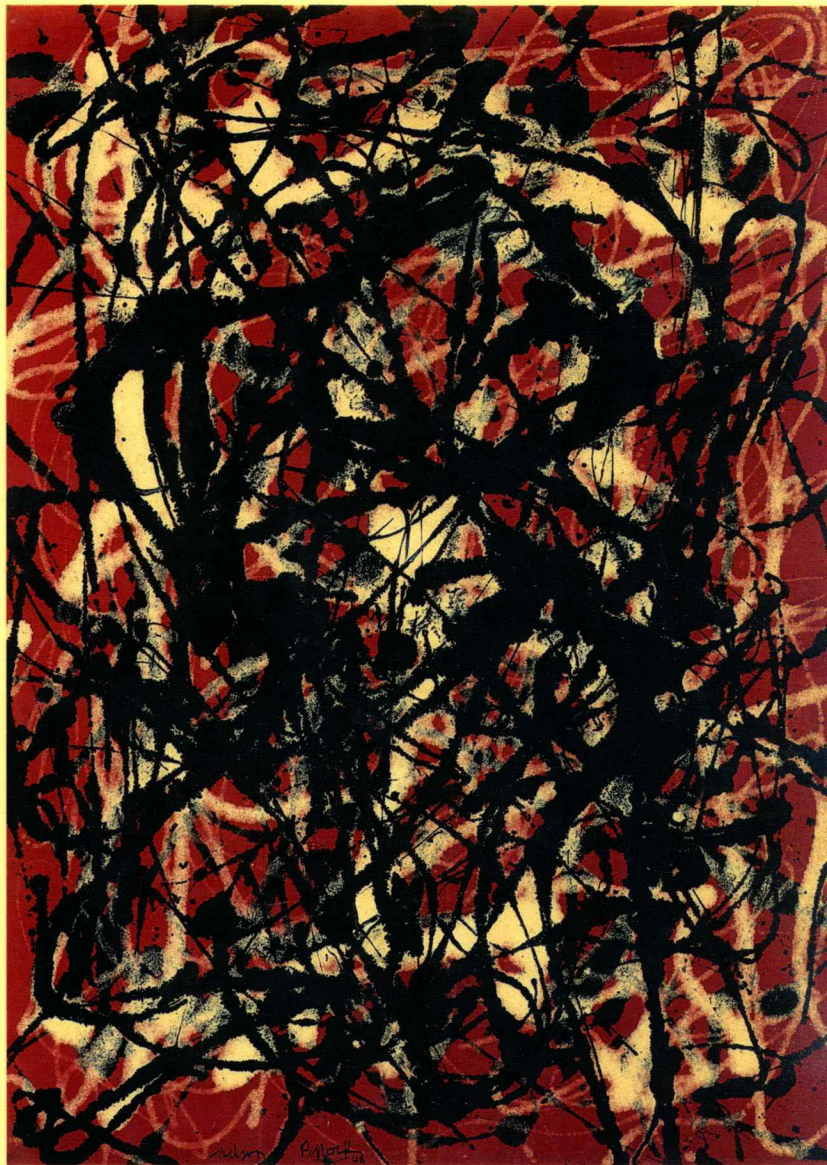


Modern Critical

INTERPRETATIONS

Edited and with an Introduction by HAROLD BLOOM

Leo Tolstoy's
War and Peace



Modern Critical Interpretations

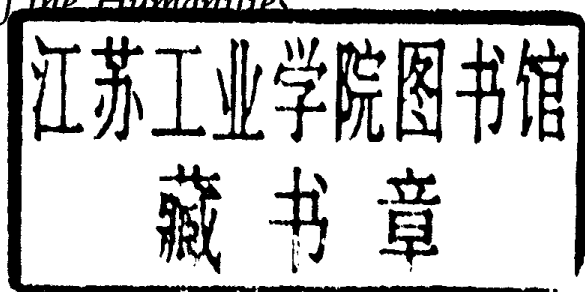
Leo Tolstoy's
War and Peace

Edited and with an introduction by

Harold Bloom

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Chelsea House Publishers ◇ 1988

NEW YORK ◇ NEW HAVEN ◇ PHILADELPHIA

© 1988 by Chelsea House Publishers, a division
of Chelsea House Educational Communications, Inc.
95 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016
345 Whitney Avenue, New Haven, CT 06511
5068B West Chester Pike, Edgemont, PA 19028

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Printed and bound in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

∞ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum
requirements of the American National Standard for
Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials,
Z39.48-1984.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Leo Tolstoy's War and peace.

(Modern critical interpretations)

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

Summary: A collection of seven critical essays discussing
Tolstoy's novel, arranged in chronological order of their
original publication.

1. Tolstoy, Leo, graf, 1828-1910. Voĭna i mir. [1. Tolstoy,
Leo, graf, 1828-1910. War and peace. 2. Russian literature—
History and criticism] I. Bloom, Harold. II. Series.
PG3365.V65L39 1988 891.73'3 87-9249
ISBN 1-55546-078-X (alk. paper)

Modern Critical Interpretations

Leo Tolstoy's

War and Peace

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Editor's Note

This book brings together a representative selection of the best modern critical interpretations, available in English, of Tolstoy's epic novel *War and Peace*. The critical essays are reprinted here in the chronological order of their original publication. I am grateful to Joyce Bannerjee and Henry Finder for their aid in editing this volume.

My introduction is an appreciation of Tolstoy's extraordinary powers of representation in *War and Peace*. John Bayley begins the chronological sequence of criticism with another appreciation, which delineates some of the ways in which Tolstoy makes *War and Peace* seem not a novel but life itself, so that we read it more than once without believing that we have to perform an act of interpretation.

In Paul Debreczeny's reading, the dialectic of freedom and necessity in Tolstoy produces the mixed genre, novel and epic, that helps give *War and Peace* its uniqueness. Robert Louis Jackson, chronicling the second birth of Pierre, relates it to the creation of Platon Karataev as a kind of Russian icon.

The multiple narratives of *War and Peace* are seen in their intricate balance by W. Gareth Jones, while Edward Wasiolek analyzes the novel's theoretical chapters, Tolstoy's massive meditations upon history.

The doctrine of memory, with its benign workings of the compensatory side of Tolstoy's imagination, is judged by Patricia Carden to be the foundation of *War and Peace*. In this book's final essay, Martin Price traces the very different movements between moral visions, and forms of life, by the novel's protagonists, and concludes that Pierre's change is the one that comes "from the deepest engagement with reality."

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Introduction

I

Tolstoy, as befits the writer since Shakespeare who most has the art of the actual, combines in his representational praxis the incompatible powers of the two strongest ancient authors, the poet of the *Iliad* and the original teller of the stories of Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, and Moses in Genesis and Exodus. Perhaps it was because he was closer both to Homer and the Yahwist that Tolstoy was so outrageous a critic of Shakespeare. Surely no other reader of Shakespeare ever has found *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear* tedious and offensive. Why Tolstoy could accept the *Iliad*'s morality, and not *Hamlet*'s, is a profound puzzle, since Hamlet has more in common with Joseph or with the David of 2 Samuel than he does with Achilles or Hector. I surmise that Tolstoy, despite himself, owed too much to Shakespearean representation, and could not bear to acknowledge the inevitable debt. Prince Andrew has more of Hotspur than of Lord Byron in him, and even Pierre, in his comic aspects, reflects the Shakespearean rather than the Homeric or biblical naturalism. If your characters change less because of experience than by listening to themselves reflect upon their relation to experience, then you are another heir of Shakespeare's innovations in mimesis, even if you insist passionately that your sense of reality is morally centered while Shakespeare's was not.

Shakespeare and Tolstoy had the Bible rather than the *Iliad* in common, and the Shakespearean drama that most should have offended Tolstoy was *Troilus and Cressida*. Alas, *King Lear* achieved that bad eminence, while only Falstaff, rather surprisingly, convinced Tolstoy. But then the effect of the greatest writers upon one another can be very odd. Writing in 1908, Henry James associated *War and Peace* with Thackeray's *The Newcomes* and Dumas's *The Three Musketeers*, since all these were "large loose baggy monsters, with . . . queer elements of the accidental and the arbitrary." Twenty years

earlier, James had a vision of Tolstoy as "a monster harnessed to his great subject—all human life!—as an elephant might be harnessed, for purposes of traction, not to a carriage, but to a coach-house."

James's demand for "an absolutely premeditated art" might seem to collide with Tolstoy's notorious polemic, *What is Art?*, but that is merely an illusion. Even in translation, Tolstoy is clearly a writer who transcends James as an artist, even as Homer overgoes Virgil and Shakespeare dwarfs Ben Jonson. The representation of persons in *War and Peace* has the authority and the mastery of what we are compelled to call the real that Tolstoy shares with only a few: Homer, the Bible, Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Cervantes, perhaps Proust. Philip Rahv remarked memorably upon "the critic's euphoria in the Tolstoyan weather." The best word there is "weather." *War and Peace*, like our cosmos, has weather, but no one would want to say that Tolstoy, like the High Romantics or Dostoevsky, had created a heterocosm. You suffer and die, or joy and live, on our earth in Tolstoy, and not in a visionary realm.

The Marxist critic Lukács reluctantly conceded that in certain moments Tolstoy broke through to "a clearly differentiated, concrete and existent world, which, if it could spread out into a totality, would be completely inaccessible to the categories of the novel and would require a new form of artistic creation: the form of the renewed epic." Lukács denied that Tolstoy could accomplish this as a totality, but his ideology made him less than generous towards Tolstoy. A short novel like *Hadji Murad* certainly is such a totality, but the thirteen hundred pages of *War and Peace*, granted the impossibility of an absolute totality at such a length, also gives us "a clearly differentiated, concrete and existent world." Tolstoy does what a nineteenth-century novelist ought not to be able to do: he reveals aspects of our ordinary reality that we could never see if he had not seen them first. Dickens and Balzac render an extraordinary phantasmagoria that we are eager to absorb into reality, but Tolstoy, more like Shakespeare than he could bear to know, persuades us that the imitation of what seems to be essential nature is more than enough.

Shakespeare is inexhaustible to analysis, partly because his rhetorical art is nearly infinite. Tolstoy scarcely yields to analysis at all, because his rhetoric evidently also gives the effect of the natural. You have to brood on the balance of determinism and free will in Tolstoy's personages because he insists that this is your proper work, but you are too carried along by the force of his narrative and the inevitability of his characters' modes of speaking and thinking to question either the structure of plot or the individual images of voice that inhabit the story. If James and Flaubert and

Joyce, the three together, are to be considered archetypes of the novelist, then Tolstoy seems something else, larger and more vital, for which we may lack a name, since Lukács was doubtless correct when he insisted that “the great epic is a form bound to the historical moment,” and that moment was neither Tolstoy’s nor ours.

II

W. Gareth Jones emphasizes that *War and Peace* is not so much a single narrative related by Tolstoy but a network of many narratives, addressed to us as though each of us were Prince Andrew, receptive and dispassionate. Perhaps that is Andrew’s prime function in the novel, to serve as an ideal model for the Tolstoyan reader, even as Pierre perhaps becomes at last the ideal Tolstoyan storyteller. Isaiah Berlin and Martin Price both have illuminated the way that Tolstoy’s heroes win through to serenity by coming to accept “the permanent relationships of things and the universal texture of human life,” as Berlin phrases it. If that seems not wholly adequate to describe the changed Pierre of book fifteen, the cause is Tolstoy’s preternaturally natural strength and not the weakness of his best critics. How can a critic convey either the cognitive wisdom or the restrained yet overwhelming pathos that is manifested in Tolstoy’s account of the meeting between Pierre and Natásha at Princess Mary’s when Pierre returns to Moscow after his liberation and imprisonment, and subsequent illness and recovery? It is difficult to conceive of an art subtler than Tolstoy exercises in Pierre’s realisation that Princess Mary’s mourning companion is Natásha, and that he is in love with Natásha:

In a rather low room lit by one candle sat the princess and with her another person dressed in black. Pierre remembered that the princess always had lady companions, but who they were and what they were like he never knew or remembered. “This must be one of her companions,” he thought, glancing at the lady in the black dress.

The princess rose quickly to meet him and held out her hand.

“Yes,” she said, looking at his altered face after he had kissed her hand, “so this is how we meet again. He often spoke of you even at the very last,” she went on, turning her eyes from Pierre to her companion with a shyness that surprised him for an instant.

“I was so glad to hear of your safety. It was the first piece of good news we had received for a long time.”

Again the princess glanced round at her companion with even more uneasiness in her manner and was about to add something, but Pierre interrupted her.

"Just imagine—I knew nothing about him!" said he. "I thought he had been killed. All I know I heard at second hand from others. I only know that he fell in with the Rostóvs. . . . What a strange coincidence!"

Pierre spoke rapidly and with animation. He glanced once at the companion's face, saw her attentive and kindly gaze fixed on him, and, as often happens when one is talking, felt somehow that this companion in the black dress was a good, kind, excellent creature who would not hinder his conversing freely with Princess Mary.

But when he mentioned the Rostóvs, Princess Mary's face expressed still greater embarrassment. She again glanced rapidly from Pierre's face to that of the lady in the black dress and said:

"Do you really not recognize her?"

Pierre looked again at the companion's pale, delicate face with its black eyes and peculiar mouth, and something near to him, long forgotten and more than sweet, looked at him from those attentive eyes.

"But no, it can't be!" he thought. "This stern, thin, pale face that looks so much older! It cannot be she. It merely reminds me of her." But at that moment Princess Mary said, "Natásha!" And with difficulty, effort, and stress, like the opening of a door grown rusty on its hinges, a smile appeared on the face with the attentive eyes, and from that opening door came a breath of fragrance which suffused Pierre with a happiness he had long forgotten and of which he had not even been thinking—especially at that moment. It suffused him, seized him, and enveloped him completely. When she smiled doubt was no longer possible, it was Natásha and he loved her.

Massively simple, direct, realistic, as this is, it is also, in its full context, with the strength of the vast novel behind it, an absolutely premeditated art. Henry James is not one of the great literary critics, despite the idolatry of his admirers. Tolstoy, Dickens, and Walt Whitman bear not the slightest resemblance to what James saw them as being, though the old James repented on the question of Whitman. If the highest art after all catches us unaware, even as we and Pierre together learn the secret and meaning of

his life in this central moment, then no novelistic art, not even that of Proust, can surpass Tolstoy's. "Great works of art are only great because they are accessible and comprehensible to everyone." That rugged Tolstoyan principle is certainly supported by this moment, but we cannot forget that Lear and Gloucester conversing, one mad and the other blind, is not accessible and comprehensible to everyone, and touches the limits of art as even Tolstoy does not. It is a sadness that Tolstoy could not or would not accommodate the transcendental and extraordinary in *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *Hamlet*, and yet did not resist the biblical story of Joseph and his brothers, or the strife of Achilles and Hector. The Tolstoyan rejection of Shakespeare may be, however twisted askew, the most formidable tribute that Shakespeare's powers of representation have ever received.

“Not a Novel . . .”: *War and Peace*

John Bayley

What can be older than the relations of married couples, of parents to children, of children to parents; the relations of men to their fellow-countrymen and to foreigners, to an invasion, to defence, to property, to the land?

TOLSTOY, *What is Art?*

To enjoy a novel we must feel surrounded by it on all sides: it cannot exist as a more or less conspicuous thing among the rest of things.

ORTEGA Y GASSET

I. FORMS

Most great novels succeed by being absolutely individual. They not only show us a way of looking at the world but make us feel—at least for a time—that this is what the world is really like. At later readings we realise, often with no diminishment of pleasure or admiration, that this is what Sterne or Stendhal or Lawrence see the world as being like. While conceding the truth of what they offer we remain aware of the large area outside them.

In the West this idea of the novel has come to be taken for granted, almost unconsciously. As I suggested [elsewhere], novelists themselves tacitly allow, sometimes even assert, the limitations which their status as novelists require of their view of life. When Stendhal speaks of the novelist as “the mirror in the roadway” he is, one feels, giving in to the *notion* of the novel, recognising its shifting but positive status, as unreservedly as is Henry James in his prefaces, D. H. Lawrence in his comments on the novel’s function, or Michel Butor in his programme for an entirely new type of fiction. The newer the fiction, the more revolutionary, the more it uncon-

sciously depends on the novel as an idea; somewhat in the way in which undergraduates in the old days unconsciously revealed by their wish to steal policemen's helmets their acceptance of the status and sanctity of the Force. In the novels of Jean Genet, for instance, do we not recognise the wholly French fictional tradition on which they depend for their novelty and—in Gide's phrase—their *nouvelles chose à dire*?

Although Tolstoy said that he had learnt from Stendhal how to describe war, the *mot* about "the mirror in the roadway" would have meant nothing to him, as neither would that other equally irritating status phrase—"une tranche de vie." Such phrases offer a background to Tolstoy's comment on the unfreedom of those who live under laws of their own making in a western constitutional government. The novelists who invent these phrases, like the M.P.s who pass the laws, are making sticks for their own backs, blinkers for themselves and their fellows. But in Russia there is no obligation to support the idea of the novel, and on at least four occasions Tolstoy observes that this idea has never acquired any real status or meaning in Russian literature. When he makes critical remarks about fiction—and in the course of his life he made a good number—they are seldom about the form of the novel, its constitution and mode of government so to speak, but about the people in it and the man behind it.

"Anyone writing a novel," he says in his essay on Maupassant, "must have a clear and firm idea as to what is good and bad in life." We can press the political parallel further, and say that in the West novelists acquire their individuality, their air of being different from other novelists, precisely *because* they have submitted themselves to laws of their own making, just as the citizens who submit themselves to the laws of a free country are different in opinions, outlook, and so forth. For Tolstoy, difference begins further back, in the heart and in the body.

When the first draft of *War and Peace*, entitled *1805*, began to appear in *The Russian Messenger*, Tolstoy would not allow the editor to call it a novel, although, being almost entirely about family life in high society, it was much more like a conventional novel than the final project turned out to be; and incidentally much more like a first sketch of the ideal novel which Percy Lubbock felt could be separated out of the great mass of *War and Peace*. In the cancelled preface of a later draft, Tolstoy says that what he wrote would not fit into any category "whether novel, short story, poem, or history"; and in the foreword to the first serial version of *1805*, which also remained unused, he says that "in publishing the beginning of my projected work, I do not promise a continuation or conclusion." (We remember that Dickens and Hardy, in their serials, had to invent further

instalments and a dénouement, come what might.) "We Russians," he goes on, "generally speaking, do not know how to write novels in the sense in which this genre is understood in Europe." An even more decisive statement of his attitude is the article *Some Words about "War and Peace,"* which appeared in *Russian Archive* after the first three volumes had been published.

What is *War and Peace*? It is not a novel, even less is it a poem, and still less a historical chronicle. *War and Peace* is what the author wished and was able to express in the form in which it is expressed. Such an announcement of disregard for conventional form in an artistic production might seem presumptuous were it premeditated, and were there not precedents for it. But the history of Russian literature since the time of Pushkin not merely affords many examples of such deviations from European forms, but does not offer a single example of the contrary. From Gogol's *Dead Souls* to Dostoevsky's *House of the Dead*, in the recent period of Russian literature, there is not a single artistic prose work, rising at all above mediocrity, which quite fits into the form of a novel, epic, or story.

As Tolstoy was later to put it to Goldenweiser, "a good work of art can in its entirety be expressed only by itself." Where *War and Peace* is concerned, the question of genre is irrelevant, and it is this that has bothered Western admirers of the novel as a form, both theorists and exponents. "What is *War and Peace* about?" asks Percy Lubbock, who goes on to suggest that Tolstoy was unaware of the fact that he was writing two novels at once. One might as well say that in *Hamlet* Shakespeare did not realise that he was writing a comedy and a tragedy at once. To understand Tolstoy's relation to the novel one must drop all preconceptions about its form, for the Russians make use of that form without adopting it like a constitution and putting themselves under its rule. *War and Peace*, as we shall see, is filled with the conventions, and even the clichés, of the Western novel, but they are never allowed to get out of hand and dictate its development or inform its underlying assumptions.

Henry James could not admit to the citizenship of novelists anyone who would not exercise his electoral rights in the parliament of form, and as a novelist he virtually writes Tolstoy off. But of course he understands very well the issues involved. "Really, universally, relations end nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily *appear* to do so." Relations in *War and Peace* certainly do not stop anywhere, and yet