2

CAPTIVITY AND HORSE FLESH

- thomas sachen

Pierre Bezukhov holds the strongest claim to the disputed protagonist role of *War and Peace*. He bears much of the novel's philosophical weight, acting in many instances as the physical manifestation of Tolstoy's ideology. His intellectual and spiritual transformation over the course of the novel is extraordinary, and the careful reader will gain essential insight not only into Tolstoy's core message, but also, more importantly, the intense internal struggle that led Tolstoy (or Pierre) to these conclusions.

Pierre begins the novel as an eccentric but mostly harmless misfit in Petersburg society. Back from his schooling in France, he is a fixture at many of the most prestigious soirees and balls due mostly to his (illegitimate) father's powerful position as a count and one of the richest people in all of Russia. Pierre is well-meaning and intelligent, but he lacks purpose, and therefore discipline – one of our first impressions of Pierre debaucherous and dangerous escapades with the infamous ne'er-do-well Fedya Dolokhov, after assuring his best friend (and philosophical foil) Andrei Bolkonsky only hours before that he would give up this reckless lifestyle. Tolstoy's unconventional technique of immediately presenting one of the novel's protagonists in such a negative light is masterful, simultaneously characterizing Pierre's misguided goodwill and accentuating the intense personal development that he will undergo.

Due to Pierre's rather unconventional views ill-befitting of the stagnant and vapid intellectual milieu of Petersburg society he is generally ignored until his father dies, leaving Pierre his title and fortune. He is never characterized as being particularly attractive – he is quite awkward, with a large, unwieldy body and thick spectacles. He is not a great dancer, nor particularly charming or witty, but from the outset he is viewed as endearing in a "funny" sort of way, especially by young Natasha Rostov, who he meets and with whom he dances.

Upon becoming Count Bezukhov,

Pierre quickly becomes one of the most sought after bachelors in all of Russia, and he is rushed into an ill-fated marriage with Helene Kuragin, a beautiful and treacherous woman who leads Pierre into a deep depression and his consequent spiritual reawakening. Helene is admired in Petersburg society as intelligent, charming, and beautiful, but in reality she is hateful and base (here again Tolstoy's views on contemporary Russian aristocracy come to the fore). Rumors abound of Helene's infidelity with Dolokhov, eventually driving Pierre to a fit of jealousy during which he explodes and challenges Dolokhov to a duel. He badly wounds Dolokhov, after which he filled with great remorse and undergoes an epiphany, becoming a freemason and divorcing himself from Petersburg society both literally and metaphorically by leaving Helene (they spend most of the remainder of their marriage apart) and going for a tour of his rural estates devoted to improving the wellbeing of his serfs.

In another famous episode, he visits his friend Andrei to tell him about his newfound love for God and humanity. The two old friends debate, and we see their ideological contrast with extreme clarity. Andrei, jaded by his near-death experiences at war, is at this point a sober realist, deeply individualist and pessimistic about Pierre's grand designs of liberalism and earthly prosperity. Pierre, on the other hand, is an eternal idealist, and his foray into freemasonry provides a framework within which he can begin actualizing his hitherto aimless goodwill. This interaction deeply impresses Andrei who "outwardly...continued to live in the same old way, [but] inwardly... began a new life." This stubborn optimism is an essential feature of Pierre's identity, and furnishes a partial explanation for Tolstoy's choice of the surname ***Безухов*** (Bezukhov), sharing a root with the word ***безухий*** ("bezukhii"), the Russian word for "earless."

Pierre, lifted from his depression by his new relationship with God and, on the advice of his spiritual mentor Osip Bazdeev, returns to Moscow to live with Helene. He takes a great liking to Andrei's fianceé, Natasha Rostov, whom he had befriended years earlier. When she is seduced by Anatole Kuragin (Helene's brother) and her relationship with Andrei crumbles, Pierre provides invaluable emotional support to Natasha, helping her recover from her emotional distress and expelling Anatole from Moscow. This interaction in particular is the beginning of Pierre's romantic love for Natasha, culminating in Pierre witnessing the great comet of 1812, an event which signals the

beginning of a great period of optimism and spiritual fulfillment for Pierre.

Spurred on by his newfound zest for life, Pierre becomes embroiled in the rapidly escalating war with Russia. Napoleon, once Pierre's idol, is leading an army directly into the heart of Russia, intent on taking Moscow. Pierre, in an attempt to show his devotion to his nation and to humanity, pledges 1000 men and supplies to the war effort, even though this takes a considerable toll on his estate. Hoping to become involved even more directly, Pierre rides to Borodino, just outside Moscow, to survey the battlefield and engage with the French directly. This is another pivotal moment in Pierre's development, and in particular it is a clear instance of Tolstoy's message manifesting as Pierre's lived experience. At first awed by the "beauty" of the battlefield, Pierre rides heedlessly into the heart of the battle. His position is immediately set upon by the French, and before he knows what has happened, he is thrown from his horse, engaging in combat and overwhelmed by the horrors of war. He understands his folly.

Returning to Moscow, which has been occupied by the French and thrown into tumult, Pierre becomes determined to assassinate Napoleon. However, on the way to commit the deed, he is sidetracked several times – he rescues a baby from a burning home, and he defends a woman from a French soldier. These events are crucial in the development of Pierre, and they foreshadow a more explicit epiphany a bit later on. Specifically, Pierre will realize that his dissatisfaction with masonry is due to its grand visions of rebuilding humanity, when God and spiritual fulfillment are present only in the tangible good and love we can show for people in our lives. This realization comes when, after being apprehended by the French for these acts, Pierre is placed in a makeshift prison, where he meets Platon Karataev, an endlessly cheerful soldier that perhaps best embodies the Tolstoyan peasant: he is not tied to earthly possessions, but instead focuses on doing good for others and living without an ego. Platon's effect on Pierre is perhaps best summarized by the following passage, when Pierre finally begins to know peace after years of futile intellectualizing and anguish:

> Now, however, he had learnt to see the great, eternal, and infinite in everything, and therefore—to see it and enjoy its contemplation—he naturally threw away the telescope through which he had till now gazed over men's heads, and gladly regarded the ever-changing, eternally great, unfathomable and infinite life around

> him. And the closer he looked the more tranquil and happy he became. That dreadful question, What for? which had formerly destroyed all his mental edifices, no longer existed for him. To that question, What for? a simple answer was now always ready in his soul: 'Because there is a God, that God without whose will not a single hair falls from the head of man.'

Here again Tolstoy's ideology is quite explicit, as this passage instantly calls to mind the principles Tolstoy espoused in many of his short stories and nonfiction writings. Karataev is reminiscent of the old muzhik in 1859's "Three Deaths," written just a few years before *War and Peace*. Specifically, Karataev spends his days in the service of those around him, expressing kind generosity and wisdom that endears him to his peers. When the time for his death comes, he takes it in stride, peacefully accepting his fate. Platon is the embodiment of simplicity, truth, and goodness, and his simple wisdom had a profound effect on Pierre. Another episode when Pierre's inner thoughts served as a vessel for Tolstoy's ideology came just before this, while Pierre was en route to prison after being detained by the French. Pierre is scheduled to be executed with little justification, by the cold and poorly organized French forces. He is in a sort of hazy stupor brought about by the suddenness and ostensible irrationality of his misfortune. In particular, while witnessing the execution of his fellow Russians, including a "factory lad" who is practically still a child, Pierre is struck by the harsh reality that none of the French soldiers seem to *want* to execute the Russians, and indeed one of them is overcome with remorse after killing the factory lad. Furthermore the orders for the execution are from some distant authority not present at the scene of the murders. Overwhelmingly it seems that these atrocities are not even willful acts by a single twisted authority, but instead just symptoms of the overarching will of history, the actual manifestations of the destructive and chaotic spirit pervading the French forces. The fact that these murders were so groundless, that they lacked even evil intent create a sense of dark irony that makes the murders even more inhumane. From Pierre:

> The only thought in his mind at that time was: Who was it that had really sentenced him to death? Not the men on the Commission that had first examined him—not one of them had wished to or, evidently, could have done it. It was not Davout, who had looked at him in so human a way. In another moment Davout would have realized that he was doing wrong, but just

> then the adjutant had come in and interrupted him. The adjutant, also, had evidently had no evil intent though he might have refrained from coming in. Then who was executing him, killing him, depriving him of life—him, Pierre, with all his memories, aspirations, hopes, and thoughts? Who was doing this? And Pierre felt that it was no one.

Here, Pierre's thoughts mirror almost exactly Tolstoy's theory of history, which he details throughout the entire novel. Tolstoy rejects the notion that individuals play anything more than an incidental role in history, instead claiming that the events of history are the sum total of infinitesimal actions in their billions, reflective of the overall intangible spirit present in each man and woman. While his theory is still deterministic in its position that history might at some point be understood quantitatively from this perspective, this is quite a far away goal, and as a result it is nothing more than arrogance for an individual to hold that they have a real grasp on the "reasons" behind historical events, and even worse for an individual to believe they can play a significant role in shaping history. Napoleon is a key case study for this thesis, and throughout the novel Tolstoy asserts that Napoleon's role was insignificant – the orders he gave were poorly received or impossible to execute, the negotiations he held with Tsar Alexander had no bearing on the actual chaos and unpredictability of battle, and that the only reason he is remembered as a great man is because *someone* had to lead the French army in the early 19th century. In his words,

> Morally the wielder of power appears to cause the event; physically it is those who submit to the power. But as the moral activity is inconceivable without the physical, the cause of the event is neither in the one nor in the other, but in the union of the two...Speaking of the interaction of heat and electricity and of atoms we cannot say why this occurs, and we say that it is so because it is inconceivable otherwise, because it must be so, and that it is a law. The same applies to historical events. Why war and revolution occur we do not know. We only know that to produce the one or the other action people combine in a certain formation in which they all take part, and we say that this is so because it is unthinkable otherwise, or in other words that it is a law.

It is no coincidence that Pierre comes to this conclusion during the same period of time in which he meets Karataev. Tolstoy's view of history is perfectly consistent with

Pierre's dream – indeed, both of these epiphanies are instantiations of the same

ideological principle. During his criticism of Napoleon, Tolstoy undermines the notion of "greatness" as applied to individuals, especially in the context of military leaders whose "greatness" derives from murder and inhumanity. Criticizing the romanticization of war of which many historians are guilty, he writes that "[w]hen it is impossible to stretch the very elastic threads of historical ratiocination any farther, when actions are clearly contrary to all that humanity calls right or even just, the historians produce a saving conception of 'greatness.'" Continuing, he asserts that any real shreds of greatness that can be found in man are those brought about by "simplicity, goodness, and truth." These are precisely the defining features of Platon Karataev, who Pierre views as a model of happiness and a meaningful life – in Tolstoy's eyes, Platon Karataev is the closest we have to a great man. Both of these notions emphasize the insignificance of the individual and the dangers of one's ego. Helene Kuragin stands in stark contrast to Platon Karataev – though she is worshipped by the Russian aristocracy, who Tolstoy might liken to mainstream contemporary historians, Helene is selfish and unscrupulous, portrayed in overwhelmingly negative light until her death, resulting from a failed abortion stemming from an extramarital affair. Pierre's rejection of Helene and love for Platon is indicative of his moral development.

The key moment when the interplay of these two ideas is most apparent is Pierre's dream, while Pierre, still a prisoner, is on the march with a French military regiment. Pierre dreams of his former tutor, showing him a small globe.

> This globe was alive—a vibrating ball without fixed dimensions. Its whole surface consisted of drops closely pressed together, and all these drops moved and changed places, sometimes several of them merging into one, sometimes one dividing into many. Each drop tried to spread out and occupy as much space as possible, but others, striving to do the same, compressed it, sometimes destroyed it, and sometimes merged with it.
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> 'That is life,' said the old teacher.
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> 'How simple and clear it is,' thought Pierre. 'How is it I did not know it before?'
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> 'God is in the midst, and each drop tries to expand so as to reflect Him to the greatest extent. And it grows, merges, disappears from the surface, sinks to the depths and again emerges. There now, Karataev has spread out and disappeared. Vous avez compris, mon enfant?' said the teacher.

This globe is Tolstoy's vision of the true nature of reality, the true nature of history, and the role of individuals. Each droplet in the globe represents a person, and the fluidity with which drops intermingle, dissipate, and form reflects the infinitesimally small but innumerable and infinitely consequential interactions between humans. The use of water is purposeful: the subtlety of the dynamics governing their motion indicates that this system is not random or chaotic. Indeed, all of the interactions and their causes are explicable from the viewpoint of a simple and elegant theory, though the parameters at play are too numerous to be fully grasped by humans. Tolstoy indicates that, as the laws of fluid dynamics govern the motion of water droplets, so the law of God governs the fate of humanity, and the will of history. Platon Karataev makes an appearance in Pierre's dream, and we finally understand Karataev's admirable lack of ego. Karataev has seen the globe, and he understands that he is utterly insignificant and replaceable, peacefully accepting the will of God and the laws of nature. In a letter to his cousin, Tolstoy explained the death of the peasant in "Three Deaths" along similar lines, writing

> The muzhik dies calmly...he himself cut down the trees, sowed rye and mowed it, killed rams, and had rams born, and children were born, and old men died, and he knew this law well; this law, from which he never turned away, like the noblewoman did, he directly and simply looked it in the face.

And, just like that, very soon after Pierre has this dream, he is rescued from captivity by none other than Fedya Dolokhov, the man he once hated so passionately, but now forgives in view of the lessons he's learned from Platon and his dream. The hardships Pierre experienced mark the completion of his spiritual and moral enlightenment, and he is set free into society to reap good and to begin life anew. Reuniting with Natasha, who he loves deeply, he reflects on his experiences in captivity as follows.

> They say: misfortunes and sufferings,' remarked Pierre, 'yes, but if right now, right this minute they asked me: "Would you rather be what you were before you were taken prisoner, or go through this all again?" For God's sake let me again have captivity and horse flesh! We imagine that when

> we are thrown out of our familiar rut all is lost, but that is only when something new and good can begin. While there is life there is happiness. There is much, much before us. I say this to you,' he added, turning to Natasha.

Pierre's reunification with and eventual marriage to Natasha marks the end of this period of spiritual turmoil which, in the beginning of the novel, was one of Pierre's greatest defining characteristics. For once, Pierre is free of the anxiety that overwhelmed him for much of the novel, finally reaching inner peace in his newfound simple and domestic life. His arc is complete, and Tolstoy's view of the contrast between early and late Pierre is abundantly clear. In many respects we can understand this as Tolstoy himself identifying with Pierre, reformulating many of the author's formative experiences as an aristocrat and soldier to convey his powerful philosophical vision.