Slavic Review (2024), **83**, 250–263
doi:10.1017/slr.2024.380

SLAVIC REVIEW CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

ARTICLE

Tolstoi's Orphans

David Herman

University of Virginia
Email: herman@virginia.edu

Orphanhood in Tolstoy has largely escaped critical examination, in part because though the writer himself was an orphan, his texts say little about the topic explicitly. But in fact thinking about orphans' trauma is everywhere in the pre-crisis fiction. Tolstoy draws orphans and non-orphans as fundamentally morally different. All his major protagonists are orphans and want to marry non-orphans. Further, many of his novelistic tics, and many critical insights into Tolstoy generally, actually apply only to characters who are motherless. *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* can be read as the author's running debate with himself: is an escape available for the traumatized from their pain later in life? If so, it would mean life is good and God is kind. Both books answer yes and demand orphans renounce their permanent sense of grievance against life for their losses. But in their final scenes Tolstoy confesses his optimism was false; life is not fair, and psyches damaged by orphanhood can never fully recover.

Key terms: Leo Tolstoy, orphans, orphanhood, trauma

Lev Tolstoi, who lost his mother a few weeks before his second birthday and his father when he was nine, has a funny habit of writing narratives with heroes who are orphans, but, peculiarly, it seems to make no difference to the stories. Olenin in *Cossacks*, for example is introduced as though growing up without parents were central to his moral development:

> At the age of eighteen he was free—as only rich young Russians in the 'forties who had lost their parents at an early age could be. Neither physical nor moral fetters of any kind existed for him; he could do as he liked, lacking nothing and bound by nothing. Neither relatives, nor fatherland, nor religion, nor wants, existed for him. He believed in nothing and admitted nothing.[1]

But after this intriguing opening, to all appearances the subject is completely dropped—orphanhood seems not to matter in *Cossacks* or to Tolstoi generally.

One could be forgiven for crediting these longstanding truisms. In fact in submerged form there is orphanhood in everything Tolstoi wrote. One just needs to learn to see it. As a crucial consequence of growing up without parents, Olenin is presented at the start of his tale as unable to love fully.[2] Perfecting this skill that Tolstoi feels most people master

[1] Leo Tolstoy, *Great Short Works of Leo Tolstoy,* trans. Louise and Aylmer Maude (New York, 2004), 90. L.N Tolstoi, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 90 vols. (Moscow, 1928–58) (henceforth PSS), 6:7–8. If only a Russian source is specified the translation is mine. When the title of the text within the PSS is not clear, it is given following the page number. Russian names have been regularized in quotations that use alternate spellings.

[2] *Great Short Works of Leo Tolstoy*, 86–87; PSS, 6:7–8.

© The Author(s), 2024. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

instinctively from childhood becomes *the* key challenge before him, as before all the writer's orphans—Pierre, Andrei, Mar'ia, Anna, Levin, and the others.

Terminologically, in Russian you don't need to lose both parents to be an orphan; one is enough. In Vladimir Dal''s dictionary anyone "who lacks a father or mother" (*u kogo net ottsa libo materi*) qualifies.[3] Thus at his mother's funeral in *Childhood*, Nikolen'ka, whose father is still alive, complains, "Some of [the visitors] referred to us as 'orphans.' As if we didn't know without them that that's what children are called who have no mother!"[4] Since for Tolstoi fathers have no important nurturing function, the kind of orphanhood that matters, because it hurts, is when a child loses its mother.

In what follows I examine Tolstoi's fictional and occasionally non-fictional treatment of the motherless. Revealing patterns emerge that have much to tell us about the thought process of their author and the meaning of his celebrated texts. My approach is not wedded to psychoanalytic theory. Nor does it consider orphans outside Tolstoi's writings and life. From a perusal of the scholarly literature one would assume the loss of a mother is a minor concern in Tolstoi, and yet orphanhood proves to be absolutely central to his deepest—and often most conflicted—concerns. Cutting the familiar pie in a relatively new way may in addition help liberate us from the grip of those enduring clichés in which Tolstoi criticism abounds, insights into the writer that are not untrue yet fall short of the full truth, providing genuine insights, in Paul de Man's terminology, but only at the expense of kinds of blindness.

All of Tolstoi's major characters before his crisis are orphans—all of them except their love interests, who are never orphans.[5] His orphans always seek out non-orphans to unite with, presumably because non-orphans exude "family" from every pore. Marriage in other words is compensatory for his motherless characters, a quest for the warmth and connectedness they always dreamt of because they never quite experienced it, like the lonely hero of "Landowner's Morning," who dreams of a wife whom he will "love as no one has ever before loved anyone in the world."[6] The original example is not even marriage but Nikolai Irten'ev's supreme friendship in the trilogy. He gushes over Dmitrii Nekhliudov but gradually realizes a large part of his enthusiasm is for the whole family atmosphere at Dmitrii's house, where mutual affection flies this way and that.[7] Levin is similarly enamored of an entire household: "Strange to say, it was the whole Shcherbatskii family . . . he was in love with."[8] Tolstoi felt the same in his own life, telling his sister, "I find the Bers family particularly congenial, and if I ever married, it would only be in their family."[9] The writer was at first drawn to the eldest of the three sisters, Liza, then married the second, Sonia, and was long close to (and, his son Il'ia surmises, unconsciously in love with) the third, Tania.[10]

The sheer numbers are striking. There are orphan/non-orphan couples in the autobiographical trilogy, *Family Happiness* (Masha is an orphan), and *Cossacks* (Olenin is). In *War and Peace*, all the major pairings fit the pattern: Pierre and Natasha (and even Pierre and Hélène), Andrei and Natasha (about Andrei and Lise one cannot be sure because there is no information about her early life), Mar'ia and Nikolai, and even the special friendship Anne

3. V.I. Dal', *Tolkovyi slovar' zhivogo velikorusskogo iazyka,* 4 vols. (Moscow, 1999), 4:188.

4. Leo Tolstoy, *Childhood, Boyhood, Youth*, trans. Judson Rosengrant (London, 2012), 106; PSS, 1:87.

5. Gustafson notes, "All Tolstoy's major heroes are orphans, except Natasha and Nikolai Rostov," but he of course overlooks Mark'ianka in *Cossacks*, Dolly and Kitty in *Anna Karenina*, and if only mothers count, Lukashka and Vronskii. Richard Gustafson, *Leo Tolstoy: Resident and Stranger* (Princeton, 1986), 14.

6. Leo Tolstoy, *Short Novels: Stories of Love, Seduction, and Peasant Life,* trans. Louise and Aylmer Maude and J.D. Duff (New York, 1965), 120; PSS 4:165.

7. *Childhood, Boyhood, Youth*, 365–68; PSS, 2:202–5.

8. Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina,* trans. Louise and Aylmer Maude, ed. George Gibian, 2nd ed. (New York, 1995), 19; PSS 18:24.

9. Tatiana Andreevna Kuzminskaia, *Moia zhizn' doma i v Iasnoi Poliane*, Lib.ru: "Klassika," 2011 [1924], xiii, at http://az.lib.ru/k/kuzminskaja_t_a/text_moya_zhizn_doma_i_v_yasnoy_polyane.shtml (accessed June 1, 2024).

10. Il'ia L'vovich Tolstoi, *Moi vospominaniia*, Lib.ru: "Klassika," 2010 [1913], 76–77, at az.lib.ru/t/tolstoj_i_l/text_0050.shtml (accessed June 2, 2024).

Eakin Moss has written about between Mar′ia and Natasha.[11] The pattern continues in *Anna Karenina* with Stiva and Dolly, Levin and Kitty, and Anna and Vronskii—six of seven major characters. There is just one major exception before Tolstoi's crisis: Anna and Karenin, both orphans. The marriage, Tolstoi hints perhaps not entirely consciously, lacks sufficient natural warmth and is the only one that completely collapses. In the famous "mistake unions"—Natasha and Anatole, Kitty and Vronskii—a non-orphan who will later marry an orphan unsuccessfully falls for another non-orphan. Tolstoi's implication seems to be that if his heroines want true partners, they need to choose orphans. They have been wounded, so they love harder. The dynamic holds even in real life: Tolstoi's parents' and his own marriage were also orphan/non-orphan. Tolstoi's mother's life story and name are loosely duplicated in Mar′ia Bolkonskaia in *War and Peace*. The real Mar′ia Volkonskaia lost her mother at age two, then herself died when the future writer was not yet two. Even Tolstoi's friendships often followed the pattern. Chertkov, who he was famously close to, was famously close to his mother, whose house was sometimes used to hide manuscripts from Sof′ia Andreevna.

Many of the quirks we associate with Tolstoi's worldview are in fact orphan's quirks, native only to his motherless characters: the rejection of convention, a lifelong quest for deeper meaning, the project of self-perfection more generally, being incapacitated at the mere thought of death, turning up one's nose at routine marriage and holding out for ecstatic union with a perfect soulmate. Levin abhors convention; Kitty does not mind. Pierre cannot go on without attaining deeper meaning and challenging the status quo; Natasha is observant, thoughtful, and curious but has no need for revelation or revolution. Natasha is not destroyed by the fact that people suffer and die needlessly, but Andrei is. Anna is infuriated at society's hypocrisy; Vronskii keeps trying to see what it is her eyes perceive. Levin is rendered suicidal by his brother's death. Dolly and Kitty's brother drowned in the Baltic but they show no traces of trauma. After their brother Petia is killed, Natasha and Nikolai recover completely.

There are other orphan's quirks without which we could not begin to picture Tolstoi: moral crises, completely changing one's life, then doing it again, and again and again, or in other words spun positively, moral questing, spun negatively, a kind of restlessness, never being able to find a place where you feel entirely at home and at peace, even in marriage to a perfect soulmate. Similarly, keeping a diary or making long lists of rules to live by, both of which Tolstoi famously did, so as to figure out the sources of the pain and to master the techniques of fighting them. In fact, all living by the conscious mind instead of by the heart and unconsidered instinct is characteristic of Tolstoi's orphans, since, he hints, the natural flow of things has betrayed them once and for all. It is after he is abandoned by his mother and gelded, the horse Strider says, that he "became self-absorbed and began to brood."[12] If you follow the inner logic, even writing novels is for orphans, because, Tolstoi obviously believes, to write a good book you need to drop out of life a little bit and let others live while you simply observe, ponder, and note things down. In fact all important writing in Tolstoi is by orphans: Olenin's diary and unsent letters, Pierre's masonic diary, Andrei's new laws, Mar′ia's moral ledger book for her children, Levin's treatise on agriculture, Kozynyshev's philosophy articles, Anna's children's books, and, perhaps parodically, Karenin's reports. Tolstoi's real mother penned a sentimental novel. Natasha has so much to say, but gives up the moment it has to be recorded on paper. It is hard to picture Nikolai Rostov, Kitty, or Vronskii writing a book, not because they are stupid but because they fundamentally accept the universe as it is. This is why, Tolstoi implies, Vronskii has to give up painting, though he is good with a brush; he has no inner drive. Creative art, where something is made where

[11] Anne Eakin Moss, *Only Among Women: Philosophies of Community in the Russian and Soviet Imagination, 1860–1940* (Evanston, 2020), 69–79.

[12] Leo Tolstoy, *The Portable Tolstoy*, trans. Louise and Aylmer Maude, ed. John Bayley (New York, 1978), 451; PSS, 26:18.

there was nothing, is itself a kind of talking cure; there has to be a wound in the first place or Tolstoi feels it will have nothing important to say.

The non-orphans in the novels excel at a different kind of art: performative, where someone else generates words or music that later must be brought to life for an audience. Performance for the writer is role-playing and public celebration, not private lament or protest. But his orphans do not like performing. (One exception: Andrei is "one of the best dancers of his day." On the other hand, he processes his one dance with young Natasha at the ball as retreat into private space, away from tedious political conversation with a baron he little knows, while for Natasha it is the reverse, an entry into public space, so that the whole crowd should "know how . . . splendidly I dance."[13]) Tolstoi's non-orphans revel in singing, dancing, or playing music before others: Luke in *Cossacks* sings with "firm strength," Eroshka loves playing balalaika and singing, Count Rostov dances with gusto, Nikolai sings, Natasha sings and dances, Platon Karataev sings "like the birds."[14] Nikolai in *Childhood* can pen a poem for his grandmother but not dance with Sonia at a party. His father (patterned largely on Tolstoi's non-orphan father) demonstrates to him angrily how one dances. The father also reads novels aloud theatrically, with tears in his voice, though from the narrator's description he has no real sorrows.[15] Tolstoi himself was proficient on piano, but preferred writing.

The highest orphan's quirk may be the thirst for God.[16] A quick test is which characters consider converting their lives to sacrificial or otherwise pronounced Christianity. All are orphans. Nikolen'ka does, visiting a monastery in the trilogy. Masha does in *Family Happiness.* Olenin does, giving Luke a horse. Pierre does not but comes close, dedicating himself to emulating the sacrifices of the peasant soldiers at Borodino. Andrei wants to when dying but does not live long enough. Mar'ia dreams of devoting her life to pilgrimage. At the start of *Anna Karenina* Levin attempts to with his troubled brother, Karenin does with Anna's daughter, Anna does with the orphan Hannah. Non-orphans are not like this. Kitty and Dolly sense something amiss when Anna stops in en route to the train station but take no action.

After his crisis, in the wake of which Tolstoi's key definitions change, orphanhood remains crucial but is decoupled from mothers and radically reenvisioned as what happens to everyone when all people are egotists who truly love no one but themselves. (The latter idea is central to *On Life*.) Tolstoi's own Christianity is explicitly an orphan's reflex. In the non-fictional *Confession* he describes it as an emptiness he cannot shake, even after success, wealth, marriage, and children. A "feeling of . . . orphanage" besets him as if he were "a fledgling fallen from its nest . . . lying on its back crying in the high grass" for the mother "who has deserted me" forever and so must be replaced by a higher, non-biological Father.[17] But then Tolstoi realizes religion is a minor matter if *only* the motherless need it. So half a decade later he proclaims all people orphans in a higher figurative sense. In *Anna Karenina*, spiritual bereavement had afflicted only Levin, but in *Confession* it grips one fourth of mankind, depending on psychological type, and in *On Life* becomes the central experience of *every* life.[18] How this happens mechanically is shown in Ivan Il'ich, who had a mother but achieves the worst solitude and despair in all Tolstoi as he is dying, weeping "on account of his helplessness, his terrible loneliness, the cruelty of man, the cruelty of God, and the absence of God."[19] The hero is wrong about God (always there in Tolstoi silently, as Ivan Il'ich figures out at the last second). But he is right that after 1880 no person ever feels your pain like you do,

[13] Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, trans. Louise and Aylmer Maude, ed. George Gibian, 2nd ed. (Norton, 1996), 405; PSS, 10:204.

[14] *Great Short Works*, 145; PSS, 6:59. *War and Peace,* 860; PSS, 12:49.

[15] *Childhood, Boyhood, Youth*, 37; PSS, 1:30.

[16] Daniel Rancour-Laferriere, *Tolstoy's Quest for God* (New Brunswick, 2007).

[17] *The Portable Tolstoy*, 713–14; PSS, 23:43–4.

[18] *The Portable Tolstoy*, 695–99; PSS, 23:27–31; Leo Tolstoy, *On Life*, trans. Michael Denner and Inessa Medzhibovskaya, ed. Inessa Medzhibovskaya (Evanston, 2019); PSS, 26:313–442.

[19] "Death of Ivan Il'ich," *Great Short Works*, 294: PSS, 26:105.

even his creator's Christians, which is why Ivan Il'ich never attempts to convey his woe to the good servant Gerasim who has helped him so till now. Once egoism comes to dominate Tolstoi's universe we are all inherently on our own. You have to think about the fact to grasp its horrible truth and power, *On Life* argues, but once you do, it becomes the central reality of existence.

Works with large casts diversify psychological types so that not all the important characters are drawn from Tolstoi's couple favorite categories. Thus in *Anna Karenina* we get Stiva Oblonskii, a serial adulterer, in whom orphanhood spawns not the expected qualitative quest for a perfect bond with one, but a *quantitative* hunt for an endless supply of cheering but shallower bonds. Stiva likes almost everyone and everyone likes him back. This orphan's adulterousness is more like a principled philosophical stance than Mme Vronskaia's or Anatole's non-orphan adulterousness, as Stiva delights in men's company as well as women's. Diversification may also account for the two orphans who are most often discussed as such in criticism: Sonia in *War and Peace* and Varen'ka in *Anna Karenina*, who seem *not* to qualify entirely for Tolstoi. Both grow up with an adoptive mother—not quite a mother, but not quite *not* a mother either. Hence they come out neither fish nor fowl, faintly grumpy, but not pushed to dangerous insights, not heartbroken or rebellious, not even crowd-pleasers like Stiva.

Many scholars' famous critical insights are unnoticed commentaries on orphanhood. Boris Eikhenbaum describes Tolstoi's protagonists as mercurial and inconsistent. His orphans are, but his non-orphans are not, except trivially. "'Tolstoy's personalities are always paradoxical, always changeable and dynamic. This is necessary for him because his works are built not on characters, not on 'heroes' as the bearers of constant attributes which determine their actions, but on sharp portrayals of psychic states, on the 'dialectic of the soul.'"[20] T.G.S. Cain's gulf between characters who are "instinctively closer to the real truth of things" (Natasha, Nikolai Rostov, Platon Karataev, Dolly, and Kitty) and those who are not features all non-orphans on one side (the closer, of course) and all orphans on the other.[21] Edward Wasiolek feels Tolstoi concluded people "could be beautiful, fulfilled, and happy without effort, without, in fact, the agonizing self-analysis . . . effort, and struggle that so characterized his own life."[22] But this is true only of non-orphans, as Wasiolek intuitively senses, exemplifying how to live via Nikolai and Natasha in *War and Peace*, and how not to via Andrei, Mar'ia, and Pierre.[23] Similarly, the longstanding tradition of contrasting the Rostovs and the Bolkonskies in *War and Peace* is almost always a comparison of orphanhood and what Tolstoi considers psychic normality, like that by Pavel Gromov that Donna Orwin cites.[24]

Lauding living prosaically, Gary Saul Morson condemns characters who strive for great agency over their fate, to which they futilely attempt to impart the shape of Romantic narratives with heroic changes and decisive turning points.[25] But Tolstoi's orphans *have* to assay this path. Prosaic reality is sweet only for non-orphans. Hence the hidden heroes Morson discovers in the two great novels, Nikolai Rostov and Dolly, are of course non-orphans.[26] According to Vladimir Alexandrov, Tolstoi endows each major character in *Anna Karenina* with a unique vision of life, which in turn makes value fundamentally relative. But his examples of strong personal visions are essentially all orphans.[27] This failure of mutuality applies

[20] Boris Eikhenbaum, *The Young Tolstoi*, translation ed. Gary Kern (Ardis, 1972), 66.

[21] T.G.S. Cain, *Tolstoy* (London, 1977), 14.

[22] Edward Wasiolek, *Tolstoy's Major Fiction* (Chicago, 1978), 9.

[23] Ibid., 7.

[24] Donna Tussing Orwin, *Tolstoy's Art and Thought, 1847–80* (Princeton, 1993), 123.

[25] Gary Saul Morson, *Hidden in Plain View: Narrative and Creative Potentials in "War and Peace"* (Stanford, 1987).

[26] Ibid., 245; Gary Saul Morson, *"Anna Karenina" in Our Time: Seeing More Wisely* (New Haven, 2007), 38.

[27] The 98-page chapter on the subject (134–232) has 17 pages on non-orphans—most of it on the tensions in their relations with orphans. Vladimir E. Alexandrov, *Limits to Interpretation: The Meanings of "Anna Karenina"* (Madison, 2004).

"even in the case of Levin and Kitty," the happiest couple; but the tension, Alexandrov points out, comes from the orphan, not his wife.[28] Isaiah Berlin's famous image of a self-divided Tolstoi, tormented because his gift is to know many things (a "fox"), while passionately believing it preferable to be a "hedgehog," a person who knows the one key thing (whatever it may be), is trapped in exactly the orphan's predicament.[29] Non-orphans as Tolstoi draws them are hedgehogs who accept the divine order (the one thing) implicitly and so are able to concentrate on loving people and life fully. Orphans, whom the key has eluded, open their attention wider; they begin to accumulate facts, insights, and observations to analyze what they might do to improve a bad situation, foxes, trying to become hedgehogs but always failing. Berlin's tragic closing image of Tolstoi as Oedipus wandering self-blinded at Colonus, destroyed by his inability to escape his innermost heart, has the key elements of Tolstoian orphan psychology and is an orphan in Sophocles.[30]

What, other than singing and dancing, is left for non-orphans in Tolstoi's world? All of ordinary life—work, family, play—all done with ease and no questioning or agonizing. Unfortunately these ordinary paths never satisfy the orphan because they leave life's traumas unremedied. But Tolstoi sees no way traumas can be cured, which is why his fictions tend to end with a highest lesson that one needs to accept the ordinary path in order to fully recover. (This in turn leads into a logical tangle, since invariably most of the ordinary path has already been forcefully rejected not just by the heroes but by the narrative itself, which abhors convention and complacency.)

Orphan psychology as Tolstoi depicts it rests most basically on a sensation of grievance and injustice that settles deep into the psyche, breeding a permanent unease within the universe. Something rooted in the very nature of reality seems off to his heroes, eternally chafing. The world has proven itself to them painfully imperfect, and this infiltrates their every perception. The fact that Pierre has no mother worries Platon Karataev.[31] Young Nikolen'ka in *Boyhood* has a breakdown and howls, "No one cares anything about me or understands how unhappy I am!" then senses, "*everyone, from Grandmother to Filipp the coachman, hated me and took pleasure in my sufferings,*" and concludes, "It must be that I'm not my mother and father's son, nor Volodia's brother, but a wretched orphan."[32] A page or so later he traces "the religious doubts that troubled me in boyhood" back to "the injustice of Providence."[33] Eventually it dawns on Tolstoi's motherless heroes that we human beings are called upon to cure this plight, first for our own sake and then for all mankind's. This is a fundamental spur to sacrificial Tolstoian Christianity, which is why his Christian protagonists after 1880 reproduce the main psychological traits of his orphans before 1880.

This also helps explain *War and Peace*'s gradually shifting main focus as Tolstoi worked on it. Originally a novel about the Decembrists, revolutionaries who in 1825 staged a small revolt (Pierre's society of virtue at the end of the novel is a clear hint at them), it morphed into a project with a rather different emphasis on their most immediate inspiration, Napoleon and the wars he caused. But orphanhood kept calling. From there it continued its metamorphosis into the book we read today, where the evaluation of historical figures and events recedes

[28] Ibid., 139.

[29] Isaiah Berlin, "The Hedgehog and the Fox," *Russian Thinkers*, ed. Henry Hardy and Aileen Kelly (New York, 1979), 22–81.

[30] In "Oedipus the Tyrant," the hero is scarred by orphanhood of an unusual sort. His father, the king, had ordered the infant be killed to ward off a prophecy that he would grow up to kill his father, but a servant secretly spared the child. As an adult, Oedipus, rather like Tolstoi's orphans, tries both to save his community and, unwittingly, to compensate for his childhood trauma (sleeping with his mother and killing his father); however, his strivings only doom him and Thebes by extending the curse on it still further. Unable to bear the weight of self-knowledge, he has blinded himself in the second play. Sophocles, "Oedipus the Tyrant" and "Oedipus at Colonus," *The Theban Plays*, trans. Peter J. Ahrensdorf and Thomas L. Pangle (Ithaca, 2014), 15–64 and 81–138.

[31] *War and Peace*, 858; PSS, 16:47.

[32] *Childhood, Boyhood, Youth*, 166, 167 [italics in original], 167–68; PSS, 2:42, 43, 43.

[33] *Childhood, Boyhood, Youth*, 169; PSS, 2:44–5.

into the interpolated essays while psychology and ethics push to the front in a plot designed most centrally as a meditation on "Napoleonic" rebelliousness against the order of things as a disastrous disposition of mind native to a certain type of personality. Richard Gustafson has detected warring tendencies throughout Tolstoi of *residency* and *"strangership"*; this self-dividedness may be the natural outcome of growing up with an aching belief in an ideal of love that is not modeled for you by a parent and which you do not get much practice doing, so that when you get it you are not ready for it.

Natasha Rostova's *arete* is her ability to exult in the everyday experiences before her, to be fully present with her whole being at whatever she is doing. Her father and brother have their own versions of this "presentness" too, as do Karataev, Kitty, the mowing peasants, and the Cossacks. They are all *here*, *now*, invested in whatever they are doing, a little bit simple, it is true, but therefore fully alive. No orphan in Tolstoi can keep that focus for long. Andrei and Mar'ia struggle with it. They have a tendency to drift off into their own minds. Mar'ia hugs Lise with delight when they first meet, but within minutes has a look of "sadness" in her eyes and is no longer listening as Lise prattles on.[34] Except for the brief period of falling in love with a non-orphan, which Tolstoi makes much of, orphans cannot *be here fully*. They instinctively distrust the flow of things; they cannot "just live." They need to reflect, step out of the moment, check it out for flaws, and ascertain that no one is getting too badly hurt. Then they have to compensate by trying to get back *into* it, making mental lists of life's spectacular blessings and beauties (think of Andrei's revivals, or Levin when rejected by Kitty or when talking himself out of suicide). When we first meet Andrei in *War and Peace*, he is bitterly frustrated by a bad marriage. When we first meet his sister she is traumatized, we think by geometry lessons with her harsh father and her bad looks and sorry marriage prospects. But those proximate causes eventually fall away, while the underlying sense of being in mourning for something never does.

Andrei struggles to be actually *with* the people next to him until his very last scene. As he is dying, Mar'ia is appalled at her brother's heartless indifference to his son. Yet she too grew up dreaming of abandoning Andrei and her father to take up the pilgrim's sack and hunt for that "eternal, quiet haven, where there is neither sorrow nor sighing."[35] Without realizing it, both spend their whole lives in protest of the vanished mother they never speak of, who, Tolstoi suggests, took with her their ability to trust life fully. This may be why the angry, cerebral Andrei has an unexpected soft spot for sentimental sights like peasant girls with pilfered plums scampering down the road. Anna is similar. Empathetic towards others because of her pain but distracted from others because of her pain, she adopts an English girl while struggling to love her biological daughter.

Distractedness haunts the others too. Pierre's head is in the clouds. He cannot see without spectacles, constantly squints, and as his surname suggests, hears little going on nearby (Bezukhov literally means "earless"). Levin struggles with social conventions around people. Natasha is not like this; she knows what she wants, a life like her parents', and is perfectly happy when she gets it, if only Pierre would sit still. Dolly would be too if Stiva would just stop ruining things. So would Vronskii, or Sergei Mikhailovich in *Family Happiness*. Nikolai Rostov does not need to see the world transformed. His great ambition is just to buy back his father's estate, so the past can go on forever.

Tolstoi's orphans are incurably restless, in a fundamental way ecstatic Tolstoian marriage promises to solve but does not. Masha achieves the pinnacle of life, the family happiness of her story's title, but cannot stop dreaming of St. Petersburg all the same. Levin wins the girl of his dreams yet before long wants to kill himself and requires a private moral

34. *War and Peace,* 83; PSS, 9:120.

35. Ibid., 429; PSS, 10:237. Saburov reads Mar'ia's Christianity primarily as a reaction to her father's bullying, since it gives her a zone free from his influence. (A.A. Saburov, *"Voina i mir" L.N. Tolstogo: Problematika i poètika* (Moscow, 1959), 155–56.) But her Christian yearnings are intimately linked to a sadness that endures even after her father dies and she marries, as we will see.

revelation in which she plays no role to regain his balance. Pierre marries his ideal, too, and yet becomes distracted by Decembrist-like projects of social amelioration that we know from history endanger families and lead to Siberian exile. A non-orphan like Nikolai Rostov is appalled when Pierre lays out a plan to challenge society's status quo, but an orphan like little Nikolen'ka Bolkonskii, who is also in the room, finds it rapturously inspiring. A reflection is Pozdnyshev's insistence in *Kreutzer Sonata*—now that everyone in Tolstoi is an orphan—that people are *inherently* adulterous. It is not in human nature to find anything entirely adequate, he suggests. Tolstoi's essay on the Moscow poor, *What Then Must We Do?,* lauds the woman who does not stop giving birth even at twenty children, but just three years later *Kreutzer Sonata* carps that children and spouses are an annoying waste of time, serve no purpose whatsoever, and never have.[36] That is restlessness, too.

Restlessness is not worse in Tolstoi's men because of their lesser integration into family than women. In the Epilogue of *War and Peace*, Mar'ia has grasped that her dream of a beggar's sack was a delusion, that she really longed for something else: a family of her *own,* intact, always present besides her. She finally gets it. "'I should never, never have believed that one could be so happy,' she whispered to herself. A smile lit up her face but at the same time she sighed, and her deep eyes expressed a quiet sadness . . . that there is another sort of happiness unattainable in this life."[37] A couple sentences later Natasha appears for the first time in the Epilogue, exuding deep contentment to drive home the contrast. Mar'ia has everything and is not yet at peace: human beings still have not learned to love each other fully. Her entire plot in the Epilogue is in fact a lament for love. Her husband Nikolai has just punched the overseer. Nikolai does not address her at lunch and must not love her any more. He loves their daughter more than their son. Mar'ia herself cannot manage to forgive Sonia, who has always loved her—Mar'ia's—husband. She is ashamed but cannot love her orphaned nephew Nikolen'ka as much as her own children. The orphan cannot rest until the world is transfigured; it does not matter how difficult this remaking is. The same impulse undergirds Andrei's vision of the army or the legal system finally cured of flaws, Pierre's Masonry and Decembrism, Levin's theory of life redeemed by perfect marriage, then perfect farming, and then perfect Christian virtue, Anna's fury at society's hypocrisy and her principled trip to the opera, little Nikolen'ka Bolkonskii's Decembrist dream of saving the whole world. They know it is a pipe dream—all these plans are doomed—but they refuse to give in and will never settle for ordinary complacency. Though their novels tell us the world *cannot* be transformed, their hearts refuse to yield.

Tolstoi encourages us to like his orphans because their "woundedness" gives them special powers and energies. Because they are more sensitive and vulnerable than ordinary people, they become observant and analytical, morally concerned, willing to sacrifice their lives or undergo grueling training (Nikolen'ka Bolkonskii in the last scene of *War and Peace* vowing to study and toughen himself so he can save the world, Levin travelling to Europe to master the research on farming so he can revolutionize agriculture, and so on) to acquire specialized knowledge and skills, in order to become masters of reality and ultimately help reinvent the world as a better place with less suffering for all. This is the same drive that makes a man reject traditional Christianity and invent his own personal strain, as Tolstoi does. Thinking about all mankind and its welfare is itself a Tolstoian orphan's quirk, instead of thinking about just self and family, like other people and animals do. The problem is, all their searches teach his heroes that the ultimate answer to *all* questions in Tolstoi, whether family, service, labor, or faith, whether selfish natural happiness at one extreme or selfless Christian sacrifice at the other, is always ultimately some version of love, love for others, love for God's universe despite its horrifying flaws, love for themselves.

[36.] Leo Tolstoy, *What Then Must We Do?* Trans. Aylmer Maude (Bideford UK, 1991), 230; PSS, 25:409.

[37.] *War and Peace*, 1019; PSS, 12:265.

Yet *giving* love, surrendering oneself to the universe, sharing joy simply with another, saying yes wholeheartedly to life as it is in Tolstoi, agonizingly flawed and yet hauntingly beautiful, is the one skill that eludes the orphan and comes naturally only to the non-orphan. Sadly, Tolstoi suspects it is the only skill that actually matters. His orphans empathize better, they notice strangers in need, they sense their pain with urgency, and they act to help. Orphans *understand* the human heart, the absolute centrality of human connectedness, they treasure love more acutely, and they dissect it more insightfully. But that's not Tolstoi's ideal. Martin Heidegger talks of the tool we only notice when it breaks.[38] Love is so palpable precisely because it does not quite work for them. This is a dynamic at the heart of all Tolstoian thought: we can either understand life with our minds (as do for example the adult Irten'ev in *Childhood*, Pierre in *War and Peace*, or Sergius in *Father Sergius*), or be good at living it via our instincts (as do the models of the ideal in their narratives, Irten'ev as a child, Platon Karataev, or Pashen'ka, none of whom even have intellectual concepts adequate to understanding or explaining their own merits), but not both in full measure, because the two approaches require radically different psychologies, of trust and acceptance on one hand and of doubt, critical inquiry, and rebellion on the other. Those philosophizing about life are *automatically* living it imperfectly. Withdrawing from reality to understand it in Tolstoi guarantees one can never put to full use what one learns. Olenin writes an unsent letter on love Gustafson considers "one of Tolstoy's most significant fictional articulations."[39] But Tolstoi has already demonstrated how meditating on love *hampers* love the last time Olenin communed with his diary. Eroshka sat ignored on the floor behind him begging for attention, sad a friend writing about the all-importance of love by definition has no time to put it into action.[40]

Orphans' marriages are the most ecstatic thing in all Tolstoi. But only at first.[41] Orphanhood spawns a paradox. Growing up alone, being forced to find solace in the secondary pleasures of books, thought, and solitude like the hero of *Boyhood* and *Youth* sows in orphans' hearts an aching to unite with another person. But in Tolstoi's thinking it also deprives them of the trivial but essential skillset needed to be comfortable at close emotional quarters with others. Restlessness dogs their every happiness.[42] The result is Levin appalled at his first child and then withdrawing from commitment to his wife in his final soliloquy, then Pozdnyshev, who concludes that all humans really just want to be left alone, however tragic that may be. Marriage seems to have been unworkable for Tolstoi all along. It just took time for its flaws to become obvious.

Epiphanies, another of the writer's trademarks, are also reserved for orphans, because all Tolstoian epiphany at bottom is about a single thing, ecstatic merger with the All, perfect reintegration with every living creature and the entire universe. You have to lose or lack a thing to perceive the full enormity of getting it back for the first time. Non-orphans can be intrigued by the infinite too—like Natasha staring at the stars trying to make out their hints—but they never break through to transformative insight. She gives up, slams the window, and goes back to bed. By contrast Olenin, pretty friendless in real life, at the stag's lair dreams euphorically of all the friends he has suddenly found in every living being. Pierre picturing all humanity as a globe of competing and yet united water drops is reminding himself in the midst of war that we are all one even though we kill each other. Andrei on his

[38] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time,* trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York, 1962), 102.

[39] *Leo Tolstoy: Resident and Stranger,* 60.

[40] *Great Short Works*, 194–98; PSS, 6:105–9.

[41] Judith Armstrong disagrees. For her, orphanhood gives Levin a cult of asexual maternal purity doomed to be threatened by any woman he marries, who is both a competitor to the mother and openly sexual. But his eventual full acceptance of Kitty renders their relationship stable, free of the drag of orphanhood, Armstrong, *The Unsaid "Anna Karenina"* (New York, 1988), 22–47.

[42] Ann Hruska has written about Nikolen'ka's loneliness in the trilogy, though Tolstoi's other heroes are not fundamentally different, Hruska, "Loneliness and Social Class in Tolstoy's Trilogy *Childhood, Boyhood, Youth*," *Slavic and East European Journal*, vol. 44, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 64–78.

deathbed glimpses this universal oneness too. All grasp that death has been conquered, kind of. We think that epiphanies represent the highest possible merger with the All, and they do in a sense. Gustafson makes uniting with the All the central focus and goal of all Tolstoian striving.[43] But epiphany is fundamentally transitory, merger by definition always temporary, only in imagination, *mystical* unity for those denied the real thing. (Olenin, Pierre, and Andrei owe the visions above to having just witnessed a non-orphan enact connectedness casually and unwittingly—Daddy Eroshka, Platon Karataev, and Natasha—and teasing out the hidden ramifications). Nikolai Rostov, not an orphan, not alienated from the core, in his several sky-during-war scenes fails to see the All; the possibility of death in battle makes him think merely of survival, himself, his family, not God, not the infinite, not all of humanity or history. When you have the thing, you do not need its shattering sublimations. In Tolstoi the thing is warmer.[44]

The innate restlessness of the orphan may be why Tolstoi can produce a happy ending only by abruptly cutting off a narrative in midstream before the flip-flopping hero flips again. Morson sees wise resistance in this realist open-endedness, an objection to the false thinking that comes of trusting the oversimplified shapes of vivid romantic narrative.[45] But perhaps Tolstoi means it to symbolize the opposite, not triumph but tragedy, where the heroes passionately seek resolution, reintegration into ordinary sufficient love, but never succeed, where the oversimplified shape of family, ordinary life, and an end, once and for all, to the pain is all a human heart really needs. Think of the last scene of *Family Happiness*, *Cossacks*, *War and Peace*, *Anna Karenina*, *Death of Ivan Il'ich*, *Kreutzer Sonata, Father Sergius,* and *Resurrection*: something ending and something new beginning, where the whole story has been about the thing ending, making the barely sketched thing that is beginning intrusive, unearned, unfairly freed from the fierce analysis that dissolved all answers thus far. Tolstoi implies the new thing is at last the permanent truth. But then we reflect that nothing so far ever has ever been for his orphans.

In Tolstoi's own life, the orphan's pain is visible in a famous passage he wrote in his abortive memoirs about the woman who raised him after his mother died and "had the greatest influence on my life," Tat'iana Aleksandrovna Ergol'skaia.[46] It is a famous quote, consistently cited by critics to demonstrate the depth of the *bond* between her and the writer—we want our great student of the human heart to have had great teachers. The tolstoy.ru website created by the Tolstoi Museum and Yasnaia Poliana cites it prominently, as does Ernest J. Simmons in his biography.[47] Vladimir Tolstoi, then director of Yasnaia Poliana, says Ergol'skaia taught Tolstoi how to love in an episode of the Bibigon television network series,

---

[43] *Leo Tolstoy: Resident and Stranger,* 9–10.

[44] Martin Bidney, who treats *War and Peace* in a study of epiphanies, disagrees, lumping together characters from both sides of the divide, "Pierre, Platon . . . Prince Andrei, Petia, Nikolai Rostov," as "sensitive seekers or seers," "questers," who all have the *same* vision of the "harmonious, unforced unity of the individual with the rhythms of the greater cosmic totality"; Bidney, *Patterns of Epiphany: From Wordsworth to Tolstoy, Pater, and Barrett Browning* (Carbondale, 1997), 154, 155, 159, 159. In fact, only orphans are questers. Their epiphanies are vast and ambitious, containing and neutralizing death, breaking through to the whole of life and the infinite, and picturing the final triumph of love in some metaphoric higher sense. Non-orphan pseudo-epiphanies have none of this, just joy at life as it is. This is doubly true of Bidney's peculiar example for Nikolai—not his sky scenes, but his ecstasy at the military review. Love for an army led by a tsar is patriotism, not epiphany, and links a man not with the whole cosmos but with one small part of it banded together to do violence to other parts, planning not to overcome death but to deal it. Tolstoi's orphans demand something grander.

[45] *Hidden in Plain View*, 62–65, 158–64; Gary Saul Morson, *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time* (New Haven, 1994).

[46] PSS, 34:364, "Reminiscences."

[47] "Biografiia," *Lev Tolstoi*, Tolstoy.ru, 2013–2022 at https://tolstoy.ru/life/biography/ (accessed June 2, 2024), 1. Ernest J. Simmons, *Leo Tolstoy* (Boston, 1946), 18. Under the year 1837 the website notes: "The raising of the Tolstoy children is taken up by their father's cousin twice removed T.A. Ergol'skaia, who Tolstoy considered the 'most important' influence on his life: 'This influence was first of all that when I was a child she taught me the spiritual enjoyment of love. She taught this not in words, but rather by her whole being infected me with love. I saw and felt

"Russkaia Literatura. Lektsii" by Dmitrii Bak on YouTube.[48] Tolstoi's memoir says she was not their closest living relative; she simply loved him and his siblings so strikingly that all other claimants had to yield. Yet the eternal dissonant note is unmistakable in words critics tend to leave out: "Her main quality was love, but however much I might have wished otherwise, love just for one person, my father. Only starting from that point did her love spill out onto all people. One could feel that she loved us too for him and through him."[49] If there is trickle-down economics, this is trickle-down affection. Little Leva appreciated it immensely; it was the best thing he ever got. But it was not really for him. *His* somehow got lost. Zverev and Tunimanov extol Ergol'skaia's "love of all . . . and limitless kindness."[50] But Tolstoi perceives limits. Ergol'skaia was the prototype for Sonia in *War and Peace*, whose not entirely happy life is summed up at the end by her best friend Natasha as caused by her being a "sterile flower" fundamentally punished by life because she lacks something crucial.[51] Taken together, the two passages suggest the real Ergol'skaia's love may have been doubly prominent in one sense precisely because it was deficient in another. Ergol'skaia was, after all, an orphan like Sonia.

The astonishing thing is that despite weaving it into everything he touched, despite making it central to his main characters' psychology, Tolstoi remained strangely blind to orphanhood and its effect. This is what scholars argue happens in cases of genuine trauma—a kind of self-blindness, an inability to locate the exact source of the pain.[52] After *Childhood*, where never forgetting your dead mother is a human being's holiest task, no orphan in Tolstoi *ever* thinks seriously about a mother again. Mar'ia mentions hers once off-stage to Natasha; we do not hear it but the exchange sounds unexceptional.[53] Olenin, Andrei, Pierre, Stiva, Anna, and Karenin never mention theirs. Levin does, but only to reflect that though he does not remember her, he wants his bride to recreate her.[54] Olenin, as we saw, is described at the start of *Cossacks* in an astonishing fashion—as though losing his parents young made him *frivolous and lighthearted:* "free. . . . Neither physical nor moral fetters of any kind existed for him; he could do as he liked, lacking nothing and bound by nothing."[55] This is worth pondering. Tolstoi calls him *less* inclined to take things seriously than ordinary people. That is repression.

Levin is plunged into suicidal despair when his brother Nikolai dies in *Anna Karenina*. But it does not make sense the way Tolstoi describes it.[56] The brothers clearly dislike each other's company, so why *such* a strong reaction? It can only be that Nikolai is not the first wound, merely another cut where a deeper scar has never healed, one premature death too many for a man who has already had his fill. The real wound becomes knowable only forensically, working backwards by guesswork. The night before Borodino, Prince Andrei, grasping he is drowning under his own pessimism, thinks back over "the three great sorrows of his life"

---

how good she found it to love and grasped the joys of loving. . ." This is precisely the self-conscious insight into love that Tolstoi's fiction teaches never quite works. Significantly, the passage avoids saying Tolstoi *felt* fully loved.

48. Dimtrii Bak, "Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoi. 'Voina i mir.' Glavnye geroi i temy romana," *YouTube,* uploaded by Sviatovslav Khudiakov, June 9, 2011, at www.youtube.com/watch?v=zOUCQh8tLNY&t=128s, starting at 1:02. (Accessed June 3, 2024)

49. PSS, 34:366

50. Aleksei Zverev and Vladimir Tunimanov, *Lev Tolstoi*, series "Zhizn' zamechatel'nykh liudei" (Moscow, 2006), 29.

51. *War and Peace*, 1015; PSS, 12:259.

52. Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle: The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, 24 vols. (London, 1953–74), 18:18–23; Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore, 1996), 91–92.

53. Hugh McLean notes that the early drafts of *War and Peace* envision mothers for Pierre, Mar'ia, and Andrei, but then Tolstoi had a change of heart and deleted the women (McLean, "The Case of the Missing Mothers, or When Does a Beginning Begin?" *In Quest of Tolstoy* (Boston, 2008 [1989]), 24).

54. *Anna Karenina*, 87; PSS, 18:101.

55. *Great Short Works*, 90; PSS, 6:7.

56. Liza Knapp, *"Anna Karenina" and Others: Tolstoy's Labyrinth of Plots* (Madison, 2016), 249.

that caused it: the death of his father, the invasion of his homeland, and his failure with Natasha.[57] But the list is too short. He was embittered on the novel's first pages, long before any of these things happened. Tolstoi both cannot see orphanhood quite clearly, and, through perfect instinct as an artist, depicts the aftermath everywhere in his and his heroes' lives. As a novelist Tolstoi is famous for the strange practice of utterly omitting his protagonists' backstory, how people like Pierre, Andrei, Levin, Anna, and Karenin got to be the way they are, as though he knew, and yet at the same time could not see the pictures clearly.[58]

Mar'ia's tale in *War and Peace* ends with a strange passage rarely commented on in criticism. Nikolai is talking of his fondest dream, buying back his familial estate. Though she loves her husband she "had to force herself to attend, for what he was saying did not interest her at all." She is absorbed by something more urgent, silently vowing

> in her heart to do better and to accomplish the impossible—in this life to love her husband, her children, little Nikolai, and all her neighbors, as Christ loved mankind. Countess Mar'ia's soul always strove toward the infinite, the eternal, and the absolute, and could therefore never be at peace. A stern expression of the lofty, secret suffering of a soul burdened by the body appeared on her face. Nikolai gazed at her. "O God! What will become of us if she dies, as I always fear when her face is like that?" thought he, and placing himself before the icon he began to say his evening prayers.[59]

This is the last the novel sees the two, Mar'ia with that look of haunted longing that conquered him in the first place, Nikolai in horror. For the first time he grasps what the look has meant all along and panics: she is sure to die. Her sadness is killing her. Some non-orphan instinct just tells him life does not tolerate human grievances in Tolstoi's universe, however cruel that may be. Tolstoi's own mother died shortly after giving birth to her last child and Mar'ia, who is modelled after her, is pregnant, so Nikolai is probably right. His Rostov nature senses that if your heart rejects God's universe, the universe inevitably rejects you. As Natasha says, not thinking how many orphans are in the house with her on the novel's final night: "To him that hath shall be given, and from him that hath not shall be taken away."[60] Nikolai seconds his sister later, telling Mar'ia to stop worrying about little Nikolen'ka so much; there is only so much anyone can do for orphans.[61] The world is too big to change. If something gnaws at us, we can only change ourselves. If only orphans could conquer their restlessness once and for all, Tolstoi seems to be thinking. But in his fiction they cannot.

Orphanhood in fact ultimately breaks both of Tolstoi's great novels. Both centrally insist that the orphan's tragedy has a joyous cure, that rebellion against any seeming injustice is sacrilege and self-destruction. But then in their final scenes they recant all they had built up. *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* are in effect vast acts of repression of the orphan's sense of grievance, massive fairy tales Tolstoi soothed himself with by piling up more and more evidence that life is endlessly beautiful; that the rupture in his orphans' hearts is misguided; that before all the glory of the universe the pain goes away eventually on its own; that the orphan's sadness, however understandable, is a fatal mistake; that when we grow up, we all marry and get *second* families that redeem any past sufferings. His orphans meet the love of their lives and attain perfect bliss. Then they ruin it, backing out in order to challenge the world.

In both novels, just when it is time to bring down the curtain, Tolstoi loses his nerve. His repressed inner orphan seems to get the better of him and cry out that the upbeat tales

57. *War and Peace*, 686; PSS 11:204.

58. McLean gives several possible explanations for characters' missing pasts, though they all assume Tolstoi is consciously aware what he is doing (26–28).

59. *War and Peace*, 1038; PSS, 12:290.

60. *War and Peace*, 1015; PSS, 12:259.

61. *War and Peace*, 1037; PSS, 12:288.

he has been telling are just elaborate lies, that life is *not* fair and the proof is everywhere. Orphans get nothing but dreams of a future happiness that never comes. The two conclusions, little Nikolen'ka Bolkonskii's Decembrist dream, a kind of summation of the resistance to fate in Mar'ia and Pierre, who also exit the narrative dreaming of a better world, and Levin's embrace of Christian virtue, furiously protest the novels they culminate. True, the tone is nearly triumphant in both cases—that is what the genre of the Tolstoian novel requires—but what is really going on is bitterly cynical. In *War and Peace*, 1500 pages of self-confident pillorying of Napoleonism, the assault on the inherent order of things, suddenly redefines it on the last page of the plot so that it sounds for the first time ever understandable, justified, morally admirable, *not* the fruit of a foolish French emperor's longing for self-aggrandizement, not vain and excessive, as we have been shown all along, but the inevitable reflex of the wounded orphan who has not done a thing wrong but is unloved and knows it, and draws the only plausible conclusion: that if he is finally to win love he will need to do something different, more than he has thus far—conquer an enemy (Nikolen'ka), fix all of agriculture (Levin), found a new religion (Tolstoi's Christianity), or write a novel like the world has never seen (*War and Peace* itself). To make it still harder for us to reject Nikolen'ka's thinking, he resolves to save not just himself, but all mankind, or die trying. This is the noble and beautiful side of the Napoleonic impulse, to which *War and Peace* had never granted a noble and beautiful side till just now. History recedes and the child without parents takes over Tolstoi's thinking. The *real* reason people rebel against life is not an overweening self-assertion deserving of censure, the author clarifies to himself; it is a misery beyond reproach, deserving only of pity.

Anna Karenina is so different and yet the same. Hundreds of pages of passionate defense of soulmate-union and fidelity are thrown out, again in the very last paragraph, in favor of a new program of solitary Christian virtue that betrays everything marriage represented. The ideal of marriage had said two people unite to the core of their beings. Now the orphan Levin proclaims only what he does *on his own* matters, renouncing his wife and all his past as "meaningless."[62] Beneath the uplifting music of Tolstoian Christianity being born hides the collapse of the novel's central project of uniting two souls, an acknowledgment that merger with another is impossible, at least for orphans, and a new recognition you will never be able to convey your deepest interiority to anyone. No one grasps the real you or feels your pain like you do, Levin and Tolstoi have concluded. Hence if you *are* to be alone all your life, you might as well extract some benefit from the oppressive solitude, say by embracing a new Christianity in which virtue can be performed only solo. Tolstoi's two great novels were sure familial bliss and submission to the status quo would save the orphan. Their last scenes admit that their creator suspects deep down there will never be any solution.

Readers of course know the Decembrist revolt in 1825 failed and that little Nikolen'ka's quest to save the world is doomed. He's going to perish at the barricades and cannot see it like we can. That the son would repeat his father's mistakes without having even truly known him must have been the tragedy Tolstoi had in mind when he sat down to write out his finale. But in the heat of creation deeper instincts seem to have taken over. Instead, the tragedy is that Nikolen'ka has no alternative; nothing ordinary will bring him peace. The boy is right. He *is* alone. No one quite has time for him in the Epilogue—not just his callous uncle Nikolai, who coldly berates him, but also his aunt Mar'ia, who raised him and yet admits "I neglect him for my own"; Pierre, who, though promising the tutor Dessalles to look after Nikolen'ka, overlooks the boy "whom everyone had forgotten" in the corner when he starts talking, and Natasha, so absorbed in nuclear family she forgets even to forget him, though when his father was dying he clung to her more tightly than to anyone in the world.[63] No one loves Nikolen'ka as much he loves them back. Life may be bountiful for some people, but for

62. *Anna Karenina*, 740; PSS, 19:400.

63. *War and Peace*, 1037, 1034; PSS 12:288, 284.

others, Tolstoi concedes, things will always hurt. Perhaps the ordinary path *is* the best; but there is nothing the orphan can ever do to get on it. Tolstoi's traumatized heroes can achieve anything they like except to cease to be who they are.

Both novels end with a solitary figure in a crowded house full of kindly disposed but ultimately distant other people, grasping that at bottom he is on his own with his dreams, and that his only hope of attaining peace is to change the whole world. For over half a century Tolstoi's wounded heroes keep gritting their teeth and repeating—even in his Christianity, though it takes transmuted form there—"It is *my* fault things hurt so much. I did not handle it right, but henceforth I will strive like no one ever has, I will study myself in a diary (Tolstoi, Olenin, Pierre), I will master all knowledge (Tolstoi, the Bolkonskii family, Nikolen'ka vowing to study), I will become the strongest man who ever lived (Tolstoi, Levin lifting weights when Kitty rejects him), I will become gradually better and better and one day perfect, and then the universe will share its bounty with me fully, because I will cease to let *it* down. God *does* love us, life *is* fair and beautiful, there *is* nothing ultimately for any of us to grieve over." Who needs such endless proclamations of optimism? In Tolstoi, only an orphan.

David Herman is Associate Professor in the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures at the University of Virginia. He is the author of *Poverty of the Imagination: Nineteenth-Century Russian Literature about the Poor* (Northwestern UP, 2001). His research is on Tolstoy, his current focus being a project on the post-crisis fiction and thought entitled *Tolstoy Alone: The Late Writings.*