

Fruitless to productive: Pierre's development in Leo Tolstoy's War and Peace

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Abstract

In 1805, when anxieties about Napoleon's conquest of Western Europe are only starting to surface in Russia, the first chapter of War and Peace is set in the Russian capital of St. Petersburg. A large portion of the novel's cast is presented during a society hostess' party, including Pierre Bezukhov, the affable but awkward illegitimate son of a wealthy count, and Andrew Bolkonski, the bright and inspirational son of a retired general. Additionally, readers get to meet the cunning and vapid Kuragin family, which also includes the cunning father Vasilii, the fortune-seeking son Anatole, and the gorgeous daughter Helene. Readers are introduced to the distinguished Rostov family of Moscow, which includes the vivacious daughter Natasha, the reserved cousin Sonya, and the impulsive son Nicholas who has recently enlisted in the army under the command of the senior General Kutuzov.

Introduction

In War and Peace, Pierre Bezukhov undergoes the most significant change. He breaks free from the confines of high class life and transitions into a life rooted on the natural world and the spiritual. The character that Pierre Tolstoy initially introduces is constrained by his way of life and by his sense of obligation to reflect and ponder which he sees as a drawback since it overwhelms him and inhibits stoicism. Pierre's journey toward personal regeneration leads him through sadness, spiritual death, fury, and passivity until he eventually achieves freedom and serenity on the inside and out.

Tolstoy presents Pierre from various viewpoints within the narration. The impressions are quite heterogeneous and sometimes are even contradictory, yet the reader inevitably has a notion of Pierre as a unit, a Gestalt. This is to be expected from what social psychologists know about the perception of a person. Solomon Asch says, "One strives to form an impression of the entire person. The impression tends to become complete even when the evidence is meager. It is hard not to see the person as a unit" (216). By using the terms of Lidiia Ginzburg, along with the psychological „tekuchest“ (fluidity) that Tolstoy's major characters are so famous for, there is also a distinct „ustoichivost“ (stability) or „edinstvo“ (unity) which makes readers continually aware of who they are (321).

"Dieu! Mon Dieu!" muttered Anna Pavlovna in a terrified whisper. ... "Oh! Oh!" exclaimed several voices. (WP, 19)

His friend, Prince Andrei Bolkonskii, attempts to save the situation by suggesting that there might be a difference between the behavior of Napoleon as a statesman and Napoleon as a private person. Pierre does not close himself off from others. "He glanced at everyone and smiled. His smile was not like other peoples" smiles which fade off into non-smiles" (WP, 19). Pierre intuitively understands from the beginning the meaning of the kind and just sky. His smile reflects his way of life: open, considerate and tender, eager for fun, indulgent of self, and drawn to others. Unlike Prince Andrei, who has turned inward, Pierre moves out into the world, carousing, drinking, gambling and whoring. While a self-indulgent man of the flesh, Pierre is never self-centered. Indeed he is easily lured on by others and things happen to him because he is open to people. He is ever involved with others.

Pierre's clumsiness serves as another force of deviation from the society of Anna Pavlovna's soiree. Pierre himself is uncomfortable with his size and cannot find a suitable position to adopt. His large body signifies a source of strength that has yet

to be cultivated and effectively channeled. Throughout the novel, Pierre mistakenly finds power within his body during moments of uncontrollable rage. Although his frame can act as a vessel of force, Pierre has not yet learned how to control and utilize it. Instead, he feels awkward with himself at Anna Pavlovna's. It is not until Pierre finds a physical outlet for his strength as a prisoner that his large frame will prove constructive. In addition, Pierre's physical appearance is symbolic of not only a self-disconnection, but a disconnection from elite society as well. Much as Andrei feels restricted in the conformity of conversation, Pierre feels physically constrained in the small gathering, signifying the suffocating effects of the social group's narrow boundaries. Pierre's political beliefs come to the forefront at Anna Pavlovna's soiree. Following the philosophical principles of the 18th century, Pierre proclaims the superiority of the ideals of liberty and equality. He supports the liberal message of the French Revolution and Napoleon's rise to power and his role as leader and guardian of the revolution's core ideas.

The extremism and enthusiasm with which Pierre expresses his conviction of the "grandness" of the revolution

and of liberal ideals, without surprise, provoke retaliatory comments from the elite crowd that supports autocracy. Pierre's behaviour and tone, and his radical ideas, find little sympathy in the conservative gathering. Pierre's extremism also prevents him from taking a fruitful role in Russian society, since it is in such conflict with the Russian political climate. As Pierre tells Andrei, his principles prevent him from joining the army.

From the very beginning, Pierre finds his own creativity and inner life failing to function in the outside world. He believes that freedom lies in a life that is devoid of dreams and dilemmas and that life can only be bearable with a certain degree of callousness. This belief foreshadows his eventual disappointment in a conventional marriage that is based on status rather than love and introduces his disastrous quest for happiness. His admiration of Prince Andrei is described in a passage in which Andrei shares with Pierre his belief that Pierre still has his entire life ahead of him and that he is by no means a failure.

On the night before Platon was murdered, he told a story, as he and the other prisoners gather around the evening before campfire, about an old merchant who was unjustly incarcerated and who forgave the criminal who was the cause of this misfortune and then died before he could be released. Pierre had heard the story many times before, but on this night he drifted near the shadows and listened from a distance.

At the risk of relying too heavily upon Tolstoy's excellent narrative, a close look at the subsequent poignant passage is necessary and highly enlightening, for the story of the old merchant as a metaphor of sacrifice portends the state of mind and soul Platon will be in when he is murdered on the following day, while Pierre's behaviour foreshadows his psychological disconnection after this atrocity occurs. Reminiscent of Christ's acknowledgement of Peter's betrayal:

Karatayev turned on Pierre his kindly round eyes which at this moment were filled with tears, and there was unmistakable appeal in them – he wanted Pierre to come up so that he could say something to him. But Pierre was afraid for himself. He pretended not to see, and hastily moved away.

(WP, 1260)

It is at this point that Pierre is swallowed into the unknown, and dies to the consciousness of a profound loss. Pierre is anesthetized by the shock of the intense pain of this violent loss and responds to it in his sleep where "real events mingle with his dreams" (WP, 1260), and where he hears himself speaking to himself words of wisdom, and as the name "Karatayev" flashes in his mind:

... „Wait“ said the little old man, and he showed Pierre a globe. This globe was a living thing – a quivering ball of no fixed dimensions. Its whole surface consisted of drops closely squeezed together. And all these drops were shifting about, changing places, ... at others melted into it. „That's life,“ said the teacher. „In the center is God, and each drop does its best to expand so as to reflect Him to the greatest extent possible. ... Do you understand, my child?“ said the teacher. (WP, 1182)

This dream is the culmination of Pierre's metaphysical quest. It is also one of Tolstoy's most important fictional images of his metaphysics of life. In his dream Pierre attains an inner understanding of the abstract teaching. It seems that in his mystical experience Pierre had merged with the universe, in his dream he retains his separateness. Karataev is the one who spreads out and disappears into the sphere. At this juncture, the question of what the sphere itself means still needs to be addressed. The image is vivid and specific, yet it also seems polysemantic. Quite a few meanings have in fact been attached to it, above and beyond what the narrator says it has. According to Bidney, the roundness of sphere and of the droplets on its surface recalls and signifies the „roundness“ of Karataev. (WP, 233) It seems to be true because all the images of roundness which the writer had earlier applied to Karataev – his round motions in removing his leg bands, his round arms every ready for an embrace, his round, tearful eyes and many more – here seem to be condensed into one drop of pure, living roundness, a little sphere the edge upon a larger sphere into which it dissolves. Richard Gustafson suggests that Bazev's „pure liquid“ of truth has returned in the form of the liquid sphere (WP 81).

Throughout most of the novel the interrelationship between Pierre's personal drama and that of the Russian nation remains metaphorical. But sometimes these two story-lines directly intersect one another, as in the case of Pierre's witnessing of the Battle of Borodino in Book Ten. In that scene is both the surveyor and the surveyed. He is both a free actor in a private drama of his own devising and also a participant in the larger historical and human drama depicted by the novel as a whole. As he looks out over the battlefield and attempts to grasp what is happening, Pierre does not realize both his friend, Prince Andrew, and his future brother-in-law, Nicholas Rostov, experience parallel moments in the novel: Prince Andrew, as he surveys the battlefield of Schön Graben in Book Two, and Nicholas, as he attempts to make sense of the meeting of Alexander and Napoleon at Tilsit at the end of Book Five. Nor does Pierre realize that he is present at the pivotal battle in Russia's war against Napoleon.

Pierre's presence at that event has an air of grandeur and solemnity, of which only his creator, and the reader, is cognizant.

In *War and Peace* Tolstoy creates the illusion of order, not by ignoring reality, but by refracting reality through the transformative lens of artistic perception. Tolstoy's vision of life in the novel combines an idealized sense of life's unity with an acute awareness of the discord that underlies that unity. The part and the whole, the real and the ideal, do not exist in permanent opposition in Tolstoy's novel. They enter finally into a symbiotic relationship.

Pierre Bezukhov strives for an ideal vision of life by attempting to transcend the real. Tolstoy creates a vision of life in which the real itself, when perceived through the artistic eye, begins to acquire transcendent meaning.

Richard Gustafson has argued that artistic details in Tolstoy always point us to some higher plane of reality. He further states that in his reading of *War and Peace* the unifying truth of life is less theological and more fluid than this. His emphasis is on the ceaseless act, rather than on the accomplished fact, of man's search for a higher order in the world. Tolstoy subsumes the raw materials of everyday human reality into an artistic experience, in which even the smallest detail begins to take on larger significance when seen in the context of the whole poetic fabric of which it is part.

What Tolstoy offers the reader in the novel is not only a vision of pure metaphysical order or of some absolute Truth of life. Nor does the author completely deny the possibility of such a unifying truth. Rather, Tolstoy emphasizes the way in which his characters continually strive for a vision of the ideal amidst the real. And Tolstoy himself enacts this very process of striving in his aesthetic organization of the work.

Hence, the novel seems to be the concept of a highly personalized impersonality.

That is, the novel expresses a vision of life in which each human action and situation is both full of individualized nuance, and therefore deeply meaningful in itself, and is also part of universal human experience and the supra-personal forces of history.

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