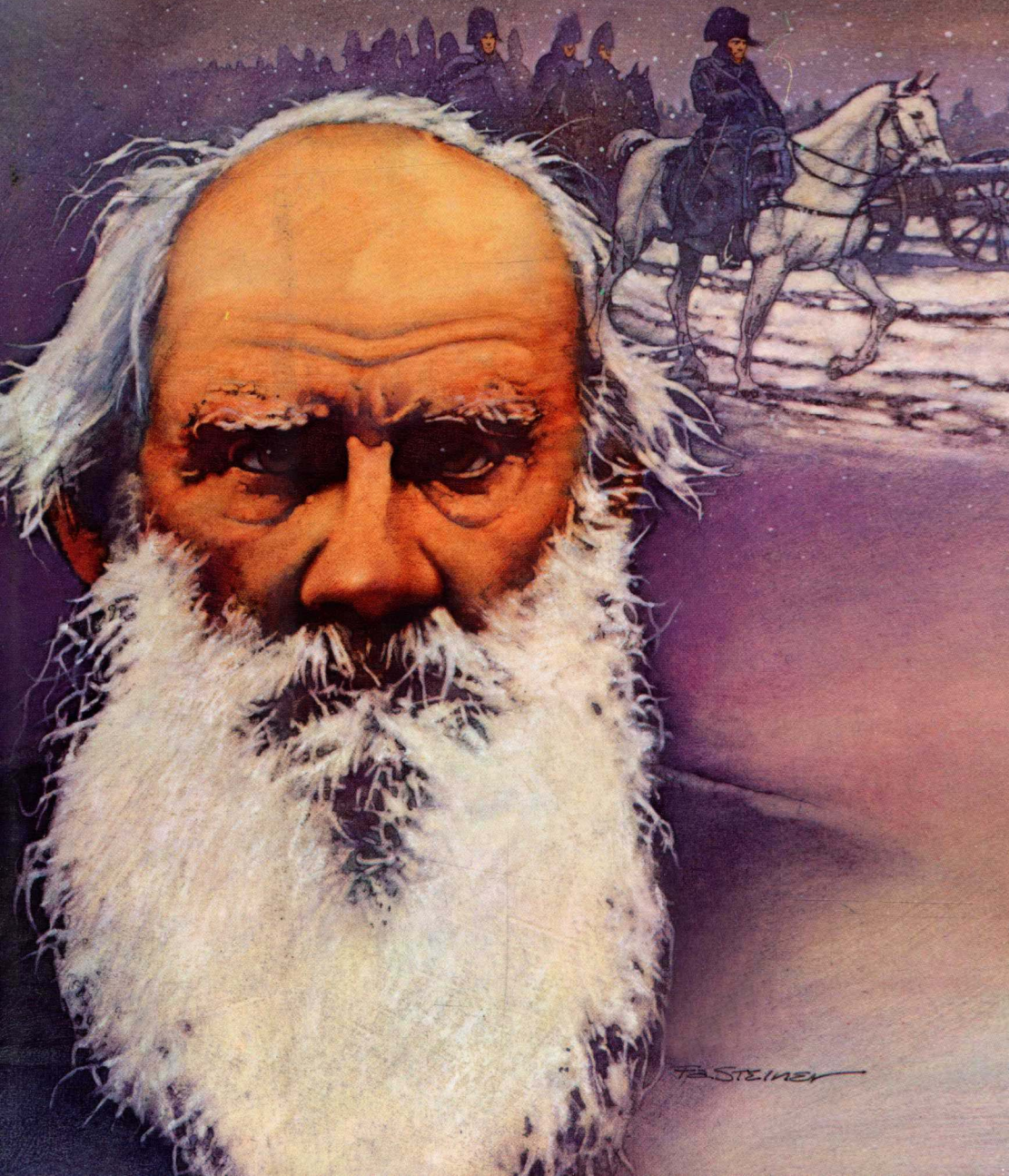


Modern Critical Views

LEO TOLSTOY

Edited and with an introduction by
HAROLD BLOOM



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Editor's Note

This volume gathers together a representative selection of the best criticism devoted to Tolstoy that is available in the English language. The essays, reprinted here in the chronological order of their publication, cover a period from 1920 through 1983, and can be called a history-in-little of the twentieth-century reception of Tolstoy's work in Anglo-American criticism, although Continental and Russian commentaries are also included here. The editor is grateful to Ms. Olga Popov, without whose erudition he would not have known of some of these essays.

The editor's "Introduction" centers entirely upon Tolstoy's magnificent late short novel *Hadji Murad*, so as to intimate something of Tolstoy's Homeric powers in narrative. With the great Hungarian critic, Gyorgy Lukacs, we expect a social emphasis, but that emphasis is severely tested when Lukacs admits that Tolstoy transcended both romanticism and the form of the novel, and nearly renewed the Homeric or national epic, a renewal that Lukacs rejects upon Marxist historical grounds. Thomas Mann, who had portrayed Lukacs in *The Magic Mountain* as Leo Naphta, the Jewish Jesuit and Nietzschean terrorist, somewhat counters Lukacs here by comparing Tolstoy to Goethe. As Mann shrewdly notes, even the most social of Tolstoy's concepts and visions invariably originated as intense personal needs.

Viktor Shklovsky's brief excursus on Tolstoyan parallels provides a fine instance of twentieth-century Russian stylistic criticism. With Philip Rahv's ruminations upon Tolstoy's short novels, the startling *naturalness* of that cosmos is emphasized. Something of the same tribute is paid by George Steiner in his comparison of Tolstoy and Homer, which can be contrasted usefully to the editor's comparison in his introductory remarks.

In Isaiah Berlin's essay, Tolstoy is seen as a martyr of the European Enlightenment, sacrificing everything upon the altar of truth. In some sense, this is parallel to R. P. Blackmur's reading of *Anna Karenina*, which concludes that human life could not stand Anna's "intensity," perhaps a trope for Tolstoy's drive towards truth. In Barbara Hardy's very different analysis, Anna is seen as suffering from the disease of nihilism. When John Bayley, assessing Tolstoy's outrageous tract *What Is Art?*, concludes that

Tolstoy's answer is "My own novels," we receive a wry illumination upon Tolstoyan truth and Tolstoyan intensity.

War and Peace becomes the focus with the examination of that epic novel's varied narratives by W. Gareth Jones. In Gary Saul Morson's essay on the poetics of Tolstoy's "didactic fiction," there is an emphasis instead upon the first Sevastopol story, as an instance of the oxymoronic element in all didactic fiction, even Tolstoy's. With Edward Wasiolek's reading of *Resurrection*, we are given a salutary reminder of what is most positive in Tolstoy's fiction, his refusal to despair. This is akin to W. W. Rowe's tracing of fateful or overdetermined patterns in Tolstoy, patterns that his stronger and more flexible personages are able to transcend.

A reading of *Family Happiness*, by Natalia Kisseleff calls into question Tolstoy's positive and transcending tendencies, exposing their dangerous nearness to sentimentalism, while acknowledging that Tolstoy himself was aware of this unhappy proximity. Robert Wexelblatt defines an approach to Tolstoy's ultimate transcendence, the mystical vision of immortality in *The Death of Ivan Ilych* through a comparison with Kafka's *Metamorphosis*.

This volume ends with Martin Price's lucid analysis of moral character in *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*. Price's observations confirm Tolstoy's acuity as a tragic writer, a dimension so different from the epic heroism of *Hadji Murad* as to renew our sense of wonder at Tolstoy's range.

Contents

Editor's Note	ix
Introduction <i>Harold Bloom</i>	1
Tolstoy and the Attempts to Go Beyond the Social	
Forms of Life <i>Gyorgy Lukacs</i>	9
Goethe and Tolstoy <i>Thomas Mann</i>	15
Parallels in Tolstoy <i>Viktor Shklovsky</i>	49
The Green Twig and the Black Trunk <i>Philip Rahv</i>	53
Tolstoy and Homer <i>George Steiner</i>	67
Tolstoy and Enlightenment <i>Isaiah Berlin</i>	75
The Dialectic of Incarnation:	
Tolstoy's <i>Anna Karenina</i> <i>R. P. Blackmur</i>	99
Form and Freedom: Tolstoy's	
<i>Anna Karenina</i> <i>Barbara Hardy</i>	119
What Is Art? <i>John Bayley</i>	141
A Man Speaking to Men: The Narratives of	
<i>War and Peace</i> <i>W. Gareth Jones</i>	153
The Reader as Voyeur: Tolstoy and the	
Poetics of Didactic Fiction <i>Gary Saul Morson</i>	175
<i>Resurrection</i> <i>Edward Wasiolek</i>	191
Some Fateful Patterns in Tolstoy <i>W. W. Rowe</i>	201
Idyll and Ideal: Aspects of Sentimentalism in	
Tolstoy's <i>Family Happiness</i> <i>Natalia Kisseleff</i>	211
Symbolism in <i>The Death of Ivan Ilych</i>	
<i>Robert Wexelblatt</i>	221
Tolstoy and the Forms of Life <i>Martin Price</i>	225
Chronology	255
Contributors	257
Bibliography	259
Acknowledgments	261
Index	263

Introduction

With God he has very suspicious relations; they sometimes remind me of the relation of "two bears in one den."

—MAXIM GORKY, *Reminiscences of Tolstoy*

I

Tolstoy, while at work upon his sublime short novel, *Hadji Murad*, wrote an essay on Shakespeare in which he judged *King Lear*, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* to be "empty and offensive." Reading one of his few authentic rivals, Tolstoy "felt an overpowering repugnance, a boundless tedium." Homer and the Bible were equals he could recognize, but Shakespeare unnerved him. The customary explanation is that Tolstoy was morally offended by Shakespeare, but the truth is likely to be darker. *Hadji Murad* has a mimetic force difficult to match elsewhere. To find representations of the human that compel us to see reality differently, or to see aspects of reality we otherwise could not see at all, we can turn to only a few authors: the Yahwist or "J" writer (who made the original narratives in what are now Genesis, Exodus, Numbers), Homer and Dante, Chaucer and Shakespeare, Cervantes and Tolstoy and Proust. Of all these, Tolstoy most resembles "J." The art of Tolstoy's narratives never seems art, and the narratives themselves move with an authority that admits no reservations on the reader's side. Gorky wrote of Tolstoy that: "He talks most of God, of peasants, and of woman. Of literature rarely and little, as though literature were something alien to him." The *Reminiscences of Tolstoy* is continually astonishing, but perhaps most memorable when Gorky describes Tolstoy playing cards:

How strange that he is so fond of playing cards. He plays seriously, passionately. His hands become nervous when he takes the cards up, exactly as he were holding live birds instead of inanimate pieces of card-board.

That is the author of *Hadji Murad*, rather than of *What is Art?* Tolstoy holds *Hadji Murad* in his hands, as if indeed he held the man, and not a fiction. I read Tolstoy only in translation, and believe that I miss an

immense value, but what remains in *Hadji Murad* overwhelms me afresh at every rereading. Tolstoy finished the novella in September 1902, shortly after his seventy-fourth birthday. Perhaps the story was his profound study of his own nostalgias, his return to his own youth, when he had participated as a volunteer in the Caucasian campaign (1851), at the age of twenty-three, and when he wrote *The Cossacks* (1858, published 1863).

Everything outward in *Hadji Murad* is historical, and Tolstoy evidently was precise and faithful in adhering to documented fact, and yet the inward story is a phantasmagoria so powerful as to devour and replace whatever we might yearn to call reality. Hadji Murad, like every other major figure in the narrative, was both a historical personage, and a living legend in Tolstoy's time, yet he is Tolstoy's vitalistic vision at its most personal, persuasive, and poignant, being a vision of the end. That is to say, *Hadji Murad* is a supreme instance of what the heroic Chernyshevsky, critic and martyr, praised as Tolstoy's prime gifts: purity of moral feeling, and the soul's dialectic, its antithetical discourse with itself.

Perhaps *Hadji Murad* can also be read as the return in Tolstoy of the pure storyteller, who tells his story as a contest against death, so as to defer change, of which the final form must be death. Tolstoy's ruinous meditations upon the power of death ensue from his awesome sense of life, a vitality as intense as his own Hadji Murad's. His crisis in the mid-1870s, when he wrote *Anna Karenina*, as set forth in his *Confession* (1882), supposedly turned upon a dread of nihilism, a conviction that no meaning of any life could be preserved once it ceased. But Tolstoy's famous refusal to divide life from literature, which could lead to the absurdity of his "Shakespeare" essay, led also to *Hadji Murad*. Consider the opening of the novella (I give the Aylmer Maude translation):

I was returning home by the fields. It was mid-summer, the hay harvest was over and they were just beginning to reap the rye. At that season of the year there is a delightful variety of flowers—red, white, and pink scented tufty clover; milkwhite ox-eye daisies with their bright yellow centres and pleasant spicy smell; yellow honey-scented rape blossoms; tall campanulas with white and lilac bells, tulip-shaped; creeping vetch; yellow, red, and pink scabious; faintly scented, neatly arranged purple plantains with blossoms slightly tinged with pink; cornflowers, the newly opened blossoms bright blue in the sunshine but growing paler and redder towards evening or when growing old; and delicate almond-scented dodder flowers that withered quickly. I gathered myself a large nosegay and was going home when I noticed in a ditch, in full bloom, a beautiful thistle plant of the crimson variety, which in our neighborhood they call "Tartar" and carefully avoid when mowing—or, if they do happen to cut it down,

throw out from among the grass for fear of pricking their hands. Thinking to pick this thistle and put it in the centre of my nosegay, I climbed down into the ditch, and after driving away a velvety humble-bee that had penetrated deep into one of the flowers and had there fallen sweetly asleep, I set to work to pluck the flower. But this proved a very difficult task. Not only did the stalk prick on every side—even through the handkerchief I had wrapped round my hand—but it was so tough that I had to struggle with it for nearly five minutes, breaking the fibres one by one; and when I had at last plucked it, the stalk was all frayed and the flower itself no longer seemed so fresh and beautiful. Moreover, owing to its coarseness and stiffness, it did not seem in place among the delicate blossoms of my nosegay. I threw it away feeling sorry to have vainly destroyed a flower that looked beautiful in its proper place.

It does not matter at all that the thistle is so obviously a synecdoche for Hadji Murad himself. What is at work here is the authority of Tolstoy's own recalcitrance. Like the thistle, Tolstoy's stance is firm, rooted in the black-earth fields. "What reality!" we think, as we stare at Tolstoy's fictive cosmos. If in Balzac every janitor is a genius, in Tolstoy every object resists inanimate status, be it the "Tartar" thistle or the low ottoman that rebels against Peter Ivanovich at the beginning of *The Death of Ivan Ilych*:

Peter Ivanovich sighed still more deeply and despondently, and Praskovya Fedorovna pressed his arm gratefully. When they reached the drawing-room, upholstered in pink cretonne and lighted by a dim lamp, they sat down at the table—she on a sofa and Peter Ivanovich on a low pouffle, the springs of which yielded spasmodically under his weight. Praskovya Fedorovna had been on the point of warning him to take another seat, but felt that such a warning was out of keeping with her present condition and so changed her mind. As he sat down on the pouffle Peter Ivanovich recalled how Ivan Ilych had arranged this room and had consulted him regarding this pink cretonne with green leaves. The whole room was full of furniture and knick-knacks, and on her way to the sofa the lace of the widow's black shawl caught on the carved edge of the table. Peter Ivanovich rose to detach it, and the springs of the pouffle, relieved of his weight, rose also and gave him a push. The widow began detaching her shawl herself, and Peter Ivanovich again sat down, suppressing the rebellious springs of the pouffle under him. But the widow had not quite freed herself and Peter Ivanovich got up again, and again the pouffle rebelled and even creaked. When this was all over, she took out a clean cambric handkerchief and began to weep. The episode with the shawl and the struggle with the pouffle had cooled Peter Ivanovich's emotions and he sat there with a sullen look on his face. This awkward situation was interrupted by Sokolov, Ivan Ilych's butler, who came to report that the plot in the cemetery that Praskovya Fedorovna had chosen would cost

two hundred roubles. She stopped weeping and, looking at Peter Ivanovich with the air of a victim, remarked in French that it was very hard for her. Peter Ivanovich made a silent gesture signifying his full conviction that it must indeed be so.

It has been remarked that the pouffle or ottoman here is more memorable, has more vitality, than the personages have in most other authors' fiction. Of *Hadji Murad* I am moved to say that everything in it—people, horses, landscapes—exuberantly is rammed with life. Isaak Babel, whose *Odessa Tales* are my own favorite among all modern short stories, reread *Hadji Murad* in 1937, and recorded his happy shock at his renewed sense of Tolstoy's vitalistic force:

Here the electric charge went from the earth, through the hands, straight to the paper, with no insulation at all, quite mercilessly stripping off all outer layers with a sense of truth . . .

Tolstoy, who moralized both abominably and magnificently, has little original to say concerning the pragmatics of literary representation. What might be called his theory of such representation is outrageous enough to be interesting:

The art of the future will thus be completely distinct, both in subject matter and in form, from what is now called art. The only subject matter of the art of the future will be either feelings drawing men toward union, or such as already unite them; and the forms of art will be such as will be open to everyone. And therefore, the ideal of excellence in the future will not be the exclusiveness of feeling, accessible only to some, but, on the contrary, its universality. And not bulkiness, obscurity, and complexity of form, as is now esteemed, but, on the contrary, brevity, clearness, and simplicity of expression. Only when art has attained to that, will art neither divert nor deprave men as it does now, calling on them to expend their best strength on it, but be what it should be—a vehicle wherewith to transmit religious, Christian perception from the realm of reason and intellect into that of feeling, and really drawing people in actual life nearer to that perfection and unity indicated to them by their religious perception.

In the age of Proust and *Finnegans Wake*, of *Gravity's Rainbow* and "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," Tolstoy's "art of the future" is still, thankfully, far in the unapparent. Yet there is a strength in Tolstoy's own attempts to write his art of the future that makes us hesitate, partly because Tolstoy seems at moments to have found his way back to an art that never quite was, even in the remote past, and yet something in us wants it to have existed. There is, in a tale like "How Much Land Does a Man Need?"

(1886), a balance between ethos and pathos that caused James Joyce to call it the finest story he had ever read. I myself give that tribute to *Hadji Murad*, but the tale is a dreadfully impressive nightmare, and yet a vision of reality, irresistible in its Biblical irony. I say "Biblical irony" with precise intention, because Tolstoy's ironies seem to me neither Classical (saying one thing while meaning another) nor Romantic (playing upon contrasts between expectation and fulfillment). Rather, they resemble the ironies of the Yahwist, and turn always upon the incongruous clash between incommensurate orders of reality, human and divine, eros and the spirit. It is not accidental that Tolstoy was obsessed with the Biblical story of Joseph and his brothers, because in some sense much of Tolstoy's greatest art is a transumption of that story. To read the tale of Joseph as Tolstoy read it may be a way of seeing what Tolstoy valued in literary representation, and may help us to appreciate more fully the greatness, almost beyond the reach of art, of *Hadji Murad*.

II

It is hardly invidious to say that *Hadji Murad* is the story that Hemingway always wished to write, but could not accomplish. If we could imagine an early twentieth-century story written by the author of the *Iliad*, then it would be *Hadji Murad*. Like Homer, Tolstoy neither loves battle nor hates it; both epic poets simply accept it as the condition of life. The world of *Hadji Murad*, whatever precise relation it has to the actuality that Tolstoy experienced as a young soldier in the Caucasus, is a scene where battle is the norm, and open warfare is morally preferable to societal treachery, whether the society be Russian or Tartar, the realm of czar Nicholas or the Imam Shamil. Overt battle is also nobler than the sad impingements of societal depravity upon those who fight, with the superb exception of Hadji Murad himself and his little band of followers, devoted to the death. In such a fictive cosmos, Hadji Murad the man combines in himself all the positive attributes divided in the *Iliad* between Achilles and Hector, while being free of the negative qualities of both heroes. Indeed, of all natural men of heroic eminence in Western literature, Hadji Murad is the most impressive.

How does Tolstoy so shape his representation of Hadji Murad as to arouse none of our proper skepticism (or his own) of the potential heroism of the natural man? No sensitive reader of Tolstoy's story would dismiss Hadji Murad as we are compelled to dismiss the fisherman in *The Old Man*

and the Sea or Colonel Cantwell in *Across the River and Into the Trees*. Hemingway's natural vitalists are neither natural nor vital enough, and their sacred innocence is too close to ignorance. Hadji Murad is shrewder as well as more courageous than anyone else in his story. He dies in battle, knowing he must, because he has no alternative. But he dies without Achilles' rage against mortality, or Hector's collapse into passivity. He can die with absolute dignity because he knows that he is not only the best of the Tartars, but superior also in horsemanship, daring, fighting skill, and charismatic leadership to any of the Russians. Famous for all his exploits, his last stand will be not less famous, and yet he need not comfort himself with such a realization. Perhaps his heroic completeness is implicit comfort enough.

Of the two chief Homeric heroes, Achilles excels in force and Odysseus in craft, but Hadji Murad is foremost in both qualities. Like Achilles, Hadji Murad has chosen immortal fame, and yet, like Odysseus, he wishes to return home, to rescue his women and his son. Unlike Odysseus, he fails, and yet Tolstoy's art makes it impossible to judge Hadji Murad's last exploit as a failure. The hero, in every phase leading up to his hopeless break-out and final battle, remains elemental, a force like wind, a kind of pure flame. That force and purity are not less elemental in the Tartar hero's dying:

all these images passed through his mind without evoking any feeling within him—neither pity nor anger nor any kind of desire: everything seemed so insignificant in comparison with what was beginning, or had already begun, within him.

Elemental dying, strong process as it is, goes on simultaneously with the last spasm of Hadji Murad's sublime vitality:

Yet his strong body continued the thing that he had commenced. Gathering together his last strength he rose from behind the bank, fired his pistol at a man who was just running towards him, and hit him. The man fell. Then Hadji Murad got quite out of the ditch, and limping heavily went dagger in hand straight at the foe.

Some shots cracked and he reeled and fell. Several militiamen with triumphant shrieks rushed towards the fallen body. But the body that seemed to be dead suddenly moved. First the uncovered, bleeding, shaven head rose; then the body with hands holding to the trunk of a tree. He seemed so terrible, that those who were running towards him stopped short. But suddenly a shudder passed through him, he staggered away from the tree and fell on his face, stretched out at full length like a thistle that had been mown down, and he moved no more.

He did not move, but still he felt.

When Hadji Aga, who was the first to reach him, struck him on the head with a large dagger, it seemed to Hadji Murad that someone was striking him with a hammer and he could not understand who was doing it or why. That was his last consciousness of any connection with his body. He felt nothing more and his enemies kicked and hacked at what had no longer anything in common with him.

The synecdoche of the mown-down thistle, called "the Tartar" in the novella's first paragraph, reminds us of Tolstoy's original tribute: "But what energy and tenacity! With what determination it defended itself, and how dearly it sold its life!" Hadji Murad also "stood firm and did not surrender to man" and marvelously demonstrated the vitality that will not submit. But why does this archaic heroism so captivate Tolstoy and, through Tolstoy, the readers of the story? Gorky said of Tolstoy: "He always greatly exalted immortality on the other side of this life, but he preferred it on this side." We should also recall Gorky's memory that Tolstoy liked to remark of *War and Peace*: "without false modesty, it is like the *Iliad*." *Hadji Murad* is even more like the *Iliad*; uncannily so, because its hero is Homeric to the highest degree, and yet something beyond even Homer, which remains to be explored.

It is totally persuasive that Hadji Murad is virtually without flaw, granted his context and his tradition. Tolstoy, as an artist, intends to transume the whole of the heroic concept, from all archaic sources, and in his Hadji Murad he fulfills that intention. The archaic hero falls somewhere between man and a god, but Hadji Murad is only a man. While the archaic hero of epic has as his special excellence what J. M. Redfield calls "not integration but potency," Hadji Murad is wholly integrated. What Redfield calls "the ambiguity of the hero" does not apply at all to Hadji Murad, whose elemental force, unlike that of Achilles, has in it none of the latency of the savage beast. Without in any way moralizing his hero, Tolstoy removes from him the childlike element that never abandons Achilles.

After Hadji Murad is dead, and even as his killers rejoice, Tolstoy renders his hero the tribute of a true threnody:

The nightingales, that had hushed their songs while the firing lasted, now started their trills once more: first one quite close, then others in the distance.

We can remember the universal adage, that if nature could write, it would be Tolstoy. His art itself is nature, and deserves that Shakespearean praise, despite his jealous dismissal of Shakespeare. He could not rival Shakespeare, but he came near to being Homer's equal.

GYORGY LUKACS

Tolstoy and the Attempts to Go Beyond the Social Forms of Life

The greater closeness of nineteenth-century Russian literature to certain organic natural conditions, which were the given substratum of its underlying attitude and creative intention, made it possible for that literature to be *creatively* polemical. Tolstoy, coming after Turgenev—who was an essentially Western European novelist of disillusionment—created a form of novel which overlaps to the maximum extent into the epic. Tolstoy's great and truly epic mentality, which has little to do with the novel form, aspires to a life based on a community of feeling among simple human beings closely bound to nature, a life which is intimately adapted to the great rhythm of nature, which moves according to nature's cycle of birth and death and excludes all structures which are not natural, which are petty and disruptive, causing disintegration and stagnation. "The muzhik dies quietly," Tolstoy wrote to Countess A. A. Tolstoy about his story *Three Deaths*. "His religion is nature, with which he has spent all his life. He has felled trees, sown rye, reaped it, he has slaughtered sheep and sheep have been born on his farm, children have come into the world, old men have died, and he knows this law from which he has never turned away as the lady of the manor has done, he knows it well and has looked it straight and simply in the eye . . . The tree dies

Translated by Anna Bostock. From *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*. Copyright © 1971 by The Merlin Press.

quietly, simply and beautifully. Beautifully because it does not lie, makes no grimaces, is afraid of nothing and regrets nothing."

The paradoxical nature of Tolstoy's historical situation, which proves better than anything else how much the novel is the necessary epic form of our time, manifests itself in the fact that this world cannot be translated into movement and action, even by an author who not only longs for it but has actually seen and depicted it clearly; it remains only an element of the epic work, but is not epic reality itself. The natural organic world of the old epics was, after all, a culture whose organic character was its specific quality, whereas the nature which Tolstoy posits as the ideal and which he has experienced as existent is, in its innermost essence, meant to be *nature* (and is, therefore, opposed, as such, to *culture*). This necessary opposition is the insoluble problematic of Tolstoy's novels. In other words, his epic intention was bound to result in a problematic novel form, not because he failed to overcome culture within himself, not because his relationship to nature as he experienced and depicted it was a sentimental one—not for psychological reasons—but for reasons of form and of the relationship of form to its historico-philosophical substratum.

A totality of men and events is possible only on the basis of culture, whatever one's attitude towards it. Therefore in Tolstoy's epic works the decisive element belongs, both as framework and as concrete content, to the world of culture which he rejects as problematic. But since nature, although it cannot become an immanently complete totality, is objectively existent, the work contains two layers of realities which are completely heterogeneous from one another both as regards the value attached to them and the quality of their being. And relating them to one another, which would make it possible to construct a work that was a totality, can only take the form of the lived experience of going from one reality to the other. Or, to put it more precisely, since the direction chosen is a given result of the value attached to both realities, it is the experience of going from culture to nature. And so, as a paradoxical consequence of the paradoxical relationship between the writer's mentality and the historical age in which he finds himself, a sentimental, romantic experience finally becomes the centre of the entire work: the central characters' dissatisfaction with whatever the surrounding world of culture can offer them and their seeking and finding of the second, more essential reality of nature. The paradox arising from this experience is further increased by the fact that this "nature" of Tolstoy's does not have a plenitude and perfection that would make it, like the relatively more substantial world at the end of Goethe's novel, a home in which the characters might arrive and come to rest. Rather, it is

a factual assurance that an essential life really does exist beyond conventionality—a life which can be reached through the lived experiences of a full and genuine selfhood, the self-experience of the soul, but from which one must irremediably fall back into the world of convention.

With the heroic ruthlessness of a writer of historic greatness, Tolstoy does not flinch from the grim consequences of his world view; not even the singular position he allocates to love and marriage—a position half-way between nature and culture, at home in both spheres and yet a stranger in each—can mitigate these consequences. In the rhythm of natural life, the rhythm of unpathetic, natural growth and death, love is the point at which the dominant forces of life assume their most concrete and meaningful form. Yet love as a pure force of nature, love as passion, does not belong to Tolstoy's world of nature; passionate love is too much bound up with the relationship between one individual and another and therefore isolates too much, creates too many degrees and nuances; it is too cultural. The love which occupies the really central place in Tolstoy's world is love as marriage, love as union (the fact of being united, of becoming one, being more important than who it is that is thus united), love as the prelude to birth; marriage and the family as a vehicle of the natural continuity of life. That this introduces a conceptual dichotomy into the edifice would be of little importance artistically if it did not create yet another heterogeneous layer of reality, which cannot be compositionally connected with the other two spheres, in themselves heterogeneous from each other. The more authentically this layer of reality is depicted, the more strongly it is bound to be transformed into the opposite of what was intended: the triumph of such love over culture is meant to be a victory of the natural over the falsely, artificially refined, yet it becomes a miserable swallowing-up by nature of everything that is great and noble in man. Nature is alive inside man but, when it is lived as culture, it reduces man to the lowest, most mindless, most idea-forsaken conventionality. This is why the mood of the epilogue to *War and Peace*, with its nursery atmosphere where all passion has been spent and all seeking ended, is more profoundly disconsolate than the endings of the most problematic novels of disillusionment. Nothing is left of what was there before; as the sand of the desert covers the pyramids, so every spiritual thing has been swamped, annihilated, by animal nature.

This unintentional disconsolateness of the ending combines with an intentional one in the description of the conventional world. Tolstoy's evaluating and rejecting attitude extends to every detail he depicts. The aimlessness and insubstantiality of the life he describes expresses itself not