

The Beekeeper's Sonata,

whereby the Eternal is Manifest through Image:
The Death of Prince Andrei Bolkónski
in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*

Paul A. Obrecht
February 9, 2002

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the B.A. degree

In memory of my mother and father

A BEE SETTLING on a flower has stung a child. And the child is afraid of bees and declares that bees exist to sting people. A poet admires the bee sucking from the chalice of a flower and says it exists to suck the fragrance of flowers. A beekeeper, seeing the bee collect pollen from flowers and carry it to the hive, says that it exists to gather honey. Another beekeeper who has studied the life of the hive more closely says that the bee gathers pollen dust to feed the young bees and rear a queen, and that it exists to perpetuate its race. A botanist notices that the bee flying with the pollen of a male flower to a pistil fertilizes the latter, and sees in this the purpose of the bee's existence. Another, observing the migration of plants, notices that the bee helps in this work, and may say that in this lies the purpose of the bee. But the ultimate purpose of the bee is not exhausted by the first, the second, or any of the processes the human mind can discern. The higher the human intellect rises in the discovery of these purposes, the more obvious it becomes that the ultimate purpose is beyond our comprehension.¹ (1005)

∞ *Image and Experience (Exposition)*

A SIMPLE IMAGE: a bee settles on a flower, a brief aside in Leo Tolstoy's vast exploration of history and the individual lives intertwined with it. This image, says Tolstoy, however simple it seems, contains as many interpretations as there are observers who would claim to discern the bee's purpose, and Tolstoy's aside is but one attempt of many to convey how inadequately the machinations of the human mind can claim to comprehend even the simplest experience.

War and Peace is in part a treatise detailing Tolstoy's objections to the claims of his contemporaries that history is an absolute science, and in part a fictional account of the experiences of several characters, set during the French invasion of Europe during the first years of the nineteenth century. If the novel is to be understood as a cohesive and self-consistent whole, one cannot separate the two. Thus arises a suspicion that the characters' experiences in some way correspond to the argument in the treatise. The themes under consideration in the novel are complex enough that one need not even assume that the fiction is designed to

1. All quotations are from Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, trans. A. and L. Maude, ed. George Gibian (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996).

illustrate the conclusions for which Tolstoy argues in the essay; one can easily conceive that the author intends the fiction, or perhaps at least parts thereof, to argue a counterpoint.

Nonetheless, two separate discussions in a cohesive treatment of a given subject matter should at least restrict themselves to common themes. Tolstoy's argument against an absolute science of history centers around the claim that the causes of phenomena cannot be discerned by observation, and he argues that such sciences as history are born from an overconfidence in our ability to discover such causes by abstract reasoning and experience (1056). Hence the illustration of the purpose of the bee. So one looks back on the fiction, hoping to discover an implicit exploration of how the characters in *War and Peace* come to understand their world by reflecting on and reasoning about their experience. The more closely one looks, the more obvious it becomes that Tolstoy's narrative is structured with such an exploration in mind.

So one innocently hopes for the possibility of discerning the causes that move Tolstoy's characters in order to understand what kind of argument, if any, the fiction asserts about understanding and experience. The closer one looks, however, the more this hope fades. At the beginning of the second epilogue, Tolstoy reveals the magnitude of the task at hand: "History is the life of nations and of humanity. To seize and put into words, to describe directly the life of humanity or even of a single nation, appears impossible" (1043). One begins to worry that to seize and put into words, to describe directly even one human life, is no less impossible. But Tolstoy carefully restricts his fiction to the experiences and reflections of individuals, which reassuringly suggests that a single life is the unit with which to begin if one is to construct an understanding of anything larger. Each character that Tolstoy presents, however, has unique experiences, and furthermore, each character tends to represent experience to him- or herself uniquely. Thus one begins to suspect that the proper starting point is itself a part of a part of a question.

This discussion will be limited to one character, Prince Andrei Bolkónski, and to one way in which he represents his experience to himself, through image. In the end it will become clear that even so small a distinction as this one—the way in which one represents experience to oneself—has far-reaching consequences that determine what one comes to understand, through experience and reflection, to be true about the world.

∞ *The Transformation of Character (Development)*

THE ECOLOGICAL RELATIONSHIP between experience and character complicates the analysis. If one considers an individual, over a lifetime, to describe a sequential progression of some kind, reflecting the effects of internalized experience, then some underlying constant must remain unchanged through any such progression, no matter how drastically changed the individual may seem. Common usage dictates that this constant should be called *identity*, and what changes throughout the progression, *character*. Yet certain experiences possess the power to fundamentally change a person; such experiences can, for example, alter one's concept of the self in relation to the world, or forcibly reconstruct one's hierarchy of governing principles in light of some previously unknown but now undeniable aspect of the world. Whatever the particular nature of such a change, it demands to be called a transformation. Since identity remains always unchanged, it is rightly called a *transformation of character*.

The relationship between identity and character suggests that the former is prior, or to phrase it differently, that one's character is a malleable surface that takes shape over the underlying identity. However, when observing another, including a fictional character, from outside, identity is not manifest. Identity is instead a context constructed by the observer who knows intuitively from his own self-knowledge that something underlying the other must also remain inert. An observer witnesses the other's words, behaviors, reactions to experience, and so on, and from these tries to discern the identity over which all these manifest characteristics must constitute a surface. Thus identity observed externally is a construct derived from what is manifest in the other's character. In the process of coming to know another, therefore, character is prior to identity. Referring to an arbitrary metaphor, it might be said that one comes to know another by reading what is manifest in the other's character.

We cannot here undertake a generalized discussion of the ontogeny of identity, but we can, for our purposes, assume that subsequent experience speaks to one whose character has been altered by the prior. Occasionally, when speaking of experiences of such magnitude as to elicit transformations of character, a *persona* will indicate a particular stage in the progression, though of course the progression of character is not as discrete as the word 'stage' may

imply. It will soon become clear that certain kinds of experience for Tolstoy's Prince Andrei are just such transformational agents. By reading in the narrative his own reflections on his experience, and his reflections on the resulting progression of his own character, it will also become clear that the way in which Prince Andrei internalizes his experience depends on the particular persona involved. To take up the metaphor again, Prince Andrei will be seen to read the progression of his own character through reading his own changing interpretations of his experience. We will try to read Prince Andrei as Tolstoy wrote him, as a man attempting to come to terms with his own experience, and to delay questions about Tolstoy's intent until appropriate.

The necessary general terms have been developed, and we can now introduce the question that will guide this discussion: how is Prince Andrei's character transformed through experience, and in what manner does he come to understand himself and his subsequent experience in light of such transformations? First, though, we must consider a preliminary question which will determine the terms appropriate to the discussion: in what form can the nature of transformation be expressed when words often cannot capture the subtleties of human experience? Tolstoy most thoroughly develops this question in the reactions of those who witness Prince Andrei's death.

∞ *What Cannot Be Expressed in Words*

THE BODY CONVULSED and then was still. After a few silent, motionless minutes, Princess Mary Bolkónskaya asked, "Is it over?" and Natásha Rostóva, clinging to the body, to her only reminder of him, hastened to close the eyes. "Where has he gone? Where is he now? . . ." she wondered. When the body was laid in the coffin, everyone wept:

Little Nicholas cried because his heart was rent by painful perplexity. The countess and Sonya cried from pity for Natásha and because he was no more. The old count cried because he felt that before long, he, too, must take the same terrible step.

Natásha and Princess Mary also wept now, but not because of their own personal grief; they wept with a reverent and softening emotion which had taken possession of their souls at the consciousness of the simple and solemn mystery of death that had been accomplished in their presence. (871)

The people who had known Andrei best, who had witnessed firsthand the successes and disillusionments of the life that culminated in that quiet bedroom, understand his death differently from those who had known him only casually. For the old count, Andrei's death is primarily a reminder of his own mortality. For the countess and Sonya, the man they knew has ceased to exist, and their pity flows for the beloved he left behind. His seven-year old son is unable to fathom the meaning of death itself; understanding that one you love is dying, that dying is a necessary separation from life does not bring with it an understanding of the event itself. Though all these characters read something relevant to their own experience in Andrei's death, it cannot provide them with an understanding of what lies beyond their experience, of the one thing that no one can experience firsthand without taking "the same terrible step" (871).

For Mary and Natásha, on the other hand, Andrei was not a minor character in the drama playing out around them. He constituted a large part of the theme and scope of Natásha's life from the day he asked for her hand, and the love and intimacy between brother and sister is evident throughout the novel—for example, in their ever-honest interactions (e.g., 89–90, 427, 560–61), in her gift of the icon (91), and in their sympathy and understanding of one another despite their disagreements (e.g., 329, 340–43).

When Princess Mary arrives at the Rostóv's house in Moscow to visit her wounded brother, Natásha tries to express the nature of the change he has undergone, but can only say, "You, you . . . will see" (865), and can refer to the change only by saying, "two days ago, *this* suddenly happened." Upon seeing him for the first time since his fatal wound, Mary feels "in his words, his tone, and especially in that calm, almost antagonistic look . . . an estrangement from everything belonging to this world, terrible in one who is alive" (866). She was not present to witness her brother's struggle to acknowledge his impending death, and can only read in his transformed character an unbreachable divide separating him from life, wholly manifest in his manner, but nonetheless alien to her understanding.

When first entering the chamber, even before speaking to her brother, Mary suddenly understands to what Natásha's *this* refers: Andrei has softened and grown gentle, which she rightly takes to be a sign of approaching death. "On seeing his face and meeting his eyes, Princess Mary's pace suddenly slackened. . . . She suddenly felt guilty and grew timid on

catching the expression of his face and eyes” (865). She feels her brother’s countenance unnaturally cold, stern, even hostile, his gaze directed “not outwards but inwards” (866), his tone calm and aloof, though he speaks of the most trivial matters. She notices that he speaks “with his lips only (his words clearly did not correspond to his thoughts).” When Andrei urges her to marry Nicholas Rostóv (which would have been impossible under Russian law were he to recover and marry Natásha), “Princess Mary heard his words, but they had no meaning for her, except as a proof of how far away he now was from everything alive” (867). She soon believes nonetheless to have discerned the cause of the image before her: his estrangement from the living is not because he fails to understand, but because he understands “something else—something the living did not and could not understand—and which wholly occupied his mind.”

Throughout the description of the scene, and of its effect on those around Andrei, Tolstoy emphasizes the inability to express in words what has changed in him. Tolstoy depicts for the reader the conversations among his characters, but at the same time he makes clear that the true interactions take place silently in what they read in each other’s manner. The import of the scene for Mary, for instance, lies in her comparison of this persona with that of the brother she had known in youth (cf. 865). Mary reads her brother in this moment, and what she finds there does not correspond to the progression of character she has known through their years together. Andrei cannot or does not say what has changed in him—he does not speak about all he has considered while lying in that dark room, nor does he speak about the import of his dream—but his sister nonetheless knows, because she knows him, that he has been transformed.

Andrei has a kind of understanding far different from his sister’s of the unbreachable divide separating him from the living. Despite his apparent inability to act as they expect, he is still aware of their expectations, making “an obvious effort to remember” (866) to inquire about his son and “an evident effort to be affectionate” (things which would have come naturally to a prior Andrei). The manuscript that he presents to others is not so illegible to him, for by reflecting on the experiences that have brought him to this point, the nature of the change is more vivid to him than he can express in words; he now understands his impending death somehow to be a culmination of all that has come before. Mary, for her

part, is able to read that his character has been fundamentally altered somehow, and she ascribes that change to his nearness to death. She is right to a certain extent, in that she can name the cause, but her understanding is incomplete, because she cannot read the nature of the change. Andrei, sensing this, tries to fill in the lacuna by phrasing it in terms familiar to her experience. He quotes Matthew:

With a great effort he tried to return to life and to see things from their point of view.

‘Yes, to them it must seem sad!’ he thought. “But how simple it is.

‘The fowls of the air sow not, neither do they reap, yet your Father feedeth them,’ he said to himself and wished to say to Princess Mary; ‘but no, they will take it their own way, they won’t understand! They can’t understand that all those feelings they prize so—all our feelings, all those ideas that seem so important to us, are *unnecessary*. We cannot understand one another,’ and remained silent. (867)

He chooses in the end to remain silent because he knows that he cannot communicate by any means, other than by what is manifest in his character, what he has come to know in the weeks since Borodinó. And even if he could somehow communicate his dream and all he has considered while lying in that dark room, he cannot communicate how those experiences have transformed the man who alone had seen the sky at Austerlitz, who alone had witnessed the death of his wife, who alone had heard the girl at the window, who alone had talked to Pierre on the ferry, and who alone had felt that “ecstatic pity and love” (726) for Anatole Kurágin in the operating tent.

Tolstoy’s presentation of his characters, both to each other and to the reader, continually reiterates this theme: the inability of words to express what underlies transformation of character. He writes of Mary’s attempt to ask Natásha about her brother’s condition before she enters the chamber to see for herself, but Tolstoy makes her stop short because she knows it impossible “to ask, or to answer in words. Natásha’s face and eyes would have to tell her all more clearly and profoundly” (864). Of Mary and Natásha during Andrei’s last days, Tolstoy writes that “neither in his presence nor out of it did they weep, nor did they ever talk to one another about him. They felt that they could not express in words what they understood” (871).

Tolstoy goes on to show in Book XV, more explicitly than before, that what Mary and Natásha witness in his death chamber cannot be expressed in words:

Drooping in spirit and closing their eyes before the menacing cloud of death that overhung them, they dared not look life in the face. They carefully guarded their open wounds from any rough and painful contact. Everything . . . painfully irritated the wound, interrupting that necessary quiet in which they both tried to listen to the stern and dreadful choir that still resounded in their imagination, and hindered their gazing into those mysterious limitless vistas that for an instant had opened out before them. . . . It seemed to them that what they had lived through and experienced could not be expressed in words, and that any reference to the details of his life infringed the majesty and sacredness of the mystery that had been accomplished before their eyes. (951–52)

He instead describes the effect on them in terms of images present to their senses (a cloud of death overhangs them, and they cannot look life in the face) and imagination (the choir and the vistas). These images, like the bee, somehow encompass all the possible interpretations for which they cannot find words; through image, they represent their experience to themselves.

As the bee presents an image to those who would discern its purpose, so Prince Andrei, through his inability to express his transformation of character in words, presents an image that Mary and Natásha must struggle to read in terms of their own experience. And so the world presents images to Prince Andrei that he must struggle to read. Since the world never expresses itself in the familiar terms of language, he is often able to reflect on his experience only in the same terms in which it is presented.

Accordingly, his reflections often manifest themselves in terms of a re-presentation of the same transformational images to his successive personae. As he is changed by experience, he reinterprets experience. He discerns meaning in what has come before by reflecting on the changes in his own interpretation of those images. Thus the meaning of events in the world for Andrei changes as a result of recognizing his own resulting transformation of character, more than from recognizing how the meaning behind the images seems to change. He discerns meaning primarily by interpreting the *effects* of experience in his own changing personae. Thus his progression of character over time begins to define a context in which the meaning of external experience, through a process of successive reinterpretation, comes into correspondence with the state of his own interior.

Consider Prince Andrei's acknowledgment in the end that his impending death is the proper culmination to his life—rather than just an abrupt end—in combination with the

above notion, that his personae become, through the process by which he discerns meaning, a reflection of the external world. If there is an absolute underlying all this apparent subjectivity of external meaning, Prince Andrei's eventual recognition of the absolute will be reflected in his own interior. This suggestion will be developed in the sequel.

∞ *The Lofty Sky and His Dead Wife's Face*

WE NOW SEEK a clear presentation of Prince Andrei's progression, in order to determine the particular images through which experience transforms his character, and the particular personae to whom these images appear. This task will require careful reading, and detailed development, for Tolstoy presents Prince Andrei as a man who undergoes manifest transformations as a result of his experience, but never explicitly reveals their precise nature and what underlies them. Instead, the narrative often gives us access to an understanding of Andrei only as complete as his own (and only to the extent that he can express it to himself). With this in mind, we begin by meeting the man with whom Tolstoy acquaints us at the beginning of the novel.

In his first introduction at Anna Pávlovna Shéerer's *soirée* in Book I, Prince Andrei's manifest character reveals his dissatisfaction with his present surroundings. "Everything about him, from his weary, bored expression to his quiet, measured step, offered a most striking contrast to his lively little wife. . . . And among all these faces that he found so tedious, none seemed to bore him so much as that of his pretty wife" (12). When he returns home with Pierre Bezúkhov after the *soirée*, his interactions with his wife are described in terms of "frigid politeness" (22), and her reaction in turn as "querulous." When she surrenders in the end, Prince Andrei "courteously" kisses her hand, "as he would have done to a stranger" (23). Interactions of this sort between them must be the rule; Prince Andrei has clearly been tortured by his marriage, for later in the evening he advises Pierre "as one who has long had something on his mind and suddenly determines to speak out" (22).

Never, never marry, my dear fellow. That is my advice: never marry till you can say to yourself that you have done all you are capable of, . . . or all that is good and noble in you will be lost. . . . Bonaparte when he worked went step by step toward his goal. He was free, and had nothing but his aim to consider. . . . Tie yourself up with a woman and, like a chained convict, you lose all freedom! And all you have of hope and strength merely weighs you down and torments you with regret. (24)

As weary and bored as Prince Andrei seemed at the *soirée*, Pierre here reads something different in his face: “Every muscle of his thin face was now quivering with nervous excitement; his eyes, in which the fire of life had seemed extinguished, now flashed with brilliant light.” Prince Andrei here displays, through his words and manner, a passion for action, aspiration, and accomplishment as the manifestations of what is good and noble in man, of the limitless possibilities if one’s hope and strength are given rein. When asked by Pierre why he intends to fight against Bonaparte, he is only able to respond, “What for? I don’t know. I must. Besides that I am going . . . I am going because the life I am leading here does not suit me” (21). The first answer is what he thinks he is expected to say, the second answer more honest. He describes his dissatisfaction to his sister later, before he leaves Bald Hills:

Know this, Másha: I can’t reproach, have not reproached, and never shall reproach *my wife* with anything, and I cannot reproach myself with anything in regard to her; and that always will be so in whatever circumstances I may be placed. But if you want to know the truth . . . if you want to know whether I am happy? No! Is she happy? No! But why this is so I don’t know. . . . (91)

For Prince Andrei, the constraints placed upon him by his marriage and by St. Petersburg society seem to prevent him from living the *kind* of life to which he feels impelled. Perhaps he enters the service to escape these constraints—in hopes of discovering a nobler, better kind of life—more than out of a sense of duty to the cause. He is searching for something loftier than what he is leaving behind, but these early conversations with Pierre and Mary indicate that he is still ignorant of what he seeks.

Nevertheless, he is greatly changed when he reappears in the service of Kutúzov soon thereafter: he is courting a new life of action. Tolstoy emphasizes the extent to which this change is manifest in his appearance.

In the expression of his face, in his movements, in his walk, scarcely a trace was left of his former affected languor and indolence. He now looked like a man who has no time to think of the impression he makes on others, but is occupied with agreeable and interesting work. (106)

As he continues in his duties as an aide-de-camp and messenger between the upper echelons of the various armies, Prince Andrei becomes a man intent on ascending the ranks of power, not by winning recognition and praise like the sycophants he disdains, but by virtue of his faith that merit and integrity are rewarded for their own sake (133, 210–11). By the

time of his audience with the Austrian emperor at Brünn, he has fully embraced his own ideal of the military lifestyle, proclaiming to Bilíbin that he intends to return to Kutúzov's army despite an opportunity to remain with the Austrian court. Such an opportunity would provide a comfortable separation from the smoke and gunpowder, and a potential for immediate honor and advancement. "I cannot argue about it," replied Prince Andrei coldly, but he thought: 'I am going to save the army' " (142). Thoughts of escaping tedium have already fled his mind; he wants only to be a hero in the highest sense of the word, perhaps even a Russian Napoleon, which resolve he demonstrates as the battle of Austerlitz turns for the worse.

He feels "tears of shame and anger choking him" (243) at the prospect of defeat, and his sense of personal honor and duty—and his identification with the Russian cause—reach their peak as he seizes the fallen standard and leads a charge to stop the French from capturing the Russian artillery. Finding satisfaction in military life, reveling in the thrill of battle, thriving on performing his duty and on the prospects of advancing nobly through the ranks, dreaming somewhat self-indulgently of heroism, perhaps Prince Andrei believes throughout that he has found exactly what he sought when he left St. Petersburg. But his encounter with the lofty sky over the battlefield at Austerlitz forever changes all that.

The new Prince Andrei, returning to Bald Hills two months after Austerlitz to find his wife in labor, has been transformed by his experience. On first seeing her he calls her "my darling . . . a word he had never used to her before" (284), and then utters, most mysteriously, "God is merciful. . . ." Perhaps Prince Andrei means that God is merciful for sparing his life, for revealing to him an aspect of truth through the lofty sky, or for returning him home in time to witness the birth of his son. Perhaps all of these things are true; words cannot always express the full range of one's understanding. Regardless of his specific intent, however, Prince Andrei's encounter with the lofty sky and his subsequent months of solitude have led him to reevaluate much, not the least of which is the importance of his marriage and family. This is only Andrei's second reference to God, the first of which he uttered while he lay on the field at Austerlitz. Pierre, much later on the ferry, recalls "Prince Andrei's former atheistic convictions" (339), but clearly something has changed.

His wife, Lise, for her part, is preoccupied with the pain of childbirth and does not “realize the significance of his appearance before her.” After his words, whose significance she would certainly have grasped if not for her condition, she looks at him “inquiringly and with childish reproach. . . . She was not surprised at his having come; she did not realize that he had come.” The words that indicate the change in Prince Andrei fall on deaf ears, and her pain seems to obscure any manifest change in his character. Thus the little princess dies minutes later, unaware that the Andrei returning from Austerlitz is not the same man who left Bald Hills.

What happened to Prince Andrei on the battlefield? What experience can possibly transform a man so? It began when he was wounded while running with the standard. Tolstoy describes the incident itself through Prince Andrei’s eyes:

‘What’s this? Am I falling? My legs are giving way,’ thought he, and fell on his back. . . . Above him there was now nothing but the sky—the lofty sky, not clear yet still immeasurably lofty, with grey clouds gliding slowly across it. ‘How quiet, peaceful, and solemn; not at all as I ran,’ thought Prince Andrei—’not as we ran, shouting and fighting, not at all as the gunner and the Frenchman with frightened and angry faces struggled for the mop: how differently do those clouds glide across that lofty infinite sky! How was it I did not see that lofty sky before? And how happy I am to have found it at last! Yes! All is vanity, all falsehood, except that infinite sky. There is nothing, nothing but that. But even it does not exist, there is nothing but quiet and peace. Thank God! . . .’ (244)

The effect was immediate and lasting. After regaining consciousness that evening, Prince Andrei looked up again, wondering, “Where is it, that lofty sky that I did not know till now? . . . And I did not know this suffering either. Yes, I did not know anything, anything at all till now” (252). Even when he realized that Napoleon—his hero—was touring the battlefield, was in fact standing right above him, Prince Andrei heard his words “as he might have heard the buzzing of a fly” (253). He could say nothing when his hero addressed him: “At that moment Napoleon seemed to him such a small, insignificant creature compared with what was passing now between himself and that lofty infinite sky with the clouds flying over it.” Since Prince Andrei had formerly held the French emperor to be a model of military and worldly greatness, his lack of interest in Bonaparte indicates a lack of interest in all things military, in the life of honor and advancement he had embraced until very recently, and perhaps by extension, in all worldly greatness. And what had come to fill the void?

The most palpable effect on Prince Andrei was a newfound love of life itself: “He was only glad that people were standing near him and only wished that they would help him and bring him back to life, which seemed to him so beautiful now that he had today learned to understand it so differently.” When he returned home—“people” no longer seeming to be an impediment to his search—perhaps this newfound love of life manifested itself in his wish to embrace his life as husband and father, anticipating a chance to atone for what he now perceives clearly were wrongs.

What exactly did Prince Andrei read in the sky that affected him so profoundly, that led him to renounce his dearly acquired new persona as a dead end? Most obviously, as he suspected, the sky was a contrast. It was different from all the shouting and fighting, different from his frightened and angry surroundings. It was immeasurably lofty and infinite, inexorable and noble. Yet many soldiers were wounded that day, many fell, lying on the ground staring upward, but how many were affected as profoundly as Prince Andrei? How many would have claimed the sky rather than the wound as a turning point in their lives? The difference was that Prince Andrei had already been engaged in a search for something expansive and noble. The infinite heavens, he thought, pointed directly to the vanity and falsehood of everything around him, and wiped away his delusions about the nobility of what he sought in military life. He realized to some degree that the real truth lurked somewhere beyond the sky (“. . . even it does not exist, there is nothing but quiet and peace”), but he did not yet know quite where to look.

Prince Andrei’s encounter with the sky, however, cannot be reduced so simply through analysis. The sky was a contrast, true enough, but that alone cannot explain Prince Andrei’s subsequent transformation of character, nor does it explain why the experience for him points directly to God. Whatever Prince Andrei saw during that moment of solitude in the lofty sky over Austerlitz began to etch itself, slowly and meticulously, into some dark corner of his interior, and it continued to do so for a long time afterward. Over time, it became for him an entity in itself, not a memory or a remembered epiphany, but a defining image in his life with an identity all its own, the momentarily yet vividly glimpsed image of what lies hidden, he thinks, in all but the most untenable moments, behind this world. Slowly, Prince

Andrei began to glimpse—between the inscrutable penstrokes of the text manifest in the world—its Author’s autograph.

When he once again returns to the world, however, just in time to witness the death of his wife, the reproachful look on her face becomes for him an unanswerable rebuttal to what he had seen over Austerlitz:

She was lying dead, in the same position he had seen her in five minutes before and, despite the fixed eyes and the pallor of the cheeks, the same expression was on her charming childlike face. . . . ‘I love you all, and have done no harm to anyone; and what have you done to me?’—said her charming, pathetic, dead face.

And there in the coffin was the same face, though with closed eyes. ‘Ah, what have you done to me?’ it still seemed to say, and Prince Andrei felt that something gave way in his soul and that he was guilty of a sin he could neither remedy nor forget. (285)

He reads his own guilt on her face, and he is right to imagine that he will never forget it, for this moment continues to obscure the vivacity of Prince Andrei’s lofty sky for years. Though he may not now recall the words he spoke to his sister before leaving Bald Hills (“I cannot reproach myself with anything in regard to her; and that always will be so in whatever circumstances I may be placed”), his experience at Austerlitz has changed him in ways he could never have foreseen. Some time later, while visiting the chapel over her grave with Mary, (“though of this Prince Andrei said nothing to his sister”) he reads on the face of a statue “the same mild reproach he had read on the face of his dead wife: ‘Ah, why have you done this to me?’ ” (322). And soon thereafter at Bald Hills, Prince Andrei’s son becomes ill, and he sits reading a letter from Bilíbin. “He read without understanding half of it, read only to forget, if but for a moment, what he had too long been thinking of so painfully to the exclusion of all else” (325). Tolstoy chooses not to reveal what this all-consuming thought is, but it must concern Lise, the unremedied wrongs he committed against her, and the irreconcilable contradiction between that reproachful look and the lofty sky. That night, after a panicked moment imagining little Nicholas’ death, Prince Andrei goes to his son’s cot to find him sleeping peacefully. With Mary and his son he stands “still in the dim light beneath the curtain as if not wishing to leave that seclusion where they three were shut off from all the world” (329). Prince Andrei’s world has diminished in scope and scale, capped no longer by the infinite sky but by the canopy of his son’s cot. “Yes, this is the one thing

left me now," he says with a sigh. And so, "firmly resolved" not to return to military service, he soon begins spending most of his time at his Boguchárovo estates, "partly because of the depressing memories associated with Bald Hills, . . . and partly because he needed solitude."

Prince Andrei presents to Pierre a manifestly transformed character when the latter, after returning from a botched tour of altruism through his own estates, finds him at Boguchárovo, "frowning and looking old," with "dull and lifeless" eyes and "a wrinkle on his brow indicating prolonged concentration on some one thought" (333). "I only know two very real evils in life: remorse and illness," he says, sounding remarkably like his father (cf. 75). "The only good is the absence of those evils. To live for myself avoiding those two evils is the whole of my philosophy now" (335). "His glance became more animated as his conclusions became more hopeless" (336), and "his eyes glittered feverishly while he tried to prove to Pierre that in his actions there was no desire to do good to his neighbor" (337). The diminished scope and scale of Prince Andrei's life becomes even more clear as the conversation continues. He appears entirely to have abandoned the search for a nobler, better kind of life, choosing instead a narrowly confined existence, and the calmness of solitude to fill the void left by the absence of positive good. He justifies his new philosophy to Pierre by referring to his lesson from Austerlitz, but his logical machinations express in words a disillusioned version of what he learned there. He avoids mentioning the image of the sky.

You lived for yourself and say you nearly ruined your life and only found happiness when you began living for others. I experienced just the reverse. I lived for glory.—And after all what is glory? The same love of others, a desire to do something for them, a desire for their approval.—So I lived for others, and not almost, but quite, ruined my life. And I have become calmer since I began to live only for myself. (335)

After a time, tiring of his old friend's adamant pessimism, Pierre turns the conversation to Freemasonry, which he calls, "the best expression of the best, the eternal, aspects of humanity" (338). Though the God at Austerlitz was never one to be revealed by ecclesiastical ritual, Prince Andrei may hear something in these words, or in the conversation as a whole, that evokes his former search. He finally begins to listen to his old friend, gazing "silently at the flooding waters glittering in the setting sun" (339). Here he finally speaks aloud of the torturing image of his dead wife's face.

‘What convinces is when one sees a being dear to one, bound up with one’s own life, before whom one was to blame and had hoped to make it right’ (Prince Andrei’s voice trembled and he turned away), ‘and suddenly that being is seized with pain, suffers, and ceases to exist. . . . Why? It cannot be that there is no answer. And I believe there is. . . .’

‘It is not argument that convinces me of the necessity of a future life, but this: when you go hand in hand with someone and all at once that person vanishes *there, into nowhere*, and you yourself are left facing that abyss, and look in. And I have looked in. . . .’ (339–40)

Pierre responds to this admission with words that—without the ‘if’—could well have been Prince Andrei’s back at Austerlitz:

If there is a God and future life, there is truth and good, and man’s highest happiness consists in striving to attain them. We must live, we must love, and we must believe that we live not only today on this scrap of earth, but have lived and shall live forever, there, in the Whole (340),

and he points up to the sky. Something rises to the surface in Prince Andrei, and soon he is no longer looking at the water glittering in the sunset, but at the “red reflection of the sun gleaming on the blue waters”—he is looking now through the river’s surface into the reflection of what lies above—and he sighs “with a radiant, childlike, tender look at Pierre’s face,” and having reached the far bank of the river—after years of trying—Prince Andrei Bolkónski finally looks up again at the sky.

He looked up at the sky to which Pierre had pointed, and for the first time since Austerlitz saw that high, everlasting sky he had seen while lying on that battlefield; and something that had long been slumbering, something that was best within him, suddenly awoke, joyful and youthful, in his soul. It vanished as soon as he returned to the customary conditions of his life, but he knew that this feeling which he did not know how to develop existed within him. This meeting with Pierre formed an epoch in Prince Andrei’s life. Though outwardly he continued to live in the same old way, inwardly he began a new life. (340)

Prince Andrei’s second encounter with the sky is similar in some ways to the first. The sky itself again directly presents an image to him, and the effect again is immediate and lasting, transforming his character enough to warrant reference to “a new life.” Yet its meaning has altered: its reappearance does not return Andrei to the state in which he found himself after Austerlitz, before he witnessed his dead wife’s reproachful face. This time the effect is deeper, but tempered: *deeper* because the sky itself over Austerlitz composed the image (though intimating something higher) whereas the sky over the ferry points directly to *some-*

thing within Prince Andrei himself, awakening “something that was best within him,” something long dormant; *tempered* because the feeling vanishes immediately, because he does not know how to develop it, because his new life is merely inward. But we expect Prince Andrei’s two encounters with the sky to be different: the Andrei at the ferry is not the same man who was at Austerlitz. His experiences during the intervening years have changed him: he is older at the ferry, less naive, more jaded. But the truth is—and Prince Andrei must realize this upon seeing it for the second time—that though his character has been transformed, the image remains the same. The sky is one. It has been above him all along, waiting to be reread, waiting for him to return to read his own transformation in that sky’s eternal sameness.

Tolstoy creates in Prince Andrei a character with an inherent momentum, a character who cannot choose but to seek (though he perhaps knows not what, except that it somehow concerns what is good and noble in himself, and therefore in man). Tolstoy constructs the narrative so that Prince Andrei’s search is at times derailed by events utterly beyond his control and comprehension, though the accompanying images, as they are progressively reinterpreted, come over time to focus that search even more, by pointing somehow to something eternal, but just out of reach, at the same time as they point directly to *something* within him. Perhaps Prince Andrei begins to sense some vague correspondence between what is hidden behind the world and something lurking in some dark corner of his interior. On the ferry, Prince Andrei finds the lofty sky to be no less eternal despite how his disillusionment has changed him. In fact, even the image of his dead wife’s face has been transformed during his continual preoccupation with it, finally pointing toward, and serving as a convincing proof of, eternity.

It is no coincidence that Prince Andrei must endure his wife’s death, so soon after Austerlitz, denied the opportunity to atone for the wrongs he committed for the sake of his first misdirected search. Tolstoy seems to indicate by this course of events that Prince Andrei’s first encounter with the lofty sky was a naive one, an incomplete image, a glimpse of the eternal as if through a pinhole camera. The author is careful to indicate that the image is incomplete, since it only intimates something higher and more expansive without revealing what that something is, and instills in Prince Andrei a longing for the peace and

stillness of the infinite heavens, and a resulting love of life, without revealing what lies behind it.

By constructing the proximate contrast of the lofty sky and Lise's death, Tolstoy seems to say that the love of life *is* naive if it is ignorant of the real fact of death. And when the same sky reappears over the ferry, Prince Andrei's new persona, as a result of reflecting on his own prior experience, is more capable of reading this treatise on the infinite. He still finds therein a testament to the eternal, but no longer takes from it a simple love of life itself. Tolstoy has thus prepared the ground for what will eventually become Prince Andrei's final question (cf. 869): What does the love of life mean in the face of inevitable death? If the love of life cannot stand up to something so inexorable, what can? Is there a love that can laugh in the face of death? Tolstoy has achieved this preparation through Prince Andrei's successive reinterpretation of the images that have over time changed him, introducing new personae in the progression of his character. Each of these personae is more capable of reading the text manifest in the world, and so each comes closer to discerning the tell-tale autograph of its Author.

∞ *Discerning the Eternal through Image*

RETURN FOR A moment to the death chamber, where Mary and Natásha voice Tolstoy's own belief that some things simply cannot be expressed in words, and consider the author's depiction of Prince Andrei's experience with this in mind. One might conclude that Tolstoy has concocted these images—the lofty sky, his dead wife's face, the red reflection of the sun—to avoid the dangerous task of literally describing the issues raised by Prince Andrei's progression of character, choosing instead to embed these issues in image and to explore poetically what is difficult for any writer to describe analytically.

Considering now the whole range of human experience, though, inside and outside the bounds of fiction, perhaps image *is* more potent than language, not only as a tool for communication, but as the primary means by which experience is represented to the self. When a meaningful question that arises from experience first presents itself, if it is potent enough to transform one who stumbles across it, the words to express that question properly are often simply unavailable. The language to express it must develop after the experience of

the *it* to be expressed, if such language can develop at all. Whether *it* is to be expressed to oneself or to others in the end makes no difference, for the means by which one expresses to oneself what has been internalized are the same as those by which it is expressed to others. One describes experience in words, or gestures—pointing *out there* and *in here*—or one refers to the changes wrought in the self by experience; in short, one communicates through the same means as Tolstoy does in order to convey to the reader the effects of experience in his fictional characters.

Consider Prince Andrei witnessing the death of his wife. He must somehow internalize and express to himself what this undeniable fact of death means, and not merely in terms of philosophical manipulations or theological doctrine. He may ask himself the same question Natásha will ask after his own death—“Where has she gone?”—and he may try to imagine the fullness of her future had she lived. He may peer ahead into the mists of his own future to witness himself without her, and he may worry about their half-orphaned son. Above all, he must wonder how this single moment will forever alter the shape and course of his life, trying in vain to reconcile all that would have been with all that now will be. Yet all these thoughts and questions, though natural and necessary, are inadequate machinations that run circles around some ungraspable center. And at the center, the question mark that punctuates all these half-stuttered thoughts, is one image—the reproachful look on his wife’s dead face—encompassing the whole of the experience and containing in itself the raw material for the construction of all possible interpretations.

Consider again Natásha’s *this*. The fact that the change in Andrei’s condition is best expressed by saying, “*this*” and pointing to him, where the effect is manifest in his image for anyone to see, is evinced by his seven-year old son:

He could scarcely read, and knew nothing. After that day he lived through many things, gaining knowledge, observation, and experience, but had he possessed all the faculties he afterwards acquired, he could not have had a better or more profound understanding of the meaning of the scene he had witnessed. (867)

And so experience—at least experience of such magnitude that it transforms one’s character—presents itself in the form of image, which admits of as many interpretations as there are progressive personae to reread it. If experience presents itself in this way to everyone, then Tolstoy’s use of image to convey what is internalized from experience is not in the end

merely technique; it reflects instead his own insightful reading of the subtleties of experience, and of the forms the questions that experience inscribes in us take—questions we sometimes cannot even ask in words. Prince Andrei is able neither to ask nor to answer his own question until he is granted an opportunity to read his own epitaph, and the answer he finds in the end is inexplicably beautiful. Yet when he first encounters this question upon returning home from Austerlitz, perhaps without even realizing in words that it is a question, the only answer he finds is disillusionment. Unable to reconcile the contradiction, he naturally retreats to seek solace in the solitude at Boguchárovo—which his father calls his “Boguchárovo Cloister”—possibly because he was only able to find in solitude—which so fully fomented his newly transformed character on the battlefield—the necessary distance from the noise and smoke of the world.

His return to Boguchárovo after the talk with Pierre is not a retreat into solitude, but a directed effort to live out Pierre’s confidence that man’s highest happiness can be reached through love of others. Prince Andrei’s high degree of “practical tenacity” (367) grants him greater success than Pierre in his efforts to reform the lives of his serfs, and in addition to this work, he reads, undertakes a critical survey of the last two campaigns, and draws up a proposal to reform army rules and regulations. His first attempt to redirect his life in light of partly reconciling those two contrary images expresses itself through good works.

∞ *An Oak, Twice*

DESPITE HIS SUCCESS, his first encounter with the oak outside Ryazán demonstrates the extent to which Prince Andrei’s new life is merely inward. “With its huge ungainly limbs sprawling unsymmetrically, and its gnarled hands and fingers, it stood an aged, stern, and scornful monster” (368). The oak seems to say to Prince Andrei, “Spring, and love, and happiness! . . . Are you not weary of the same stupid, meaningless, constantly repeated fraud? . . . There is no spring, no sun, no happiness! . . . I do not believe in your hopes and your lies.” And Prince Andrei agrees: “Yes the oak is right, a thousand times right. Let others—the young—yield afresh to that fraud, but we know life, our life is finished!” (369).

Of course, the oak does not really say anything at all to Andrei. Instead, he unknowingly broadcasts his interior onto his surroundings and then mistakes the echo of his own broadcast, as though nature were speaking to him and reaffirming what was merely his own to begin with. Prince Andrei should know by now that the world never expresses itself, like this, in words; its means of communication are far more subtle. The first encounter with the oak suggests that Andrei remains stern and scornful despite his experience on the ferry, but the “unreasoning springtime feeling of joy and renewal” (371) echoed later indicates that the intervening episode—hearing Natásha at the window—has begun the process of percolating Andrei’s new inward life up from the depths to the surface.

The narrative emphasizes Prince Andrei’s thoughts, in the form of his repeated question: “What is she thinking about? Why is she so glad?” (369). En route to the Rostóv’s house, he first sees a nameless girl who later turns out to be Natásha, a “slim, pretty girl . . . contented and cheerful in her own separate—probably foolish—but bright and happy life” (370). Throughout the course of the dull day he finds himself repeatedly watching Natásha, continually drawn back to that same question, a vexing question to which he cannot seem to find an answer. That night in his bedroom he open the window. The night floods the room “as if it had long been watching for this.”

The night was fresh, bright, and very still. Just before the window was a row of pollard trees, looking black on one side and with a silvery light on the other. Beneath the trees grew some kind of lush, wet, bushy vegetation with silver-lit leaves and stems here and there. Farther back beyond the dark trees a roof glittered with dew, . . . and above it shone the moon, nearly at its full, in a pale, almost starless, spring sky. Prince Andrei leaned his elbows on the window ledge and his eyes rested on that sky. (370)

When Tolstoy’s world expresses itself, it does so in this manner—in its own terms, in a simple revelation of beauty—never in words like those Prince Andrei heard when he first saw the oak. He contemplates in solitude the sensuous details of the night, quietly reading what it presents to him, and though what he sees therein is not explicitly described by the author, Prince Andrei must at least be aware of the other times, both recent and distant, that he has gazed at the heavens. He soon discovers, however, that he is not the only admirer of this night; he hears Natásha at the window above, hears her girlish enthusiasm, and “the rustle of her dress and even her breathing” (370). This breach of his solitude changes the character of

the night—for another reads therein a text much more innocent: everything is now “stone-still like the moon and its light and the shadows.” Natásha meanwhile remains ignorant of his presence; she continues to squeal and dream and sigh (“probably foolish”) and remains ignorant that her presence has turned this night for him to stone. Prince Andrei can only listen attentively to her every sound, “expecting yet fearing that she might say something about him,” captivated by something he is “unable to explain,” though he still feels the vivacity of its effect in the form of “an unexpected turmoil of youthful thoughts and hopes, contrary to the whole tenor of his life” (371).

Returning the next day past the same oak, now so transformed that he is incapable of recognizing it, he finds no trace of “old doubts and sorrows.” Of course, it is no wonder that Prince Andrei cannot recognize the oak, for it now echoes something new. The episode of the previous night has nourished the new inward life begun on the ferry, and new “leaves had sprouted such as one could hardly believe the old veteran could have produced”; whether this new growth is in Andrei or in the image before him is for the reader to discern. When Prince Andrei realizes that this oak is the same he saw the previous day (and perhaps realizes that his own change of character accounts for the difference), various seemingly distinct themes unite before his eyes.

All the best moments of his life suddenly rose to his memory. Austerlitz with the lofty heavens, his wife’s dead reproachful face, Pierre at the ferry, that girl thrilled by the beauty of the night, and that night itself and the moon and . . . all this rushed suddenly to his mind. (371)

All these moments, including the encounter with the oak that unites the others as different themes in one text—the text of Andrei as read by Andrei—were first presented to him as images read and internalized, and which in turn came through successive reinterpretation to affect his understanding of his own character. Over time all these images came to acquire identities in his mind, identities prone to the same transformations of character through particular experience as any human. The crucial difference is that Prince Andrei’s reading of a transforming image’s character changes only as a result of *his* experience; what lies behind it remains always constant. In this way, the two encounters with the oak reveal that what underlies all the best moments of his life, whether or not he realizes it explicitly, is the notion of a persona, changed by experience, reinterpreting an unchanging image.

One unexpected image included among these substantiates this claim. How can Prince Andrei now count his wife's dead face among the best moments of his life, unless it like the others somehow indicates an aspect of the eternal: a revelation by the Author of the world couched in the terms of the world, rather than in, say, a grandiose parting of the clouds behind which can be glimpsed trumpeting cherubs and pristinely-robed saints on parade? Tolstoy's God is far more subtle than that. Were the divine to present itself in the latter terms—terms which themselves lie beyond any possible human experience—it would forever remain altogether inaccessible. Rather, Tolstoy suggests that God is manifest in *this* world, and that His image lies directly behind every significant experience, if one only reads carefully enough. Tolstoy has been whispering this to Prince Andrei for quite a while, but he has not yet been heard. For some reason, nonetheless, after Ryazán, the image of Lise's face ceases to torment him as it had:

Then he would turn away to the portrait of his dead Lise, who with hair curled *à la grecque*, looked tenderly and gaily at him out of the gilt frame. She did not now say those former terrible words to him, but looked simply, merrily, and inquisitively at him. (372)

∞ *Love of a Particular Woman*

TOLSTOY'S DEPICTION OF Natásha's interactions with her own experience deserves an inquiry in its own right, but the discussion already underway demands that we limit ourselves to her role as it relates to Prince Andrei's progression of character, and in resolving his final question about the nature of the love that can laugh, or at least smile, in the face of death. Her first appearance under this heading is at the ball, where Prince Andrei muses, ". . . that girl is so charming, so original, that she won't be dancing here a month before she will be married. . . . Such as she are rare here" (406). The next day, he recalls her in the same terms (407), but thinks no more of it, for he has returned to St. Petersburg with a different intent.

After returning home from Ryazán, Prince Andrei's recent good works in the country no longer satisfied him. In the process of describing Andrei's thoughts, Tolstoy suggests that the machinations of the human mind are a "wretched" tool for internalizing experience, and for recognizing one's own resulting transformation of character.

He could not understand how he could ever even have doubted the necessity of taking an active share in life, just as a month before he had not understood how the idea of leaving the quiet country could ever enter his head. It now seemed clear to him that all his experience of life must be senselessly wasted unless he applied it to some kind of work and again played an active part in life. He did not even remember how formerly, on the strength of similar wretched logical arguments, it had seemed obvious that he would be degrading himself if he now, after the lessons he had had in life, allowed himself to believe in the possibility of being useful and in the possibility of happiness or love. Now reason suggested quite the opposite. (372)

He soon convinced himself, for reasons he only pretended to understand, to return to St. Petersburg to live out this new notion. Pierre's example of demonstrating his love of others through good works, further reinforced by Prince Andrei's own success with his serfs, and by his decisive decree at Ryazán—"everyone must know me, so that my life . . . may be reflected in them all" (371)—conspired to renew his enthusiasm for action for the first time since Austerlitz. Upon arriving in St. Petersburg, he soon arranges an appointment to the Committee on Army Regulations, and thereby meets Speránski. "He so longed to find in someone the living ideal of that perfection toward which he strove, that he readily believed that in Speránski he had found his ideal of a perfectly rational and virtuous man" (379). These hopes about Speránski sound much like the embodiment of what Prince Andrei sought when he first left St. Petersburg, now untainted even by aspirations of glory. As a result, it appears that, with his wife's dead face tormenting him no more, he again seeks that perfection—the good and noble in man—this time by emulating an example of human perfection and by attempting somehow to hold up his own life as an example to others. Yet this is not the Andrei who was at Austerlitz; his character has been so changed by his experience in the intervening years that he soon recalls what he learned there: the perfection found in a life of worldly deeds is not the kind of perfection he seeks.

A very simple thought occurred to him: "What does it matter to me or to Bítski what the Emperor was pleased to say at the Council? Can all that make me any happier or better?" . . . And this simple reflection suddenly destroyed all the interest Prince Andrei had felt in the impending reforms. (408)

The dinner at Speránski's reminds him of all he despised about St. Petersburg society; he invents an excuse to leave the dinner early, and when once again in the solitude of his home he reflects upon his latest attempt to imitate Pierre's example, and then he rejects and abandons that mode of living:

“He recalled his labors on the Legal Code, . . . and he felt ashamed of himself. Then he vividly pictured to himself Boguchárovo, . . . he remembered the peasants and Dron the village elder, and mentally applying to them the Personal Rights he had divided into paragraphs, he felt astonished that he could have spent so much time on such useless work. (410)

Meanwhile, Prince Andrei has called on the Rostóv’s house, “to see that original, eager girl who had left such a pleasant impression on his mind” (411) at the ball. That fetal urge to aspire to human perfection by means of acting for the sake of others—conceived by Pierre’s example, nourished by Speránski, and then aborted by his disillusionment with the latter—stands in direct contrast to the feeling that Natásha instills in him when she sings.

He looked at Natásha as she sang, and something new and joyful stirred in his soul. . . . He had absolutely nothing to weep about yet he was ready to weep. What about? His former love? The little princess? His disillusionments? . . . His hopes for the future? . . . Yes and no. The chief reason was a sudden, vivid sense of the terrible contrast between something infinitely great and illimitable within him and that limited and material something that he, and even she, was. (411).

This new and joyful feeling has a portentous effect on Prince Andrei. He feels himself divided: the implicit image is that of a limited and material vessel (the material something that he *was*) containing something infinite (the infinitely great and illimitable *within* him). Prince Andrei has witnessed a manifestation of the infinite before only in the sky at Austerlitz (though he may have come over time to suspect that something infinite lurks behind the image of Lise’s face, and over the ferry, and in the oak at Ryazán). Though his experiences with the sky at times have pointed to *something* within him, Tolstoy has never explicitly revealed Prince Andrei’s recognition of an infinite nature lurking in the depths of his own interior. The pattern in Andrei’s representation of experience to himself has shown that an explicit interpretation of the meaning behind an image depends on that persona’s access to terms capable of expressing that interpretation; he must first through experience internalize the necessary ‘vocabulary’ before he can represent the meaning behind an image to himself. Thus, if Prince Andrei, in his death chamber, has a full sense of the infinite in his own nature, he must have sensed it already through some prior experience, and his first explicit glimpse of the infinite *within* resides in something inexpressible about Natásha’s singing.

Prince Andrei has already begun to suspect that the kind of human perfection he seeks is not to be found in worldly deeds, for these have only ever provided him with disillusioning

imperfection. But where then to look? The answer, though he may not yet realize this, is written somewhere in that girl whose voice brings tears to his eyes, for those tears here begin to mouth a wordless question about human perfection that will ask itself explicitly, in the end, in the form of a closed door.

After leaving the Rostóv's that night, "it did not enter his head that he was in love with Natásha; he was not thinking about her, but only picturing her to himself, and in consequence all life appeared in a new light. 'Why do I strive, why do I toil in this narrow, confined frame when life, all life with all its joys, is open to me?' said he to himself" (411). Something implicit in her image alone—and not in any rational reflection of his encounter with her—brings these notions to mind. This love of life, as something expansive in itself, resembles the effect of Prince Andrei's encounter with the sky over Austerlitz, but this time the image in which he reads it lies closer to his own experience: he reads it in Natásha. And this wiser, more experienced Andrei also says to himself, "Let the dead bury their dead, but while one has life one must live and be happy" (412), suggesting that his love of life is no longer ignorant of the real fact of death, but is now in spite of it.

The strange nature of Prince Andrei's new love is further illustrated by his reaction when Natásha accepts his proposal for marriage:

Prince Andrei held her hands, looked into her eyes, and did not find in his heart his former love for her. Something in him had suddenly changed; there was no longer the former poetic and mystic charm of desire, but there was pity for her feminine and childish weakness, fear at her devotion and trustfulness, and an oppressive yet joyful sense of the duty that now bound him to her forever. The present feeling, though not so bright and poetic as the former, was stronger and more serious. (422)

This may sound like nothing but an accurate description of what we now call 'cold feet', but reading more carefully, and keeping in mind what lies in Prince Andrei's future, we should suspect that Tolstoy here hints at the distinction he will later ink into Andrei's own thoughts: the kind of perfection that culminates in the eternal does not reside in the "love of a particular woman," but in the "flower of eternal, unfettered love" (868). At this point in the narrative, however, Andrei only suspects that he has misread something too great into what is merely the "poetic and mystic charm of desire"; the only image now present to him is that of the limited and material in her, the "feminine and childish weakness." By comparing the qualities manifest in her character with what he already knows about the kind of perfection

he has long been seeking, he suspects that he has not found it in her; he has instead found another earthly good. Regardless of his mysterious attraction toward the infinite, however, Prince Andrei is still a man in love, and he remains committed to the marriage. His father has already decreed that the marriage must be postponed for a year, so after informing Natásha and the Rostóvs of this necessity, he sets off to travel alone.

∞ *Species of Solitude*

MORE THAN ANY other character in the novel, Prince Andrei oscillates between periods of action and interaction, and periods spent alone; Tolstoy repeatedly refers explicitly to his penchant for solitude. The most vivid—through perhaps the least literal—is on his deathbed, where he is of course surrounded by those closest to him. Solitude, in this context, describes his separation from the living, that is, from anyone capable of sensing the full nature of the changes that experience has wrought in him. Princess Mary and Natásha can read the symptoms and guess about their cause, but without the benefit of Tolstoy's narration, they know even less than the reader about the nature of that change. Andrei is alone, in a way that mere distance can never accomplish. Similarly, while lying on the battlefield at Austerlitz, he is of course surrounded by soldiers and bodies, noise and smoke, but when the sky comes to occupy his attention, all his surroundings fade away into insignificant props on the stage and he remains alone to contemplate the sky; when the sky in turn disappears, only the “quiet and peace” remain. In these moments, it seems, Prince Andrei is granted unique access to the images whose successive reinterpretations define his understanding of himself, the images that propel his progression of character.

When he is alone, Prince Andrei is observed by no one but himself and the narrator. He is free to read the world without distraction; he has no character apart from what he reads in himself. While describing his periods of solitude, however, the narrator still conveys Prince Andrei's own reflections to the reader—“those irrational, inexpressible thoughts, secret as a crime” (372). When he returns from solitude, his character transformed—when he is again present to the others within the narrative who would read his new persona—he is changed in ways they cannot know. Even the reader, who looks in on the narrative from outside, can only share his partial understanding of these moments.

If the narrative often gives us access to an understanding of Prince Andrei that is as complete as his own (at least to the extent that he can express it to himself), why then, at other times, does it refuse to pry into his solitary moments to report his secret thoughts? During the two months after Austerlitz, for example, and during the time at Boguchárovo immediately after his wife's death, Tolstoy avoids any mention of him until he is again in the presence of witnesses. This silence may be just a dramatic technique intended to make his transformations of character more apparent, by emphasizing how they first appear to the others within the narrative. It may also be intended to further reinforce our sense of the prince's solitude, for when the author turns his panoptic camera away from Andrei's life and even the narrator is absent, no one can sense the effects of experience on his interior. Or, since he is not the only character in *War and Peace* (and arguably not even the main one), the camera may pan away from him from time to time simply because action in which he is not involved must come to the front for a time.

In fact, no single reason for Prince Andrei's sporadic, but complete, absence from the action can be discerned. Tolstoy's narrative does not comment on itself, and the text does not provide conclusive evidence for any of the above readings. Nonetheless, the pattern is clear: his most obvious disappearances from the action—between departing from Bald Hills and reappearing in Kutúzov's service, the two months after Austerlitz, the first period at Boguchárovo, the year spent abroad, and the weeks after Borodinó—immediately follow transformational experiences. He reappears after each of these periods with an internal change externally manifest (though after returning from his travels, the internal change is triggered by news he hears of his fiancée's faithlessness; the change does not happen during his time away). His reaction to that news will be addressed below.

The more subtle species of solitude, however—the species present in “all the best moments of his life,” for example—are associated with those defining images which come over time to acquire identities to Prince Andrei; his repeated experience with these images alters their character. In this way, they act like other people in Andrei's life as much as Mary, Natásha, and Pierre do, but they differ in that they seem to contain within themselves intimations of the eternal—momentary yet vivid glimpses of what lies hidden behind this world. Because Prince Andrei senses the eternal somehow lurking in them, he becomes in

these moments alone more intimate with them than he has ever been with his fellow seekers of meaning, who are full of human weakness and are similarly deceived from time to time by false starts and misdirected paths. Could he only unravel them sufficiently, he suspects, he would finally be granted answers to the questions that he cannot voice in words. Even after the wound at Borodinó, before he sees Anatole Kurágin in the operating tent, Andrei can only voice his confusion: “And what will be there, and what has there been here? Why was I so reluctant to part with life? There was something in this life I did not and do not understand” (724).

Andrei’s experience with the images that intimate the eternal occur only in these moments of metaphorical solitude; they transform his character, and he habitually seeks literal solitude in order to unravel them, and their effects in himself, where the noise and smoke of the world cannot interfere. So after the evening Natásha’s sings, according to habit, he begins “making happy plans for the future. He decided . . . he ought to go abroad, and see England, Switzerland, and Italy” (412). His courtship of Natásha delays these plans, but Andrei’s letters from abroad during the year after his proposal indicate that he has kept these destinations in mind, and that his love for Natásha has regained its former vigor, no longer suffering from that “oppressive yet joyful sense of the duty”:

In the middle of the summer Princess Mary received an unexpected letter from Prince Andrei in Switzerland in which he gave her strange and surprising news. He informed her of his engagement to Natásha Rostóva. The whole letter breathed loving rapture for his betrothed and tender and confiding affection for his sister. He wrote that he had never loved as he did now and that only now did he understand and know what life was. (428)

Another letter arrives later at the Rostóv’s, in which Prince Andrei writes from Rome that the warm weather has caused his wound to reopen, delaying his return. References to such letters, of which these are the only two whose content is given, constitute Tolstoy’s only mention of Prince Andrei during his time away; the camera is focused on more immediate action, granting him solitude. Only after he returns do we learn about his thoughts while abroad, and how hearing news of Natásha’s attempt to elope with Anatole finally transforms the character of his most intimate image.

Not only could he no longer think the thoughts that had first come to him as he lay gazing at the sky on the field of Austerlitz and had later enlarged upon with Pierre,

and which had filled his solitude at Boguchárovo and then in Switzerland and Rome, but he even dreaded to recall them and the bright and boundless horizons they had revealed. . . . It was as if that lofty, infinite canopy of heaven that had once towered above him had suddenly turned into a low, solid vault that weighed him down, in which all was clear, but nothing eternal or mysterious. (558)

∞ *Memory*

AFTER SPEAKING TO Pierre in Moscow after his return, with a “fresh horizontal wrinkle between his brows” (531), Prince Andrei leaves for St. Petersburg, “on business as he told his family, but really to meet Anatole Kurágin whom he felt it necessary to encounter” (557). Prince Andrei arrives in St. Petersburg after Anatole has already departed to join the army in Moldavia, but there he meets Kutúzov, and finds himself again in military service, almost by accident, accompanying Kutúzov’s headquarters staff to the same destination. On the way there, Prince Andrei visits Bald Hills.

During the last three years there had been so many changes in his life, he had thought, felt, and seen so much (having traveled both in the east and the west), that on reaching Bald Hills it struck him as strange and unexpected to find the way of life there unchanged and still the same in every detail. (558)

Again, he interprets his experience through reference to his own transformation of character. However, one may recall that the relationship between experience and character is ecological. If Prince Andrei does in fact internalize his experience through the reflexive process outlined previously, one expects also to discover the reciprocal process at work: he ought also to interpret the nature of his own transformation of character by reference to his experience. Not much later in the narrative, while still at Bald Hills:

He thought not of this pretty child, his son whom he held on his knee, but of himself. He sought in himself either remorse for having angered his father or regret at leaving home for the first time in his life on bad terms with him, and was horrified to find neither. What meant still more to him was that he sought and did not find in himself the former tenderness for his son which he had hoped to reawaken by caressing the boy and taking him on his knee. (560)

This persona—so unlike the one who sought solace “in the dim light beneath the curtain” of his son’s cot—cannot “find in himself” the signs he seeks of the former persona. This change might be attributed to the painful associations with Natásha that such tenderness might evoke, to his own preoccupation with confronting Anatole Kurágin, or to the “two

alien and hostile camps” (559) into which his family has become divided since his last visit. Perhaps this inability to feel for his son is but another manifestation of the low, solid vault his lofty sky has become. Whatever it may be, if it can be isolated, Prince Andrei does not speculate about the cause; the nature of the change is manifest in its effects, which the narrator conveys in the limited way in which even Prince Andrei can recognize it in himself: “on returning to the old conditions of life amid which he had been happy, weariness of life overcame him with its former intensity, and he hastened to escape from these memories” (560).

How does one escape from memories? Memories are not mere experience; their effects are manifest in prior personae. The present Andrei, in order to escape from these memories, begins to conceal from himself his prior personae—the various ‘he’s who had been happy in the old conditions of life. After the burning of Smolénsk,

A novel feeling of anger against the foe made him forget his own sorrow. He was entirely devoted to the affairs of his regiment and was considerate and kind to his men and officers. . . . But he was kind and gentle only to those of his regiment, . . . people quite new to him, belonging to a different world and who could not know and understand his past. As soon as he came across a former acquaintance or anyone from the staff, he bristled up immediately and grew spiteful, ironical, and contemptuous. Everything that reminded him of his past was repugnant to him. (625)

He can forget his sorrow only by forgetting his past. However, this term—“his past”—cannot refer merely to his prior experience, for most of these “acquaintances” would not remember the experiences themselves that shaped Prince Andrei, experiences hidden from the world by those subtle species of solitude of which he rarely spoke even to Pierre and Mary. Instead, this term must refer to his prior personae (taken in its most literal sense to be the aspect of the self that is displayed to others). These people cannot be aware of the intimate images, or of the resulting transformations of character, from which Prince Andrei now seeks to escape, but they are aware of who he has been—that is, they have witnessed his prior personae. As a result, they somehow reflect back to him his own past selves, which are precisely what he seeks to escape. Here again, Prince Andrei retreats into a kind of solitude, in which he can escape all those images and the changes they wrought in him; in order to do so, however, he must also escape what is somehow manifest to him in anyone capable of sensing who he has been. And to escape what is manifest in them, he must conceal from them his prior personae, in order to conceal from himself who he has been.

∞ *The Identity behind Image*

PRINCE ANDREI'S REFLECTIONS the night before the battle of Borodino suggest an explanation for his fear of acknowledging his own past. The vivid possibility of his own death forces him explicitly to question, not only his prior experience, but the mode itself by which he has internalized his experience all along—through image. Thus he must confront the possibility that all those vivid images intimated nothing:

For the first time in his life the possibility of death presented itself to him—not in relation to any worldly matter or with reference to its effect on others, but simply in relation to himself, to his own soul. . . . And from the height of this perception all that had previously tormented and preoccupied him suddenly became illumined by a cold white light without shadow, without perspective, and without distinction of outline. All life appeared to him like magic-lantern pictures at which he had long been gazing by artificial light through a glass. . . . 'Yes, yes! There they are, those false images that agitated, enraptured, and tormented me,' said he to himself, . . . regarding them now in the cold white daylight of his clear perception of death. 'There they are, those rudely painted figures that once seemed splendid and mysterious. . . . how important these pictures appeared to me, with what profound meaning they seemed to be filled! And it is all so simple, pale, and crude in the cold white light of this morning which I feel is dawning for me.' (685)

His most intimate images, in this "cold white light," seem nothing but fictional projections; what once was "splendid and mysterious" is now revealed to be "rudely painted" and empty. The "profound meaning," which always lay just out of reach somehow behind the surface of these images, has disappeared.

But this magic lantern itself is a curious image, which Andrei presents to himself in his imagination. One may recall that Lise's dead face presented an image that transformed the character of the lofty sky. This cold white light—an image of his perception of death—illuminates all prior images to an even greater extent, in such a way that their characters become malleable and superficial pictures, with nothing underlying them. Perhaps his despair results from the effects on his own 'past'—used here in the same sense as above—which must then appear to have been continually misled by these phantoms, despite all he thought he had discerned about the world through experience.

The images projected by a magic lantern, however, appear by virtue of a light that shines out through its surface. Andrei's perception of death obscures this light, but does not douse it. He now believes that the images that have preoccupied him throughout life are false; if

this cold white light of the fear of death were to be extinguished, would he know to look not at the projected images, but toward the source of this more subtle light?

Passing references have been made in this discussion to the ‘Author of the world’, as well as to ‘the eternal’, ‘the infinite’, and the possibility of an ‘absolute’ underlying the subjectivity of external meaning; all of these terms have been used synonymously depending on the context. Andrei’s successive re-presentation of various images to himself has supported the claim that their import for him lies in their intimations of God—of Whom ‘absolute’, ‘infinite’, and ‘eternal’ might be called the manifestations of character. If the image of the magic lantern itself contains the interpretation given above—as the image of the bee contains as many interpretations as there are observers—and if the absolute underlying an image is to be accounted for, one should consider that image also admits of division into identity and character. We should not, after Tolstoy’s warning about the bee, claim to discern the “ultimate purpose” of the magic lantern, but we can acknowledge that it is an image of the source of images, perhaps intended by Tolstoy in precisely that way.

Much later—on the night of Natásha’s *this*, prior to the dream itself—Andrei will again fear falsehood, but not the falsehood of the images themselves. He will fear the falsehood of the life lived according to them. If the illumination provided by the cold white light of the perception of death by nature reveals falsehood, then how much more that subtle source of light, by what we have seen already, ought to reveal falsehood in its own way. If its nature is as we suspect, then it reveals the falsehood of image by revealing itself more vividly to be the truth. On that night, before the dream, he will look toward such a light:

Can fate have brought me to her so strangely only for me to die? . . . Is it possible that the truth of life has been revealed to me only to show me that I have spent my life in falsity? (869)

What is the source of that truth? We return to Borodinó. Immediately after the magic lantern episode, as in the episode at Ryazán, Andrei broadcasts his interior onto his surroundings, this time more perceptive of light and dark. “He looked at the row of birches shining in the sunshine, with their motionless green and yellow foliage and white bark. . . . And the birches, with their light and shade, the curly clouds, the smoke of the campfires, and all that was around him changed and seemed terrible and menacing” (686). After this moment, all the images by which he has gauged himself disappear from the narrative—

except one. Perhaps he abandons all those intimate images because the cold white light obscures them all, revealing them to be insignificant illusions. What then will remain when the cold white light is extinguished?

We return to the deathbed. Prince Andrei recalls the moment after the wound, when he saw Anatole Kurágin in the operating tent. “When he came to himself after being wounded and the flower of eternal, unfettered love had instantly unfolded itself in his soul as if freed from the bondage of life that had restrained it, he no longer feared death and ceased to think about it” (868). With the cold white light extinguished, and image now clearly but a projection, perhaps Prince Andrei can finally begin to sense that other source of light. If that source can be expressed at all, his thoughts in that moment may reveal the character it presents to him. We return to Borodinó.

He now remembered the connection that existed between himself and this man who was dimly gazing at him through tears that filled his swollen eyes. He remembered everything, and ecstatic pity and love for that man overflowed his happy heart.

‘Compassion, love of our brothers, for those who love us and for those who hate us, love of our enemies; yes, that love which God preached on earth and which Princess Mary taught me and I did not understand—that is what made me sorry to part with life, that is what remained for me had I lived.’ (726)

We return to the deathbed. Can we sense the nature of the change in him yet? He no longer fears death, he again embraces his memories, and he recalls spending his subsequent solitude penetrating into what has become over time a ‘principle’:

During the hours of solitude, suffering, and partial delirium he spent after he was wounded, the more deeply he penetrated into the new principle of eternal love revealed to him, the more he unconsciously detached himself from earthly life. To love everything and everybody and always to sacrifice oneself for love meant not to love anyone, not to live this earthly life. And the more imbued he became with that principle of love, the more he renounced life and the more completely he destroyed that dreadful barrier which—in the absence of such love—stands between life and death. (868)

His love slowly becomes unfettered, and so does he. He renounces life, because to love a particular is to love an image and not the source. Once the source becomes the object of perception, in whatever form it takes, all else becomes phantom. Even the self begins to disappear. Experiences become less and less referred to the self for interpretation, and the new object of perception is read in itself more and more. The self no longer comprehends expe-

rience by internalizing meaning from *out there*; the self instead begins to comprehend what is beyond its experience by *being* internalized, or so it appears in Andrei's thoughts.

'Love is God, and to die means that I, a particle of love, shall return to the general and eternal source.' These thoughts seemed to him comforting. But they were only thoughts. Something was lacking in them, they were not clear, they were too one-sidedly personal and brain-spun. (870)

The objects of Andrei's love form a progression: from worldly deeds, to life itself, to others through good works, to Speránski as human perfection, to Natásha, and finally, to Christian love ("love of our brothers, . . . love of our enemies"). Yet even this last form of love has an object. As perception is finally turned toward the source by a process of successively peeling away surfaces, so this principle of "unfettered" love, now seen as a progression in itself, successively peels away its objects. After the wound, as Andrei penetrates more deeply into this principle, his love becomes unfettered by objects; he slips away from life, until the dream—the *this*—but now the narrator presents its effects from Andrei's own perspective.

It was the last spiritual struggle between life and death, in which death gained the victory. It was the unexpected realization of the fact that he still valued life as presented to him in the form of his love for Natásha, and a last, though ultimately vanquished, attack of terror before the unknown. (869)

If it seems that Prince Andrei undergoes a deathbed redemption, that all of these thoughts are but machinations of his mind that serve to escort him out of life peacefully, then perhaps we should return to the night before Borodinó, to the one image left unobscured after he saw that cold white light:

He closed his eyes. One picture succeeded another in his imagination.² On one of them he dwelt long and joyfully. He vividly recalled an evening in Petersburg. Natásha with animated and excited face was telling him how she had gone to look for mushrooms the previous summer and had lost her way in the big forest. She incoherently described the depths of the forest, her feelings, and a talk with a beekeeper she met, and constantly interrupted her story to say: 'No, I can't! I'm not telling it right; no, you don't understand,' though he encouraged her by saying that he did understand, and he really had understood all she wanted to say. But Natásha was not satisfied with her own words: she felt that they did not convey the passionately poetic feeling she had experienced that day and wished to convey. 'He was such a delightful old man, and it was so dark in the forest . . . and he had such kind . . . No, I can't describe it,' she had said, flushed and excited. Prince Andrei smiled now the same happy smile as then when he had looked into her eyes. 'I understood

2. "Picture" is rendered as "image" in Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, trans. R. Edmonds (New York: Penguin Putnam, Inc., 1978), p. 923.

her,' he thought. 'I not only understood her, but it was just that inner, spiritual force, that sincerity, that frankness of soul—that very soul of hers which seemed to be fettered by her body—it was that soul I loved in her.' (692)

All the themes in this discussion resolve into harmony in that memory. The moment vividly re-presents itself to him in the form of an image. This persona of Prince Andrei is better able to understand the intimations of an otherwise unmemorable conversation long ago, a conversation in which Natásha was unable to express in words the significance of even that simple experience. By remembering, that is, by re-presenting this conversation to himself in the form of image, he is finally able to approximate in words what he sensed when she sang, that which in her seemed to intimate the eternal. Of anyone she could meet in a dark forest, Tolstoy selects a beekeeper. And the memory of the conversation now intimates to this Prince Andrei, even before his own detachment from earthly life, that her soul, like his, is fettered by a body.

We now look to Prince's Andrei Bolkónski's final image, returning to the deathbed one last time.

He dreamed that he was lying in the room he really was in, but that he was quite well and unwounded. Many various, indifferent, and insignificant people appeared before him. He talked to them and discussed something trivial. They were preparing to go away somewhere. Prince Andrei dimly realized that all this was trivial and that he had more important cares, but he continued to speak, surprising them by empty witticisms. Gradually, unnoticed, all these persons began to disappear and a single question, that of the closed door, superseded all else. (870)

By peeling away surfaces, his perception is finally turned toward the source, and his love over time has unfettered itself from objects. In this way also the dream proceeds. What remains after the people disappear? The question of the door. What remains after the door is opened? A question. What remains when the question is answered? Death. But now it is not death, not a question: it is an awakening—as only love remains when its objects disappear, as only the source remains when images disappear.

When, waking in a cold perspiration, he moved on the divan, Natásha went up and asked him what was the matter. He did not answer and looked at her strangely, not understanding. . . . From that day an awakening from life came to Prince Andrei together with his awakening from sleep. And compared to the duration of life it did not seem to him slower than an awakening from sleep compared to the duration of a dream. (871)

∞ *Image and Experience (Recapitulation)*

A SIMPLE IMAGE: the question of the closed door, the culmination of one fictional man's experience in Leo Tolstoy's vast exploration of history and the individual lives intertwined with it. This image, however simple it seems, contains as many interpretations as there are observers who would claim to discern its meaning, and this man's life is but one attempt of many who seek to understand the world by reflecting on and reasoning about even the simplest experience.

Perhaps the proper culmination to this discussion is itself a part of a part of an answer, for each character that Tolstoy presents has unique experiences, and furthermore, each character tends to represent experience to him- or herself uniquely. If one is to construct an understanding of anything larger, a single life is the unit with which one must begin, but even then, to seize and put into words, to describe directly even one human life appears impossible. Yet Tolstoy has accomplished precisely this task, many times over, for he succeeds somehow in circumventing the inadequacy of words by creating lives, through words, of such compelling palpability that their invented experiences admit of as many interpretations as our own do. God is manifest behind the inscrutable penstrokes of the world flowing from beneath Tolstoy's pen, and as Prince Andrei peels away the layers of his own experience—one by one, approaching more and more closely with each step an inexplicable beauty, a culmination that he cannot discern, despite its eternal proximity, until it is revealed to him to be so simple that it can only be expressed in terms so absolute, terms of which any interpretation is but a crude misreading, that even the simplest image is but a phantom—we finally begin to see what Tolstoy means when he speaks of history, of the life of humanity, saying, “The higher the human intellect rises in the discovery of these purposes, the more obvious it becomes that the ultimate purpose is beyond our comprehension.”

∞ *Works Cited*

1. Tolstoy, Leo, *War and Peace*, trans. A. and L. Maude, ed. George Gibian. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996.
2. Tolstoy, Leo, *War and Peace*, trans. R. Edmonds. New York: Penguin Putnam, Inc., 1978.