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Flashes of lightning

by [Eric Ormsby](#)

On *War and Peace*, by Leo Tolstoy, translated by Richard Pevear & Larissa Volokhonsky.

Leo Tolstoy

War and Peace, translated by
Richard Pevear & Larissa Volokhonsky.
Knopf, 1,272 pages, \$37

Tolstoy began writing *War and Peace* in 1863, just over fifty years after the Napoleonic invasion of Russia and the catastrophic retreat of the *Grande Armée*. Though the novel opens in July 1805, and Tolstoy carries the story well into the 1820s, most of the narrative centers on the events of 1812, culminating in the horrific battle of Borodino and the evacuation of Moscow. As Adam Zamoyski notes in his superb *1812: Napoleon's Fatal March on Moscow* (2004)—easily the best recent account of the whole savage fiasco—the engagement at Borodino “had been the greatest massacre in recorded history, not to be surpassed until the first day of the Somme in 1916.” The Russian army lost half of its fighting men in that encounter; the entire French cavalry was, in Zamoyski’s words, “all but destroyed.” In *War and Peace*, Tolstoy described the slaughter at Borodino unforgettably in all its murderous confusion; after reading him, we feel that we too have stumbled among corpses in a haze of artillery smoke with the baffled Pierre; like him, we too have become bystanders to the carnage. And yet, despite its documentary verisimilitude, despite that fabled Tolstoyan “objectivity” of eye, *War and Peace* is only partially about such momentous historic events. The events are given epic dimension, and rightly so, but in the novel they serve principally as occasions of self-revelation for the characters caught up in them. In Tolstoy, external incident almost always acts as a thin but relentless beam of light which illumines characters from within, often to their own astonishment.

Sometimes in *War and Peace* that illumination occurs not as a result of some world-historical confrontation but out of a fleeting moment of irresistible exuberance. Thus, in his wonderful essay on “Shakespeare’s Kings and Noblemen,” the great Austrian poet and playwright Hugo von Hofmannsthal saw fit to evoke the “howl suddenly uttered by Natasha during the hare-hunt in *War and Peace*, that wild, triumphant howl of a hound from the throat of an elegant young lady.” He called this one of those “flashes of lightning” common to both Shakespeare and Tolstoy. In the new translation by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, the passage reads,

Natasha, without pausing for breath, let out a joyful and rapturous shriek, so shrill that it made their ears ring. With this shriek she expressed everything the other hunters had expressed with their simultaneous talk. And this shriek was so odd that she herself would have been embarrassed at such wild shrieking, and they all would have been surprised at it, if it had happened at any other time.

War and Peace is laced together from beginning to end by such secret lightning-flashes.

Tolstoy drew these insights from relentless explorations of his own conscience, and especially from his failings. In a diary entry of October 6, 1863, some six months into the writing of *War and Peace*, he remarked, “Inconsistency, timidity, laziness, weakness—these are my enemies.” But he had a formidable ally too. His wife Sonya, Countess Tolstoy, was his constant collaborator. She not only copied the huge manuscript by hand no fewer than seven times—while bearing him the first of thirteen children (in her spare time, as it were)—but read through and criticized each chapter as it was being written. In her own fascinating and voluminous diary she lamented, “Lyovochka makes me feel like a mangy dog,” but at other times, with a percipience equal to her husband’s she could quip, “The unhappy lonely wives of great men are the wives of whom posterity makes Xantippes.” But even Xantippe was a Natasha once, and Tolstoy knew it.

Another revelatory glimmer, one more consonant with Tolstoy’s own lifelong obsessions, occurs early in the novel. During his baptism of fire, at the battle of Schöngraben, young Nikolai Rostov falls from his horse, only to see the French troops swarming upon him as he struggles to his feet. In the Pevear/Volokhonsky translation, Rostov muses, “Who are they? Why are they running? Can it be they’re running to me? Can it be? And why? To kill me? *Me*, whom everybody loves so?” To the enemy, Rostov is nothing more than a faceless number in a mounting body count, but at the same moment Rostov stands revealed, in his own eyes, as irreplaceably precious. The disparity is all the more poignant for being gently comical. And yet, Tolstoy is not poking fun at Rostov. Most of his characters display a similar naiveté in moments of crisis, as though uniforms and insignia, tiaras and ball gowns, along with the glittering paraphernalia of fashion and convention, had to be stripped away so that the essential innocence of an individual soul before the brutal facts of the world could be laid bare.

Though *War and Peace* is certainly “a triumphant affirmation of human life in all its richness and complexity,” as the historian Orlando Figes has remarked, and indeed, Tolstoy’s zest for life in all its forms surges from every page, nevertheless, that affirmation came at a steep price. From an early age Tolstoy was obsessed with an overwhelming dread of death. In a letter to his cousin the Countess Alexandra, he wrote, “There are times when one forgets about [death]. But there are others when one sits there with those one loves as though in hiding. One fears even to think of their fate.” In another letter he remarked, “One passes one’s whole life seeking distraction in hunting or in work merely not to think of death, for if one should think deeply and picture death vividly, one can’t live!” Tolstoy imparted that dread, which caused him deep anguish, to certain of his most memorable characters. For them, typically, awareness of death comes by stealth, arising like an unexpected reminder of some forgotten rendezvous; each *memento mori* arrives as a mysterious surprise. In *Anna Karenina*, Levin sits by the deathbed of his brother and reflects, to his own amazement, “I had forgotten there was such a thing” (as death). But remembrance of death invariably prompts the dreadful question, which Levin then voices, “What am I to do now? What am I to do?” In his diary, Tolstoy himself put it more sharply: “If a man must die, what even is truth?”

In “The Death of Ivan Ilych,” Tolstoy’s greatest treatment of the theme, Ivan asks himself, mere moments before his death, “What *is* the right thing?” Perhaps, if he could just discover that elusive integer, “the right thing,” his impending death might be, if not averted, then at least made meaningful. Made meaningful, I should add, to him and to him alone: For “the awful, terrible act of his dying was, he could see, reduced by those about him to the level of a casual, unpleasant, and almost indecorous incident (as if someone entered a drawing room diffusing an unpleasant odor) and this was done by that very decorum which he had served all his life long.” The absurd notion possesses Ivan that his death “resulted from his not having lived as he ought to have done.” If we could grasp how we ought to live, might we sidestep mortality?

For Tolstoy, mortality is always supremely personal: Not, why must *one* die, but why must *I*—with

my cherished name, my individual history, my irreplaceable memories, the whole distinctive fragrance of my unrepeatable personality—why must I, with my raging and inextinguishable self, have to die? At school Ivan Ilych had learned the rote syllogism, “Caius is a man, men are mortal, therefore Caius is mortal.” But surely this applies only to the abstract Caius, not to Ivan himself? For “what did Caius know of the smell of that striped leather ball Vanya had been so fond of? Had Caius kissed his mother’s hand like that, and did the silk of her dress rustle so for Caius?”

Throughout *War and Peace* such discrete, almost inconspicuous, epiphanies underpin the relentless onrush of historical incident. On January 3, 1863, as he was beginning to write the work, Tolstoy confided to his diary, “The epic manner is becoming the only natural one for me.” The epic manner involved not simply a grand conception of history, according to which Napoleon himself is but an unwitting pawn manipulated by an inscrutable Providence, nor did it develop solely out of Tolstoy’s fervent wish to give flesh and bones to a triumphant national myth; rather, beyond these motives—at least if we are to judge by the results—that ambitious manner demanded a cosmic perspective. But such perspective could be achieved only by the meticulous accumulation of detail after tiny detail, each of which possessed its own distinctive weight. In a diary entry written eight months later, he noted, “Wrote badly. If you avoid the essential, the result is tittle-tattle.” And yet, “the essential” is not invariably the most obvious. When the wounded Prince Andrei is brought after the battle of Borodino to a dressing station in the woods, it isn’t only the “loud, angry screams” and “pitiful wailing” of the other wounded which attract his attention but humbler, homelier sights (again in the Pevear/Volokhonsky translation): “The horses were eating oats from their nosebags, and sparrows flew down to them, pecking up the spilled grain. Crows, scenting blood, crowing impatiently, flew about in the birches.” These aren’t just realistic touches added for the sake of verisimilitude. The munching horses and the foraging sparrows and the crows alert to the smell of blood are accorded the weight of characters; they too play a part in the tale. As Tolstoy explained in a note, “The aims of art are not to resolve a question irrefutably, but to compel one to love life in all its manifestations. And these are inexhaustible.” A decade later, in *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy gave fuller expression to this compulsion. When Levin realizes how deeply he has fallen in love with Kitty, he flies into a state of exaltation in which (in the translation by Louise and Aylmer Maude) “what he saw then he never saw again. Two children going to school, some pigeons that flew down from the roof, and a few loaves put outside a baker’s window by an invisible hand touched him particularly.” Love, like death, lets us see the world again in its holy simplicity, if only for an instant, just as we once saw it in childhood. *War and Peace* is the ultimate epic of those “inexhaustible manifestations.”

But of course, *War and Peace* isn’t about “life” at all; it’s about lives. It’s about Pierre Bezukhov, bastard son and heir of the daunting Count Kirill Bezukhov with his iron-clad routines, and about the impossibly noble Prince Andrei Bolkonsky, and about Natasha Rostova, along with hundreds of others, from chattering aristocrats to swaggering soldiers to long-suffering serfs. The historical personages—Tsar Alexander I (of whom Catherine the Great once shrewdly remarked, “this little boy is a knot of contradictions”), the temporizing Field Marshal Kutuzov (sly strategist or lucky incompetent?), Napoleon himself (whom Tolstoy compared to a horse on a treadmill, imagining himself free while chained to a rigid destiny)—are so vividly realized that as we read, we seem privy to their inmost thoughts.

To bring these varied characters into English with all their specific quirks of speech and nuances of tone in such a way that each remains immediately recognizable is no mean feat, and there are numerous registers to convey; the formulaic chit-chat of the drawing room, veering from French inexplicably into Russian and back again, all in a split second, possesses a wholly different timbre from the ritualized barking of the battlefield. These are only the most obvious differences for the characters shade and modify their speech continually depending on whom they are conversing with; Prince Andrei speaks in intimate accents when closeted with Pierre, his closest friend, but confines

himself to icy phrases in more formal settings. To complicate matters further, Tolstoy's characters are morbidly sensitive to deviations from proper discourse. When Pierre blurts out radical opinions in a fashionable parlor, he disgraces himself; it's not only that his views are distasteful but that his manner of speaking offends. He is shockingly incapable of *la jolie conversation* such occasions require.

Pevear and Volokhonsky capture these subtleties exceedingly well. They retain the French with which Tolstoy so notoriously larded his opening chapters, as well as the German interchanges on the battlefield; they provide translations of these passages in footnotes. This is a bit distracting at first. But they are right to do so. This is, after all, the way Tolstoy wrote the book, and it is, of course, the way in which Russian aristocrats conversed, flitting restlessly between two tongues at the drop of a lorgnette; even more importantly, it gives us as readers the sneaky sense of eavesdropping on privileged conversations in otherwise inaccessible milieus. And much of Tolstoy's genius resides in just that creation of intimacy; he has the knack of making us secret onlookers at momentous events.

This close adherence to what Tolstoy wrote, as he wrote it, characterizes the Pevear/Volokhonsky translation from start to finish. Since I don't read Russian I can't comment on the accuracy of their version, but it has a stubbornly literal feel on almost every page. You never forget that you're reading a translation; they make little attempt to smooth Tolstoy out as, say, Briggs and other translators tend to do. In his rather feisty introduction, Pevear defends their method, rejecting a more fashionable "idiomatic" approach and remarking, "A translator who turns a great original into a patchwork of ready-made 'contemporary' phrases, with no regard for its particular tone, rhythm, or character, and claims that that is 'how Tolstoy would have written today in English' betrays both English and Tolstoy." He notes further that he and Volokhonsky were at pains to reproduce not only the power and rhythm of Tolstoy's prose but, in particular, its distinctive repetitiveness. This fidelity is admirable, but it does give their own prose a certain oddity. At times, English syntax and word order are ever so slightly dislocated. Among many possible examples, we find sentences such as the following, in the scene at Schöngraben, "To the left our troops adjoined a wood, where smoked the campfires of our infantry, who were cutting firewood." This isn't incorrect, but it doesn't sound quite right either; it is certainly neither "idiomatic" nor "contemporary," Pevear's two *bêtes noires*. And in the great bravura passage, towards the end of the novel, in which Tolstoy describes the return to Moscow of its inhabitants, we read:

Just as it is hard to explain why and where ants hurry to from a demolished anthill, some away from the anthill carrying specks of dust, eggs, and dead bodies, and others back to the anthill—why they run into each other, chase each other, fight—so it would be hard to explain the reasons that made the Russian people, after the departure of the French, crowd into the place which was formerly called Moscow. But just as, when looking at the ants scattered around the destroyed anthill, despite its complete obliteration, one can see by the tenacity, the energy, the countless numbers of the swarming insects, that everything has been destroyed, except for something indestructible, immaterial, which made for the whole strength of the anthill—so Moscow, in the month of October, despite the fact that there were no authorities, no churches, no holy objects, no wealth, no houses, was the same Moscow it had been in August. Everything was destroyed, except for something immaterial but mighty and indestructible.

Briggs, and other translators, render this famous passage more elegantly; in their versions, the antitheses are deftly poised, the cadences of the sentences classically English. But Pevear and Volokhonsky achieve something else; their sentences and clauses scurry, now this way, now that, exactly as the human ants of Moscow clamber back into their ravaged nest. Even the near nonsensical phrase at the opening ("why and where ants hurry to from") intensifies this effect.

Some reviewers have praised Pevear and Volokhonsky for their prose style; this is certainly

misplaced. To their credit, they are less interested in “prose style” as such than in “Tolstoyan prose,” a prose of “robust awkwardness,” as Nabokov, whom Pevear cites, described it. By working so stubbornly in what Pevear calls “the space between two languages,” they have accomplished a translation which is both robust and awkward, and often quite splendidly so. At its best, their version resembles a brass rubbing beneath which something of immense force and severe delineation gradually becomes visible. And in the end, that is how this greatest of novels reveals itself, not through the rattle of musketry and the pounding of artillery, but in small, successive flashes, when the startled recollection of death is at the same time a reminder of how deeply, and with what urgency, we must love life in all of its “inexhaustible manifestations.”

Eric Ormsby's latest book is *Ghazali* (Oneworld).

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