, an agony that Andrei possesses, and never chose to.

These two possibilities are another example of absolute language within the text, revealing his complex inner world. While Andrei's obsession with choice and activity are his most prominent character-traits, his layered self-monologue reveals for another dimension: his surprising, deep doubt, his endless grappling with the impossibility of choice in a world defined by meaningless and vanity. Pierre's flexible outlook, his plural relationship to

ambiguity, frees him to travel in any direction on the compass in his search for meaning; Andrei seems to realize he may only travel in two, north and south, and on the same road, which is to say he may either look outward to the world of drawing rooms and the war council, never fully understanding either's coherence, or turn his gaze inward, ever skeptical of both.

III

Reading Andrei's Revelatory Experience as a Secular Turn

Already, in Pierre we can detect an alternate system characterized by flexibility and pluralism. Although one might read Pierre's ultimate peace at the end of the book as a kind of post-conversion, in which his doubts are assimilated into the domestic sphere, he never completely settles into a singular or defined position, but accepted the continued possibility for more pluralistic turns.⁶³ It might be helpful to remember that, for Pierre, the absence of a fixed monistic system—in which the screw could cease its turning, and the order might be unveiled—is not entirely a loss; in fact, the very absence is fruitful, in a way he might never understand, in its potential for a kind of radical fragmentation as a form of symmetry.

I might suggest that Andrei embodies a secular monism that Tolstoy was not himself altogether aware of. Andrei's disenchantment is vested in public networks, structured outlets of power; the life of the soiree is often described mechanically: "the spindles humm[ing] steadily and ceaselessly."⁶⁴ The Prince's major ambition *is* for an end, an end which seems endlessly elusive, and at first he appears to find joy at the possibility of "rejoicing at the successes and grieving at the misfortunes" of a "common cause."⁶⁵ This possible cause is, for Andrei, brief, and his disposition grows fatalistic and despondent. This

is because, I argue, Andrei's principle concern is self-motivated. After his most fundamental "turns" he does not look about for others whose experiences might provide some insight, as Pierre does. Instead, he relates the varieties of his most intense experiences to himself alone. Patricia Carden defines the distinction between Pierre and Andrei through the significance of their respective "inner" and "outer"⁶⁶ lives, and I favor her position. Pierre blunders around, seemingly unaware, hiding a rich and deeply sensitive inner life; Andrei is quite the opposite, and relies heavily on the changes he can affect through external decisions. When he has an experience similar to Pierre's moment with the comet of 1812, and sees the "sky" as if for the first time, Andrei loses his faith in the world of appearances which he has, for so long, despised. But his revelatory eye wanders, or turns, naturally back to himself. While Pierre's revelry with the comet serves to open up a new possibility of life, Andrei's works to break down his understanding of the world, and plunge him into despondency and nihilism.

What's this? Am I falling? My legs are giving way," thought he, and fell on his back. He opened his eyes, hoping to see how the struggle of the Frenchman with the gunners ended . . . But he saw nothing. Above him there was now nothing but the sky—the lofty sky, not clear yet still immeasurably lofty, with gray clouds gliding slowly across it. "How quiet, how peaceful, and solemn; not at all as I ran. . .how differently do those clouds glide across the lofty infinite sky! How was it that I did not see that lofty sky before? And how happy I am to have found it at last! Yes, all is vanity, all falsehood, except that infinite sky. There is nothing, nothing, but that. But even it does not exist, there is nothing but quiet and peace."⁶⁷

At the moment of Andrei's revelation he has been struck down—it is this wound Tolstoy planned as the Prince's death. The surprising change of level, from vertical in combat, to horizontal, and gazing skyward, confuses him. And, as it turns out, this sudden alienation from the active world delivers Andrei anew. He recognizes that "all is vanity, all falsehood." This recognition effects a major turning point in Andrei's life. One immediately hears the

echo of Andrei's thoughts of "vanity" and the passage from Ecclesiastes: "what does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever."⁶⁸ Choice, activity, all that Andrei champions is undermined when he feels what Charles Taylor calls an experience of "fullness" in the natural world. Because Andrei's character relies on decision-making to find meaning in his life, the realization that there is something which surpasses himself is devastating. He suddenly believes full-heartedly, and with the same assurance that the life of society is "all falsehood," that all *human life* is also worthless in comparison with "that lofty infinite sky" which he cannot, and will not, understand. As a result, Andrei loses his faith that the world might conceal richness or meaning. In place of meaningfulness, Andrei relishes that "there is nothing, nothing," that even that: "sky" "does not exist."

Charles Taylor's book *A Secular Age* comes in handy at this point in order to understand Andrei's experience with the "infinite sky." We have already seen the potentials of experience through Pierre's turns in the last chapter. Taylor identifies possible manifestations of these moments, and the conditions preceding the insights. Before reaching Andrei's specific dilemma, Taylor offers a definition of the positive experience of what he terms "fullness." He writes:

Somewhere, in some activity or condition, lies a richness; that is, in that place (activity or condition), life is fuller, richer, more worth while, more admirable, more what it should be. This is perhaps a place of power: we often experience this as deeply moving, as inspiring. Perhaps this of fullness is something we just catch glimpses of from afar off; we have the powerful intuition of what fullness would be . . . But sometimes there will be moments of experienced fullness, of joy and fulfillment, where we find ourselves there.⁶⁹

Of course, in Andrei's experience the potential for "richness" is taken away, unrealized. This is not to say that Andrei's sudden recognition of the sky does not prompt the feeling of

“what fullness would be.” Andrei immediately identifies the impossibility of comprehending such a “fullness,” and chalks up the experience to a confirmation of the physical world’s vast illusory nature. “There is nothing, nothing but *that*” he thinks. The moment in which Andrei feels the experience as “deeply moving, as inspiring” occurs at the same instant of his complete and most devastating disenchantment. This is because the experience does reveal that “life is fuller,” or “richer,” and certainly not “more worth while.” Although it appears to raise Andrei upward, to propel him toward a fundamental truth, in fact the moment precipitates a moving downward, backward, out of life.

No, Andrei’s “experienced fullness” corresponds most accurately in the “negative slope” which Taylor connects to the tradition of “damnation,” and of “exile.” While Pierre looks from his internal vantage point outward, Andrei moves from external to internal. When he damns the world as illusory, as “nothing,” the possibility of the sacrosanct is all but lost for Andrei. One might think of Andrei when Taylor writes:

The sense of orientation also has its negative slope; where we experience above all a distance, an absence, an exile, a seemingly irremediable incapacity ever to reach this place; an absence of power; a confusion; or worse, the condition often described in the tradition as melancholy, ennui (the “spleen” of Baudelaire). What is terrible in this latter condition is that we lose a sense of where the place of fullness is, even what fullness could consist in we. . . cannot believe in it anymore ⁷⁰

So we see Andrei in this second condition of “absence,” hinting at what will prove the beginning of his overwhelming unbelief. The possible reason for Andrei’s inability to positively orient himself during the experience could be linked to his obsession with agency and decision-making, previously noted. Berlin identifies the “single central vision” as “centripetal,”⁷¹ which the Oxford English Dictionary defines as “directed toward the centre

of a circle.”⁷² Andrei continually tends in this direction, and when he recognizes the world’s “vanity” he begins to fold that way. While Pierre recognizes the various and “scattered” parts, and finds peace through gazing up, down, and in every direction he can, Andrei favors the system which organizes and remains “coherent or articulate.”⁷³ This side aligns with Berlin’s single-minded “hedgehog.” So when Berlin goes on to speculate that “Tolstoy was by nature a fox, but believed in being a hedgehog,” a curious reference might be made regarding the difference between Pierre’s potential fox-ness and Andrei’s catastrophic single-minded and structured life as a—perhaps selfish—“hedgehog.”

The evidence of this divide can be seen in the aftermath of Andrei’s first wound, after his solemn return to organized life. Leo Tolstoy’s young life was marked by a period of “pantheism,” fueled by his readings of Rousseau, the significance of which is not lost in *War and Peace*. Pierre’s “natural” expression is, in one moment, when he wanders into the middle of a bloody battle, debased to the point that he is described as a dog. Rousseau’s impression is bitterly reflected in Andrei after his return from Austerlitz. Pierre pays a visit to the Prince and the two take a walk along the docks. Pierre has recently found a momentary peace in the Freemasons, and appeals to his despondent friend. Andrei’s hopeless position is revealed for the first time in his conversation with Pierre. In the absurd and slightly comic description of Andrei’s conversation with Pierre, the Prince’s “eyes glittered feverishly while he tried to prove to Pierre that in his actions there was no desire to do good to his neighbor.” Andrei’s explanation follows:

[the serfs] lead the same animal life, and the stripes on their bodies heal, and they are happy as before. But if it is a good thing for proprietors who perish morally, being remorse upon themselves, stifle this remorse and grow callous . . . it is those people I pity. . . Conscious of it. . . [they] cannot restrain themselves, and grow more miserable. . . So that’s what I’m sorry for

—human dignity, peace of mind, purity, and not the serfs' backs and foreheads, which, beat and shave, always remain the same backs and foreheads.⁷⁴

So we find Prince Andrei disdaining the intellectual and “miserable” condition he feels strongly himself, after he is wounded.⁷⁵ His views on the pursuit of “human dignity” have, at this point at least, been given over to the stronger belief that a meaningful life cannot be found through the fruitless actions and choices which present themselves to us. Only “animal life,” which asks no questions and hopes for no “truth,” can quell the miserable emptiness that Andrei understood on the battlefield. Pierre feels deeply the dangers of Andrei’s position, and immediately sees that Andrei has no desire to speak about the “past” or the “future,” and no longer desires to make the “plans”⁷⁶ which were once so important to him. Andrei’s new and apathetic view brings about a total shift of focus; away from the external world of planning, he effectively isolates himself from the world of order. All illusion, he realizes, is an unworthy subject for speculation. This turn will only change in Andrei after he experiences an aesthetic moment of “fullness,” embodied in another human being, which awakens in him a feeling of universal or “divine” love. This experience is clear in Natasha, the character who lives most fully through unthinking mood, and experience. Although Andrei’s slow descent into self-involved pessimism progresses through a few iterations—most significantly influenced by a recognition of “universal love” when he experiences Natasha’s relationship with the external world—life will finally prove unlivable. This eventual end point is directly related to his inability to situate himself in an unmeaning world; he cannot grasp the “fullness,” which lives in disparate, plural experience.

IV

Limited Absolutes and Andrei's Universal Love

It may be helpful, especially in the study of Prince Andrei Bolkonski, to briefly venture into perhaps the most heavily criticized aspect of the great book: Tolstoy's philosophy of history. The theory itself was, for many years after its publication, the subject of scrutiny, even disdain; Turgenev called it "farcical," Shelgunov named it the "philosophy of the swamp."⁷⁷

The theory is buttressed by the argument that historical truth cannot be understood through the examples of "great men," but relies on the constantly moving "mill" of the collective. Andrei particularly is at odds, at first, with this Tolstoyan theory of history. This theory does not rest on an understanding that events take place through the "absolute" movements of "great men," rather that only through continual subjective, and limited experiences of ordinary lives does real change take place. Because of this Andrei is most at odds with history, both within the book and within himself. This may be because he is the only principal character directly motivated by an understanding of "absolute" and singular action. He longs to be remembered for his heroism and cunning in battle, and before his wounding at Austerlitz, Napoleon is his greatest hero. These aspects of Andrei's character go against many of the most fundamental pieces of Tolstoy's idea of historical movement, which claims that "historical personages" are not the actual producers of "events."⁷⁸ Andrei's life falls apart when he comes to this realization shortly before his tragic demise. The major contradiction within Tolstoy's theory can be seen through the private and public spheres. The Prince begins to abhor all public systems, in some sense understanding--or beginning to at least, as we see in his conversation on the docks with Pierre--that any vehicle which

presumes to hold major power is doomed. This is significant for Andrei because of his mastery of the "system," and his continual inward turn which isolates him from the external world.

Berlin comments on the "two systems of value," which most agonize Andrei: on the one side: "the public"; on the other the "private."⁷⁹ Andrei's major issue rests in the "public" sphere; in his personal and "private" experience, one sees the "public" continuing to haunt him ("all is vanity"). His negative turn in the Battle of Austerlitz also corrupts his ability to be moved by those "feelings and immediate experiences" which prove also nothing "but a vast illusion."⁸⁰

Andrei only appreciates the "immediate experience" when he can view a moment separately from himself. Morson identifies Andrei's "finest moments" as those which "occur when language and socially constructed systems of meaning have been transcended."⁸¹ Extending this, it is interesting to note that the experiences which most move Andrei are most attuned to the movements of nature, and those which most reject interpretation. The great weight of "value," which distresses Andrei, can be momentarily forgotten only when he experiences something transcendent, which he can relate to in private, without interpretation. When he witnesses Natasha's astonishment at the moon, for example, Andrei is able to find a renewed curiosity in the external world.

"Do just come and see what a moon!. . . Oh, how lovely!. . . O God, O God, what does it mean?" [Natasha] suddenly exclaimed. "To bed then, if it must be!" and she slammed the casement. "For her I might as well not exist!" thought Prince Andrei while he listened to her voice, for some reason expecting yet fearing that she might say something about him. "There she is again! As if it were on purpose," thought he.⁸²

Natasha's characteristic abandonment, her flight of fancy, comes as a surprise to Andrei. The moment recalls his own skyward meditation, but to a very different end. Indeed, it might not be an *end* at all, rather a single instant of unreasoning wonder, which most excites his interests. He cannot help but think that Natasha's actions "were on purpose." But it is precisely because of this potential lack that Andrei is freed from his gloom. For the Prince, the moment operates on two levels. First, it serves as an immediate glance into the private life of another character, for whom he "might as well not exist." At the same time, the personal moment is displayed for him without any premeditation. Andrei, perhaps for the first time, can experience a potential "fullness" which needs no explanation and offers no absolute. Still, he suspects that Natasha may be performing, or that she "might say something about him." Andrei can only be roused from his isolating melancholy through experiences which somehow remove him from activity, if only for an instant.

Natasha opens up the possibility for Andrei to return to life. "No, life is not over for me at thirty-one!"⁸³ he thinks shortly after he witnesses Natasha's rhapsody about the moon. But aesthetically motivated reveries like this seldom stir Andrei. More often, even his forays into renewed life are undercut by a return to rote routine, which stirs up his buried disillusionment. He wishes to live as Natasha does: purely, through experience, and without interpretation, but even this proves impossible. When he later professes his love to Natasha, all the "poetic and mystic charm of desire" suddenly vanishes, and transforms to "pity."⁸⁴ The "mystery," which sometimes may captivate him, cannot be maintained. This may be because unlike Pierre, Andrei's position requires the definitiveness of a cold conclusion. This conclusion finally is reached in his death, which Inessa Mejerbosky notes, "proves a true illumination."⁸⁵

Andrei's potential for universal love still does not allow him to live, at ease, in the world. This is what Edward Wasiolek points to when he writes that "the one big thing he fails to understand is that the universe is not his," that "life is independent of his beliefs."⁸⁶ Wasiolek reckons this aspect of Andrei's character proves that he possess no "core," because he expects his personal "wishes, wants and demands" to be met above all else. It cannot be denied that this is the case in Andrei. The reason he cannot fulfill his potential as Natasha's husband could be in part because he cannot move away from the singular "self" as the only center available to him. But if one applies Wasiolek's reading of the book's "millions of centers," to Berlin's model, Andrei serves the role of the unified being in-and-of-himself.

Chapter Two End Notes

⁴⁷ War and Peace: the Maude Translation, Backgrounds and Sources, Essays in Criticism.” War and Peace: the Maude Translation, Backgrounds and Sources, Essays in Criticism, by Leo Tolstoy et al., W.W. Norton, 1966, pg. 12.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ The difference in spelling throughout the chapter is a result of the varieties of possible spellings of Andrei’s name. He is variously: “Andrew,” “Andrei,” and “Andrey,” depending on translation. I opt for Garnett’s spelling, although I use Maude’s translation throughout the paper. The last name also can be spelled “Bolkonski,” “Bolkonsky.” It all depends, really, on which you like best. In the Russian original: “Андрей Болконский.”

⁵⁰ Ibid. “Letter to L.I. Volkonskaya—May 3rd, 1865.” 1084.

⁵¹ Ibid. 242.

⁵² Ibid. 1084.

⁵³“Tolstoy's Absolute Language .” Hidden in Plain View: Narrative and Creative Potentials in "War and Peace", by Gary Saul. Morson, Scolar Press, 1988, p. 229-230..

⁵⁴ Ecclesiastes, L.1-2.

⁵⁵ War and Peace: the Maude Translation, Backgrounds and Sources, Essays in Criticism.”, by Leo Tolstoy pg. 21.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 106.

⁵⁷ Carden, Patricia. “CAREER IN ‘WAR AND PEACE.’” *Ulbandus Review*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1982, pp. 23-38. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/25748069.

⁵⁸“Tolstoy's Absolute Language .” Hidden in Plain View: Narrative and Creative Potentials in "War and Peace", by Gary Saul. Morson, p. 255.

⁵⁹ War and Peace: the Maude Translation, Backgrounds and Sources, Essays in Criticism.”, by Leo Tolstoy. pg. 229.

⁶⁰ Carden, Patricia. “CAREER IN ‘WAR AND. pg. 34.

⁶¹War and Peace: the Maude Translation, Backgrounds and Sources, Essays in Criticism.”, by Leo Tolstoy. pg. 229-230.

⁶² See Maude's footnote on 229 for more elaboration into this particular. The details of Lev Tolstoy's proverbial "mid-life-crisis"—which slowly took over his entire life, were most closely concerned with Tolstoy's turn to nihilistic anti-literary, anti-historical spiral. His reading of Schopenhauer led him to believe in the meaninglessness and unknowability of all human life. He wrote in 1869 of this experience in the bleakest of terms: “In my search for answers to the question of life I felt exactly as a man who is lost in a forest. I came to a clearing, climbed a tree, and had a clear view of the endless space around me. But I could see that there was no house and that there could be no house; I went into the thick of the forest, into the darkness, but again I could see no house—only darkness. (*Confessions*, Pg. 40—)

⁶³ Pierre's final “resolution,” although it seems a possible conclusion to continual turning, holds the possibility for a reemergence of “doubt.” It is not so much a complete conversion into a set faith, *per se*. When these doubts do arise, Pierre need only refer “to the views he had held at [the] time of his madness”; this “time of madness” was the period in which he felt strongly a turn, coinciding with his proposal to Natasha. The final words Tolstoy provides for the turn of Pierre's confused faith in effect proves a continuation of his pluralistic character: in the bright light of the emotion that shone within himself, and at once without any effort [he] saw in everyone he met everything that was good and worthy of being loved. *Ibid.* 2664

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 9.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* 108.

⁶⁶ Carden, Patricia. “CAREER IN ‘WAR AND. pg, 35.

⁶⁷ War and Peace: the Maude Translation, Backgrounds and Sources, Essays in Criticism.”, by Leo Tolstoy. pg. 244

⁶⁸ Ecclesiastes, 1. Lines: 3-6.

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ecclesiastes+1&version=ESV>

⁶⁹ Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*, 5.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* 6.

⁷¹ Berlin, Isaiah. *Hedgehog and the Fox*, New York Simon and Schuster, 1953. page. 1.

⁷² OED, “centripetal,”

⁷³ Berlin, Isaiah. *Hedgehog and the Fox*, page. 1.

⁷⁴ War and Peace: the Maude Translation, Backgrounds and Sources, Essays in Criticism.”, by Leo Tolstoy. pg. 337-338.

⁷⁵ It should be noted that it is in this battle in which Andrei receives his first wounding.

⁷⁶ War and Peace: the Maude Translation, Backgrounds and Sources, Essays in Criticism.”, by Leo Tolstoy. pg. 334.

⁷⁷ These examples are both used by Berlin in his brilliant “*Hedgehog and the Fox*.” pgs. 7-8.

⁷⁸ Ibid. 1047.

⁷⁹ Berlin, Isaiah. Hedgehog and the Fox," pg 29.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Saul Morson, Gary. "Selves and Decisions," *Hidden in Plain View*, pg. 255

⁸² War and Peace: the Maude Translation, Backgrounds and Sources, Essays and Criticism," by Leo Tolstoy, pg. 371.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid. 422.

⁸⁵ Tolstoy's

⁸⁶ Edward Wasiolek, Tolstoy's Major Fiction (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 65-68

Living Through Experience

Chapter III: Natasha

Dream delivers us to dream, and there is no end to illusion. Life is a train of moods like a string of beads, and as we pass through them, they prove to be many colored lenses which paint the world their own hue, and each shows only what lies in its focus.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, Experience. ⁸⁷

I

Natasha's "Shareable" Moods and her "Epic" Qualities

The connection between Tolstoy and Homer has, for some time, been the subject of much scholarship. In its entirety, *War and Peace* might even fall under the category of "epic," although this point is the subject of much speculation.⁸⁸ But we might ask ourselves, in a study of *War and Peace*: what makes the book figure into the category of an epic? Percy Lubbock called the book "a confusion of two designs," R.F. Christian wrote of it as "not a finished work"; perhaps most notably, Tolstoy himself explicitly tells his readers: *War and Peace* does: "not fit into the form of: novel, epic, or story."⁸⁹ On the other hand, the vastness of the book, spanning years, multiple families, and wars, figures at the very least into a literal definition: *War and Peace* is without a doubt of "epic" proportions. Scholars like F. T. Griffiths and S. J. Rabinowitz have argued in favor of a reading of *War and Peace* alongside both the *Odyssey*, and the *Iliad*. Pierre has even been likened to Odysseus, and Andrei to Achilles.⁹⁰ Through the milieu of criticism and scholarships, I would like to offer a reading of *War and Peace* as a kind of "epic" that hinges on an understanding of epic-ness, not in form precisely, but in *character*.

The one character remaining in my study of the book most clearly embodies this “epic” quality. This is Natasha Rostova. Nicholas Warne writes that Natasha not only “combines the novelistic with the epic, but actually creates a work that resembles a different kind of epic.”⁹¹ Her character sweeps between “multilayered individuation” while maintaining “a maximum of symbolic value.”⁹² Pierre embodies the multilayered: he lives completely within the plural, subjective, and *limited* experience. So too does Natasha. Andrei lives through his individual experience; Natasha too lives in some part lives in this way. It is in Warne’s first characterization of Natasha that I wish to dwell, not in her possible “symbolic value” which has linked her character to the “Russian national character” or Russian “folk roots.”⁹³ Reading Natasha an embodiment of “multilayered individuation,” places her in a position which completes and compliments Pierre and Andrei. She is what both Pierre and Andrei sorely wish themselves to be, and can never be: a person who lives meaningfully and without doubt. Because of this, Natasha is not merely Lubbock’s identification of the “spirit of youth,”⁹⁴ still less is she the simple “fool”⁹⁵ which Turgenev condemns within her character. No, Natasha Rostova embodies that bodily Dionysiac figure which Nietzsche described: “piled high with flowers and garlands,” and summoning “the ferocious creatures of the cliffs and the deserts” to “peacefully draw near.”⁹⁶ She does not actively reject the structured world, but she lives through and transcends these system unconsciously, without feeling contempt for it. Natasha does more than synthesize both flesh and the spirit: her presence heralds something which might be closest aligned to a sense of godliness that *War and Peace* will ever come. She enacts the greatest turns, and moves all those around her into the most intense moments of intoxication. Griffiths parallels Natasha with Penelope; I would argue that this is a slightly undeserving

correspondence for Natasha, who is more an embodiment of the goddess than Penelope. Although she does wait for Andrei after his initial proposal, Natasha is of her own moment. This is not to say that she is vastly differs Penelope in her loyalty, more that Natasha's power of commitment exists only in the present, and her feeling, and that encompasses her entire way of living in the world. In this way she is most admirable and consistent, both to her place within *War and Peace* and in her position as a character most like that within Homer's epic.

I suggest first that Natasha's way of life most fully realizes the potential of living *only* through experience. Unlike Pierre and Andrei, Natasha's inner and outer lives are one and the same. When she laughs, the reader does not expect any explanation as to why she is laughing, besides that she "felt happy," or "was unable to control her joy which expressed itself by laughter."⁹⁷ Natasha is often described as being out of "control"; she even says to Sonya, her cousin, while she prepares to elope with Anatole Kuragin: "I told you, I have no will. . . why don't you understand?"⁹⁸ This lack of "free will" could appear merely as an example of Tolstoy's misogynistic understanding of the feminine character. But it could have another meaning understood as an "epic" quality within Natasha.

Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Kelly in their sensational book *All Things Shining* describe the difficulty of a modern reading into the motivations of Homeric characters. A contemporary reader understands motivation through "inner experiences and beliefs."⁹⁹ The figure who most lives through "inner experience" is Andrei: the most contemporary and secularly turning character in the book. I have also argued that he is the most absolute and monistic. Pierre to some extent also lives in this way, although he has the capacity to understand and thrive in a world of multiplicity. Natasha, on the other hand, never lives

inwardly. Her moods are experienced as “public” and “shareable.”¹⁰⁰ This is the characteristic Dreyfus and Kelly notice within the character of Homer’s epics. They write that:

The Homeric Greeks were open to the world. . .instead of understanding themselves in terms of inner experiences and beliefs, they saw themselves as being swept up into public and shareable moods. . .moods are important because they illuminate a shared situation: they manifest what matters most in the moment and in doing so draw people to perform. . .passionate deeds.¹⁰¹

This finds a resonance in Natasha, whose great strength exists in her ability to transfer her moods to other characters and “illuminate” possibly the greatest of all “shared situation[s]”: the beautiful “shining” quality of life. Of course, the connection between Natasha and the Homeric character cannot be applied in every respect. Although Tolstoy “listed” the *Iliad* along side the “*Odyssey* among the ten books which had influenced him most,”¹⁰² the tradition behind him did not support polytheism, and, of course, “Homeric excellence bears little resemblance to modern moral agency.”¹⁰³ But it should also be remembered that Tolstoy as a man could find no comfort through the tradition behind him. By the end of his life, after years of searching for answers in a world apparently meaningless, Tolstoy created his own brand of Christianity, and retreated to his country estate to become a kind of self-confirmed “sage” for the rest of his life.¹⁰⁴ The conception of meaning in Homer’s epics resided in the conception of “*arete*” or “excellence of life” which relied on “gratitude and wonder” that could not conceive of the modern “nihilistic existence”¹⁰⁵ that agonized Tolstoy. Natasha lives in perpetual “wonder,” and because of this she is capable of finding meaning, for most of the book, only through her various moods. Although I am loath to appropriate this term, it might serve as a way into Natasha’s potential within the book.

Unlike Andrei, who most clearly descends into a “nihilistic existence” and views the world only through “public” and “private” values, Natasha does not distinguish between these two systems. Unlike Pierre, Natasha does not rely upon a pluralistic understanding of the world. Instead, she is the most realized manifestation of unreason and feeling separated from private and public values as they have been seen in *War and Peace* this far. She therefore yields the most unifying synthesis of the finest most “shining” aspects within both Pierre and Andrei. I argue that to live like Natasha would be—especially for Tolstoy himself—a possible solution in the search for a meaningful life.

When she first appears in *War and Peace* as a young child, this is made evident. Natasha momentarily casts a spell on those around her, not through her actions precisely, but because she possesses an inexplicable freshness that transcends explanation.

"Do you see? . . . My doll. . . Mimi. . . You see. . ." was all Natasha managed to utter (to her everything seemed funny). She leaned against her mother and burst into such a loud, ringing fit of laughter that even the prim visitor could not help joining in.¹⁰⁶

This is the earliest example of Natasha’s inexplicable and infectious charm. She is perhaps the only character throughout the book who possess the power to share her moods with all those near her. Both of my previous chapters are connected through the turning experiences which Natasha effects. Pierre’s reverie at the comet of 1812 is directly the result of his moment with Natasha, the change in Count Rostov’s mood occurs as he listens to his sister sing; all that keeps Prince Andrei’s hope alive rests on the “divine love” which Natasha affects in him. These moments are always uniquely unreasoning and surprising. They offer no answer or insight but rely only on the intensity of *feeling* itself which Natasha is somehow able to tap into. She is “open to the world,” and the world is consequently always open for

her. In the constellations of *War and Peace*, Natasha shines brightest of all. It is difficult to track her “turns” because she is always turning. This, I suggest, allows Natasha a unique position within the book. Because her actions offer no explanation, her character is most sacrosanct.

II

A New Case for the Absolute and Subjective Experience

Tolstoy describes his condition during his “search for answers to the meaning of life” in *Confessions*: “exactly as a man who is lost in a forest,” who, after scouring the darkness all night, came to the realization that: “there was no house and that there could be no house”¹⁰⁷ which might offer him shelter. This sort of terror relies on the supposition that to find peace one must first stop being “lost.” But, I suggest, that although Tolstoy could not completely face the possibility that: “there was no house,” and no place which might offer him shelter from the immensity of this dark and endless wood, the prospect of being “lost” does not have to necessitate fear or hopelessness. Natasha lives her entire life without looking for “answers to the meaning of life”; for her there is no “desire to possess something beyond the world,”¹⁰⁸ to quote a wonderful line from Mark Strand. This is interesting when one looks at Natasha from the perspective of the “absolute.” Because Natasha lives completely in the present moment, the possibility of completion or singularity presents a strange dilemma. Morson writes that Natasha, and the entire Rostov family:

continually repeat, and act upon, the phrase ‘everything is possible.’ Trying to live without past, future, or other constraints, they each develop their own ways of dealing with a world in which very little is possible and choice is continually necessary.¹⁰⁹

Morson does not dwell on Natasha's character for very long, besides making the comment that when Natasha is forced to make a decision which may have serious "consequences" she learns better than to live as if "everything is possible." Morson does note the immediacy of the present in the Rostovs' character, but by the end of his mediation on Natasha the takeaway appears to be that everything is *not* possible, and the Rostovs must learn to live with it. But Morson seems to forget the way in which Natasha lives in the world: through the vacillations of her moods. More than this, Natasha's belief that: "everything is possible" does not necessarily hold up in the literal sense. In the potential "shareable mood" which infects all those close to her, the necessity for making "choices" is not a rational one. The only possibly "absolute" in Natasha's character is revealed as her "absolute" power to live only through her experiences.

Even this reading of an "absolute" in Natasha deals more in a subjective use of the term, if such a thing is possible. Pierre embodies perhaps the most open-ended reading of "absolute" within the book, Natasha works a bit differently. Because she lives most completely through her moods, without tormenting herself "searching for answers" she does not face the necessity of strictly defining what is absolute and what is not within her world. A reading of Natasha's "absolute" qualities differs from the previous readings of the "absolute" within Pierre and Andrei. Her experiences appear as "absolutes" to her; she does not conceive of decision or choice within them, but simply acts as she feels. Because of this, these experiences are always subjective and flexible, limited to the mood which temporarily takes her. This corresponds to Warne's comment, that: "the essence of Tolstoyan visions seems to be the revisions. The man cannot make up his mind."¹¹⁰ The "revisions" within Natasha do not yield to a finished product, so to speak, but constantly

change. The trajectory of her character, which Laura Olson called a “story of metamorphosis,” adheres to “various roles,”¹¹¹ but must be understood through transience in mood.

War and Peace deals almost exclusively in the real, human events of this world, without any foray into the unearthly or supernatural. The dream sequences of Pierre and Andrei are understood only through their individual experiences, and do not effect the external world of the book. But Natasha’s imagination extends beyond herself. She enters reveries which serve as “a spontaneous source of aesthetic power”¹¹² for those around her. Often Natasha’s own moods affect others nearby, but sometimes the agency is reversed, and Natasha’s presence becomes the catalyst for experiences of “fullness” limited, or isolated in other characters, as when Andrei sees her looking at the moon. She is the most sacred or “shining” of all characters because of this particular quality.

III

Complications in Tolstoy’s Language; Dissolving of Absolutes through Natasha

The possible issue in Natasha to address the complications which arise from understanding her as an embodiment of the sacrosanct, and a potentially “shining” manifestation of godly proportions in Tolstoy’s fictional world. Tolstoy presented what seems a very clear definition of “beauty” in his book *What is Art?* The book came later in his life, so there is no direct influence in this definition and Natasha at all. But reading the two identifications of “beauty” which he offers here, evidences a direct relation between “absolute” and limited—the two terms which most closely interest me. Morson writes that Tolstoy created “*War and*

Peace as a challenge to all traditional novels,” and that *What is Art* was his attempted “challenge to all traditional aesthetics.”¹¹³ Morson’s comment is helpful in this allusion; while written during very different periods of his life, the same modes in *War and Peace* are present in *What is Art?* His aim was to challenge. And in the two definitions of “beauty,” there is a critical divide which is helpful for us. He writes that:

there exist (and it could not be otherwise) only two definitions of beauty: one the objective and mystical one, which merges [a] conception with the highest perfection, with God—a fantastic definition, not based on anything; the other, on the contrary, a very simple and pleasing one (I do not add ‘without aim or advantage,’ because the word *pleasing* of itself implies this absence of any consideration or advantage). On the one hand, beauty is understood as something indefinite and, therefore, inconclusive of philosophy, religion, and life itself. . .or, on the other hand. . .beauty is only a particular kind of disinterested pleasure which that we receive.¹¹⁴

Tolstoy’s penchant for “absolute language” is shockingly evident here. Clearly, the latter definition of “subjective” beauty is lesser in Tolstoy’s mind. His affinity of the first definition of “objective” and perfected beauty can be closely identified in those statements which have been noticed by Morson in all his writing, which are “expressed in absolute and uncompromising language.”¹¹⁵ The project of my paper has been in dealing with moments which appear “uncompromising,” and the events which seem to occur with absolute consequences, and attempted to find the potential faultiness of absolutes within experience throughout *War and Peace*. Of course, when Tolstoy writes things like “it could not be otherwise,” the reader immediately challenges the seemingly universal claim. This can be applied easily to the contents of *War and Peace*. Andrei’s single-mindedness kills him, Pierre lives best understanding that it always *can* be “otherwise.” So when Tolstoy writes passages like this one, which express universal claims of human existence, we are immediately

suspicious. Natasha is situated precariously in this two-fold definition of “beauty.” She does not embody either the “objective” form, which can only be understood through “highest perfection”; neither is she this definition of “subjective” beauty which only serves “disinterested pleasure.” Perhaps Natasha does not embody “beauty” at all, then. But Natasha’s ability to incite experiences presents another definition of “beauty” which Tolstoy does not account for in this late, challenging definition. This is not the beauty of higher power or simple “pleasure.” Instead, Natasha’s capacity for *experiencing* life without identifying what is beautiful in moral terms allows her to transcend the “public” and “private” values of most other principal characters in *War and Peace*. She is monistically inclined, and does not hold secretly “inner beliefs,” and she does not precisely fit into the category of pluralism which I identified in *Pierre*. This may be because, what is usually private is for Natasha—unconsciously—placed into the public sphere. She does not understand the various public systems as Andrei does; she is unconscious of their presence and—also unconsciously—dismantles them. Everyone can feel this, but she cannot be placed into Tolstoy’s first category of “beauty.” A new category must be made for Natasha, which dissolves private values and public systems, and reveals that the living experience can be one without explanation, but nonetheless can be transcendent, brimming with “fullness” but divorced from higher power. Trying to avoid appropriating a Homeric “excellence in life” to fit the atmosphere of Tolstoy’s world, I suggest that a potentially different understanding of meaning which rests in perpetual “wonder” might be seen through Natasha.

Although, as I noted previously, no supernatural events take place in *War and Peace*, a magical quality in the ordinary events of human life is often revealed through Natasha.

When her brother, the young Count Rostov, returns home on leave during his time in battle, his moments with Natasha draw him into states of wonder. For example, this scene:

“You know Sonya’s my dearest friend. Such a friend that I burned my arm for her sake. Look here!” . . .

Sitting on the sofa with the little cushions on its arms, in what used to be his old schoolroom, and looking into Natasha's wildly bright eyes, Rostov reentered that world of home and childhood which had no meaning for anyone else, but gave him some of the best joys of his life; and the burning of an arm with a ruler as proof of love did not seem to him senseless, he understood and was not surprised at it. . .

"We are such friends, such friends! All that ruler business was just nonsense, but we are friends forever. She, if she loves anyone, she does it for life, but I don't understand that, I forget quickly."116

A number of insights into Natasha emerge in this simple, domestic interaction. Natasha’s presence brings Rostov back to the space of his home, her “bright eyes” allow the young Count to “reente[r]” a space which, although it “has no meaning for anyone else,” is deeply meaningful to *him*. Although no great turn is affected in Rostov or Natasha during the brief scene, Natasha’s power to invite and welcome-in memory and imagination is apparent. She understands that the “ruler business is all nonsense”; there is even a hint that Natasha recognizes the foolishness of burning her arm. But what she does, she does without regret. She “forget[s] quickly,” and does not feel the need to explain herself further.

Simply “looking into Natasha’s wildly bright eyes” allows Rostov entrance into the hidden world of personal memory and “joys.” This particular power within Natasha is evident in many other scenes throughout the book, and it does not only affect those whom Natasha is personally close to. Even the nameless “connoisseurs,” lose themselves when Natasha sings; she effectively does away with, or at least makes level, all systematized roles for the luminous moments which she takes control of a space:

[Natasha] did not yet sing well, as all the connoisseurs who had her said: "it is not trained, but it is a beautiful voice that must be trained." Only they generally said this some time after she had finished singing. While that untrained voice, with its incorrect breathing and labored transitions, was sounding, even the connoisseurs said nothing, but only delighted and wished to hear it again.¹¹⁷

Natasha's "incorrect" and "labored transitions" are specifically important in this passage. If she were the embodiment of the "highest perfection," the effect would be lost; the most significant and moving aspect of Natasha is her capacity to feel and experience without ever attaining "objective" or singular perfection. The space for speculation can only occur "some time after": during the moment of her performance Natasha captivates and levels all judgement. She is completely of her world, yet she transcends explanation. The ordinary is therefore extraordinary when it can *feel* and *experience* without looking for meaning.

IV

Luminosity, Reveal and the Potentials of Imagination

When Pierre disguises himself in a coachman's cloak, and wanders the streets of Moscow, Natasha immediately recognizes his true identity. Her mother, the Countess Rostova, does not believe her daughter, exclaiming: "how could you talk such nonsense!"¹¹⁸ Natasha's ability to recognize and reveal that which desires to be disguised—here Pierre—proves critical for her. When Pierre's identity is revealed, he feels Natasha's "radiant, happy expression—of which he was conscious without looking at her" and which "filled him with enchantment."¹¹⁹ When Natasha reveals to the reader some quality which was previously

hidden—in this case, the true identity of Pierre—the response is almost always one of “enchantment,” not, say, worry or contempt at being discovered.

This is one, literal example of Natasha’s capacity to incite and “reveal” wonder. In many instances Natasha’s power of recognition is far less literally realized. But consistently throughout the book, Natasha serves as a way into an otherwise inaccessible potential for revelation. While Natasha recognizes that which is hidden, her other great strength lives in her imagination, which allows her to revise and route that which would otherwise be considered impossible. This allows Natasha to live through potentiality, to live as if nothing is impossible. Because of her potential to reveal what one might call the magic quality of ordinary life, everyone is attracted to her. Those who come into contact with her recognize themselves, or some part of a common existence which appears both public and private, universal and particular, absolute but also, importantly, deeply limited.

When Natasha arrives at her debut ball, she “looked in the mirrors and could not distinguish her reflection from the others. All was blended in one brilliant procession.”¹²⁰ Natasha’s “blended” identity is described only viscerally, through “reflection” not in terms of her internal, but external appearance. Because there is little distinction in Natasha’s inner and outer life, becoming “one” in a “brilliant procession,” does not have the same implications as was previously noticed in Pierre. But this is not precisely to say that Natasha does not tend towards pluralism, just that she does so in a different way. The dissolving of what seems-to-be and what really *is*, which we see in Natasha the most complete representation of one who asks no “fundamental questions.”¹²¹ This is only possible because she accepts unconsciously that “brilliant procession” which makes up everything. It is because of her that Pierre fully believes that “everything... was worthy of being loved.”¹²²

When he Natasha's "shareable mood" most intensely, Pierre stops asking himself:

That terrible question "Why?" "Wherefore?" which had come to him amid every occupation was now replaced, not by another question or a reply to the former question, but by *her* image¹²³

Although there is a potential reading of Natasha's "image" as sort of symbolic icon, which holds implication with a Russian Orthodox tradition, the emphasis on "*her* image" shifts focus to Natasha precisely. Perhaps Natasha's finest quality—that which makes her most "shining" and godly—is her ability to reveal the transcendent in the world, not through "inner experience," and not in terms of artificial public values but in the ordinary world. Morson prefaces his reading of "absolute language" in Tolstoy as "an attempt to answer the riddles of existence by denying the existence of meaningful riddles," going on to say that "for Tolstoy, a true understanding of life is achieved not when fundamental questions are answered, but when there is no need to ask them."¹²⁴ Natasha's ability to live a life which is "hidden in plain view," not through private experience but through its opposite, allows her to live perhaps the most realized manifestation of Morson's idea. Through Natasha, those "questions" transform, in many cases, into wonder and joy, and the potentials of living in some form of peace without an *answer* at all. The "vanity of all earthly things" is thrown into relief by Natasha's exuberance. She is instilled with "earthly" beauty, and this opens up a new possible meaning for those who she touches. This power is vested in her ability to live without doubt, through feeling, the unintellectual senses; this quality manifests in those around her as love, "divine" love which is too much for Andrei, and which raises Pierre from asking that "terrible question."

Natasha is seen at the conclusion of the book completely transformed. She has "abandoned her witchery"¹²⁵ and adopted the messy life a mother. The narration chalks up

Natasha's "witchery" to a "powerfully seductive" quality within her; this is contestable. The love which Andrei felt for Natasha was already described as a "divine" one. Pierre finds peace in this and "love" for "everyone" through Natasha's influence. Instead of writing off this element within her as merely seduction, sensuality, or feminine wile, I would suggest that this final portrayal of Natasha works as a disguised form of "absolute language."

Natasha's ability to remove disguise, and reveal the possibility of meaning in a world filled with unanswerable questions of "wherefore" and "why" *does* reveal her, in some sense at least, as one who possess magical qualities. One might look at her conclusion as an attempt of to take away this power in Natasha, enacted by the authorial "absolute." This sudden shift does not, however, take away the "wonder" which, throughout almost the entire book, maintains a powerful influence.

Chapter III End Notes

⁸⁷ “Experience.” *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, emersoncentral.com/texts/essays-second-series/experience/.

⁸⁹ Tolstoy, Leo, et al. *War and Peace: the Maude Translation, Backgrounds and Sources, Criticism*. Norton, 1996. *Russky Arkhiv, (Russian Archive)* 1868. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1942. [Letter to I.P. Borisov—March 15/27, 1870]. 1090. (Italics, Mine).

⁹⁰ Olson, Laura J. “Russianness, Femininity, and Romantic Aesthetics in War and Peace.” *The Russian Review*, vol. 56, no. 4, 1997, pp. 515–531. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/131563.

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⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Olson, Laura J. “Russianness, Femininity, and Romantic Aesthetics in War and Peace.” *The Russian Review*.

⁹⁴ Lubbock, Percy. “THE CRAFT OF FICTION.” <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/18961/18961-h/18961-h.htm>.

⁹⁵ Tolstoy, Leo, et al. *War and Peace: the Maude Translation, Backgrounds and Sources, Criticism*. [Letter to I.P. Borisov—March 15/27, 1870]. 1107.

⁹⁶ Nietzsche, Frederich. “The Birth of Tragedy,” pg. 17.

⁹⁷ Tolstoy, Leo, et. al. *War and Peace, the Maude Translation, Backgrounds and Sources, Criticism*. 260.

⁹⁸ Ibid. 513.

⁹⁹ Dreyfus, Hubert; Sean Dorrance Kelly “Homer's Polytheism .” *All Things Shining*, Free Press, A Division of Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2011, p. 60.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Griffiths, F. T., and S. J. Rabinowitz. “Tolstoy and Homer.” 98.

¹⁰³ Dreyfus, Hubert. Sean Dorrance Kelly. "Homer's Polytheism", *All Things Shining*. 61.

¹⁰⁴ Isaiah Berlin. *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, pg.

¹⁰⁵ ¹⁰⁵ Dreyfus, Hubert. Sean Dorrance Kelly. "Homer's Polytheism", *All Things Shining*. 61.

¹⁰⁶ Nietzsche, Frederich. "The Birth of Tragedy" pg.. 33 .

¹⁰⁷ Tolstoy, Leo. *Confessions* . Translated by David Patterson, W W Norton and Company , 1983. pg, 48.

¹⁰⁸ Mark Strand, "The Idea."

¹⁰⁹ "Tolstoy's Absolute Language ." Hidden in Plain View: Narrative and Creative Potentials in "War and Peace", by Gary Saul Morson, Sclar Press, 1988, p. 241. .

¹¹⁰ Warner, Nicholas O. "Character and Genre in War and Peace: The Case of Natasha." 100.

¹¹¹ Olson, Laura J. "Russianness, Femininity, and Romantic Aesthetics in War and Peace." *The Russian Review*.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ "Tolstoy's Absolute Language." Hidden in Plain View; Narrative and Creative Potentials in "War and Peace," by Gary Saul Morson. 3.

¹¹⁴ Leo Tolstoy, "*What is Art?*" 31.

¹¹⁵ "Tolstoy's Absolute Language." Hidden in Plain View; Narrative and Creative Potentials in "War and Peace," by Gary Saul Morson. 1.

¹¹⁶ Tolstoy, Leo, et al. *War and Peace: the Maude Translation, Backgrounds and Sources, Criticism*. 261.

¹¹⁷ Ibid. 298.

¹¹⁸ Ibid. 771.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid. 402.

¹²¹ Tolstoy's Absolute Language." Hidden in Plain View; Narrative and Creative Potentials in "War and Peace," by Gary Saul Morson. 5.

¹²² Tolstoy, Leo, et. al. *War and Peace, the Maude Translation, Backgrounds and Sources, Criticism*. pg. 509.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Tolstoy's Absolute Language." Hidden in Plain View; Narrative and Creative Potentials in "War and Peace," by Gary Saul Morson. 5.

¹²⁵ Tolstoy, Leo, et. al. War and Peace, the Maude Translation, Backgrounds and Sources, Criticism. pg. 1020.

Conclusion

—Considering Further Limitations—

The subject of this paper offers, I see now, also its greatest ending. I was concerned principally with limitations, and I feel strongly my own limitations as I conclude my study. There is so much which I might have offered, and so much which seems lacking, and which, for one reason or another, to use Tolstoy's own words "I could not" and did not "enlarge on." The subject which I wanted to address has, I hope, not been totally lost: the impossibility of reading Tolstoy's "absolute language" as completely absolute, and the significance of subjectivity and flexibility, the possibility of finding immanence in the knowable world, etc. But still it seems that a vast area of this study did not amount to all that it could have.

Berlin's two representations of Tolstoy as "fox" and "hedgehog" go some distance towards illustrating a few aspects of Pierre and Andrei. In Andrei, I attempted to reveal the potential failures in a monistic system, especially in light of a rising, secular nihilism; this made him a kind of "hedgehog." Pierre's flexibility in understanding a "variety of experiences" allows him to move between many different beliefs, maintaining a meaningful and rich existence; I imply that he is more of a "fox." Yet I am afraid that the two terms which I use throughout are not quite adequate. There is another reading in the "limits" of "absolute language" which I did not expand on in the paper, and which would have yielded perhaps a far more rich final product. This is the possible unification which relies and *thrives* on an understanding of pluralism. Andrei's monism fails only because of his selfishness—not intrinsically in the monistic traits which I read in him. I tried to ignore, or took some

liberty with, the potential complications that this dualistically inclined reading might give rise to. Here, I might look to a few of these issues.

Inviting though it was to view Berlin's construction of the "fox" and the "hedgehog" from two different angles—one favoring multiplicity, the other singularity, i.e. the "limited" versus the "absolute," they may not in fact exist in the opposition which, in this paper at least, they appear. I might even argue that the only real "universal system" would *join* rather than split the two descriptions. Pierre finds peace once he views himself amid the "countless other scintillating stars"; this should not, though, fix him rigidly into one construction—pluralistic, in my reading— at all. John Ashbery's line from "A Blessing in Disguise" captures a potentially alternate reading which allows for multiplicity within the "universal": "I prefer "you" in the plural,/I want "you". . .all golden and pale/Like the dew and the air. /And then I start getting this feeling of exaltation."¹²⁶ In a reading which places plural opposite to singular, of course, perhaps these sorts of paradoxical thoughts come prerequisite.

The other possible reading which I was not able to think through concerned the tone in which Tolstoy actually conveys statements of "absolute language," or universal truths. The frequency of these statements, and their at times bewildering and absurd placement lead to the comment from a friend recently—something along the lines of, *was he serious?* Another way of framing this would be: is there a caveat in Tolstoy's use of the "absolute" which escaped Morson? Could Tolstoy not really mean these obviously universal statements? or was he, perhaps, being a bit tongue-and-cheek, when he says things like "all happy families are alike, but each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way," a statement which *Anna Karenina* inevitably disproves. This, of course, one can never know. Nevertheless, the "luminosity" which I characterized in Natasha evidenced another

dimension, which might not concede so definitively in relation to the other two. The two poems I included in the preface, in reflection, might suggest a journey which has no real end at all; one which, as I see it, is of the most extreme significance not only in this study, but in the study of human life in all its “innumerable, inexhaustible manifestations.”

¹²⁶ Ashbery, John, *Collected Poems*, “A Blessing in Disguise.”

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