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The Hedgehog and the Fox

A queer combination of the brain of an English chemist
with the soul of an Indian Buddhist.
E. M. de Vogüé [1]

I

There is a line among the fragments of the Greek poet Archilochus which says: 'The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.'[2] Scholars have differed about the correct interpretation of these dark words, which may mean no more than that the fox, for all his cunning, is defeated by the

[1] 'On dirait l'esprit d'un chimiste anglais dans l'âme d'un bouddhiste hindou; se charge qui pourra d'expliquer cet étrange accouplment': *Le Roman russe* (Paris, 1886), 282.

[2] 'πόλλ᾽ οἶδ᾽ ἀλώπηξ, ἀλλ᾽ ἐχῖνος ἓν μέγα.' Archilochus fragment 201 in M. L. West (ed.), *Iambi et elegi graeci ante Alexandrum cantati*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (Oxford, 1989). [The fragment was preserved in a collection of proverbs by the Greek Sophist Zenobius (5. 68), who says that it is found in both Archilochus and Homer – West, op. cit., vol. 2 (Oxford, 1992), 'Homerus' fragment 5. Since it is iambic rather than dactylic in metre, the attribution to Homer is likely to mean that it appeared in the (now thought pseudo-Homeric) comic epic poem *Margites*, probably written later than Archilochus' poem. See e.g. C. M. Bowra, 'The Fox and the Hedgehog', *Classical Quarterly* 34 (1940), 26–9 (see 26), an article reprinted with revisions in Bowra's *On Greek Margins* (Oxford, 1970), 59–66 (see 59), and evidently unknown to Berlin. In any event, the sentiment might well be a proverb deployed by both authors, though given Archilochus' frequent use of animal encounters (on which see also 114–15 below), it is attractive to think it was used first, and given this metrical form, by him.]

hedgehog's one defence. But, taken figuratively, the words can be made to yield a sense in which they mark one of the deepest differences which divide writers and thinkers, and, it may be, human beings in general. For there exists a great chasm between those, on one side, who relate everything to a single central vision, one system, less or more coherent or articulate, in terms of which they understand, think and feel – a single, universal, organising principle in terms of which alone all that they are and say has significance – and, on the other side, those who pursue many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory, connected, if at all, only in some de facto way, for some psychological or physiological cause, related to no moral or aesthetic principle. These last lead lives, perform acts and entertain ideas that are centrifugal rather than centripetal; their thought is scattered or diffused, moving on many levels, seizing upon the essence of a vast variety of experiences and objects for what they are in themselves, without, consciously or unconsciously, seeking to fit them into, or exclude them from, any one unchanging, all-embracing, sometimes self-contradictory and incomplete, at times fanatical, unitary inner vision. The first kind of intellectual and artistic personality belongs to the hedgehogs, the second to the foxes; and without insisting on a rigid classification, we may, without too much fear of contradiction, say that, in this sense, Dante belongs to the first category, Shakespeare to the second; Plato, Lucretius, Pascal, Hegel, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Ibsen, Proust are, in varying degrees, hedgehogs; Herodotus, Aristotle, Montaigne, Erasmus, Molière, Goethe, Pushkin, Balzac, Joyce are foxes.

Of course, like all over-simple classifications of this type, the dichotomy becomes, if pressed, artificial, scholastic and ultimately

absurd. But if it is not an aid to serious criticism, neither should it be rejected as being merely superficial or frivolous: like all distinctions which embody any degree of truth, it offers a point of view from which to look and compare, a starting-point for genuine investigation. Thus we have no doubt about the violence of the contrast between Pushkin and Dostoevsky; and Dostoevsky's celebrated speech about Pushkin has, for all its eloquence and depth of feeling, seldom been considered by any perceptive reader to cast light on the genius of Pushkin, but rather on that of Dostoevsky himself, precisely because it perversely represents Pushkin – an arch-fox, the greatest in the nineteenth century – as being similar to Dostoevsky, who is nothing if not a hedgehog; and thereby transforms, indeed distorts, Pushkin into a dedicated prophet, a bearer of a single, universal message which was indeed the centre of Dostoevsky's own universe, but exceedingly remote from the many varied provinces of Pushkin's protean genius. Indeed, it would not be absurd to say that Russian literature is spanned by these gigantic figures – at one pole Pushkin, at the other Dostoevsky; and that the characteristics of other Russian writers can, by those who find it useful or enjoyable to ask that kind of question, to some degree be determined in relation to these great opposites. To ask of Gogol, Turgenev, Chekhov, Blok how they stand in relation to Pushkin and to Dostoevsky leads – or, at any rate, has led – to fruitful and illuminating criticism. But when we come to Count Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy, and ask this of him – ask whether he belongs to the first category or the second, whether he is a monist or a pluralist, whether his vision is of one or of many, whether he is of a single substance or compounded of heterogeneous elements – there is no clear or immediate answer.

The question does not, somehow, seem wholly appropriate; it seems to breed more darkness than it dispels. Yet it is not lack of information that makes us pause: Tolstoy has told us more about himself and his views and attitudes than any other Russian, more, almost, than any other European, writer. Nor can his art be called obscure in any normal sense: his universe has no dark corners, his stories are luminous with the light of day; he has explained them and himself, and argued about them and the methods by which they are constructed, more articulately and with greater force and sanity and lucidity than any other writer. Is he a fox or a hedgehog? What are we to say? Why is the answer so curiously difficult to find? Does he resemble Shakespeare or Pushkin more than Dante or Dostoevsky? Or is he wholly unlike either, and is the question therefore unanswerable because it is absurd? What is the mysterious obstacle with which our enquiry seems faced?

I do not propose in this essay to formulate a reply to this question, since this would involve nothing less than a critical examination of the art and thought of Tolstoy as a whole. I shall confine myself to suggesting that the difficulty may be, at least in part, due to the fact that Tolstoy was himself not unaware of the problem, and did his best to falsify the answer. The hypothesis I wish to offer is that Tolstoy was by nature a fox, but believed in being a hedgehog; that his gifts and achievement are one thing, and his beliefs, and consequently his interpretation of his own achievement, another; and that consequently his ideals have led him, and those whom his genius for persuasion has taken in, into a systematic misinterpretation of what he and others were doing or should be doing. No one can complain that he has left his readers in any doubt as to what he thought about this topic: his

views on this subject permeate all his discursive writings – diaries, recorded *obiter dicta*, autobiographical essays and stories, social and religious tracts, literary criticism, letters to private and public correspondents. But the conflict between what he was and what he believed emerges nowhere so clearly as in his view of history, to which some of his most brilliant and most paradoxical pages are devoted. This essay is an attempt to deal with his historical doctrines, and to consider both his motives for holding the views he holds and some of their probable sources. In short, it is an attempt to take Tolstoy's attitude to history as seriously as he himself meant his readers to take it, although for a somewhat different reason – for the light it casts on a single man of genius rather than on the fate of all mankind.

II

Tolstoy's philosophy of history has, on the whole, not obtained the attention which it deserves, whether as an intrinsically interesting view or as an occurrence in the history of ideas, or even as an element in the development of Tolstoy himself.[1] Those who have treated Tolstoy primarily as a novelist have at times looked upon the historical and philosophical passages scattered through *War and Peace* as so much perverse interruption of the narrative, as a regrettable liability to irrelevant digression characteristic

[1] For the purposes of this essay I propose to confine myself almost entirely to the explicit philosophy of history contained in *War and Peace*, and to ignore, for example, *Sevastopol Stories*, *The Cossacks*, the fragments of the unpublished novel on the Decembrists, and Tolstoy's own scattered reflections on this subject except in so far as they bear on views expressed in *War and Peace*.

of this great, but excessively opinionated, writer, a lopsided, home-made metaphysic of small or no intrinsic interest, deeply inartistic and thoroughly foreign to the purpose and structure of the work of art as a whole. Turgenev, who found Tolstoy's personality and art antipathetic, although in later years he freely and generously acknowledged his genius as a writer, led the attack. In letters to Pavel Annenkov,[1] Turgenev speaks of Tolstoy's 'charlatanism', of his historical disquisitions as 'farcical', as 'trickery' which takes in the unwary, injected by an 'autodidact' into his work as an inadequate substitute for genuine knowledge. He hastens to add that Tolstoy does, of course, make up for this by his marvellous artistic genius; and then accuses him of inventing 'a system which seems to solve everything very simply; as, for example, historical fatalism: he mounts his hobby-horse and is off! Only when he touches earth does he, like Antaeus, recover his true strength.'[2] The same note is sounded in the celebrated and touching invocation sent by Turgenev from his deathbed to his old friend and enemy, begging him to cast away his prophet's mantle and return to his true vocation – that of 'the great writer of the Russian land'.[3] Flaubert, despite his 'shouts of admiration' over passages of *War and Peace*, is equally horrified: 'il se répète et il philosophise',[4] he writes in a letter to Turgenev, who had sent him the French version of the masterpiece then almost unknown outside Russia. In the same strain Belinsky's intimate friend and

[1] Letters of 14 February and 13 April 1868: I. S. Turgenev, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem* (Moscow/Leningrad, 1960–8), *Pis'ma*, vii 64, 122.

[2] ibid. 122.

[3] Letter to Tolstoy of 29 June 1883, ibid. xiii 180.

[4] 'He repeats himself and he philosophises.' Letter of 21 January 1880, Gustave Flaubert, *Lettres inédites à Tourguéneff*, ed. Gérard Gailly (Monaco, 1946), 218 ('cris d'admiration' ibid.).

correspondent, the philosophical tea-merchant Vasily Botkin, who was well disposed to Tolstoy, writes to the poet Afanasy Fet that literary specialists

> find that the intellectual element of the novel is very weak, the philosophy of history is trivial and superficial, the denial of the decisive influence of individual personalities on events is nothing but a lot of mystical subtlety, but apart from this the artistic gift of the author is beyond dispute – yesterday I gave a dinner and Tyutchev was here, and I am repeating what everybody said.[1]

Contemporary historians and military specialists, at least one of whom had himself fought in 1812, indignantly complained of inaccuracies of fact;[2] and since then damning evidence has been adduced of falsification of historical detail by the author of *War and Peace*,[3] done apparently with deliberate intent, in full knowledge of the available original sources and in the known absence of any counter-evidence – falsification perpetrated, it seems, in the interests not so much of an artistic as of an 'ideological' purpose.

This consensus of historical and aesthetic criticism seems to

[1] A. A. Fet, *Moi vospominaniya* (Moscow, 1890), part 2, 175.

[2] See the severe strictures of A. Vitmer, a very respectable military historian, in his *1812 god v 'Voine i mire': po povodu istoricheskikh ukazanii IV toma 'Voiny i mira' grafa L. N. Tolstogo* (St Petersburg, 1869), and the tones of mounting indignation in the contemporary critical notices of S. Navalikhin ('Izyashchnyi romanist i ego izyashchnye kritiki', *Delo* 1868 no. 6, 'Sovremennoe obozrenie', 1–28), A. S. Norov ('"Voina i mir" (1805–1812) s istoricheskoi tochki zreniya i po vospominaniyam sovremennikov (po povodu sochineniya grafa L. N. Tolstogo: "Voina i mir")', *Voennyi sbornik* 1868 no. 11, 189–246) and A. P. Pyatkovsky ('Istoricheskaya epokha v romane gr. L. N. Tolstogo', *Nedelya* 1868: no. 22, cols 698–704; no. 23, cols 713–17; no. 26, cols 817–28). The first served in the campaign of 1812 and, despite some errors of fact, makes criticisms of substance. The last two are, as literary critics, almost worthless, but they seem to have taken the trouble to verify some of the relevant facts.

[3] See Viktor Shklovsky, *Mater'yal i stil' v romane L'va Tolstogo 'Voina i mir'* (Moscow, 1928), *passim*, but particularly chapters 7 and 8. See also 47 below.

have set the tone for nearly all later appraisals of the 'ideological' content of *War and Peace*. Shelgunov at least honoured it with a direct attack for its social quietism, which he called 'the philosophy of the swamp';[1] others for the most part either politely ignored it, or treated it as a characteristic aberration which they put down to a combination of the well-known Russian tendency to preach (and thereby ruin works of art) with the half-baked infatuation with general ideas characteristic of young intellectuals in countries remote from centres of civilisation. 'It is fortunate for us that the author is a better artist than thinker,' said the critic Nikolay Akhsharumov,[2] and for more than three-quarters of a century this sentiment has been echoed by most of the critics of Tolstoy, both Russian and foreign, both pre-Revolutionary and Soviet, both 'reactionary' and 'progressive', by most of those who look on him primarily as a writer and an artist, and of those to whom he is a prophet and a teacher, or a martyr, or a social influence, or a sociological or psychological 'case'. Tolstoy's theory of history is of equally little interest to Vogüé and Merezhkovsky, to Stefan Zweig and Percy Lubbock, to Biryukov and E. J. Simmons, not to speak of lesser men. Historians of Russian thought[3] tend to label this aspect of Tolstoy as 'fatalism', and move on to the more interesting historical theories of Leont′ev or Danilevsky. Critics endowed with more caution or humility do not go as far as this,

[1] N. V. Shelgunov, 'Filosofiya zastoya' (review of *War and Peace*), *Delo* 1870 no. 1, 'Sovremennoe obozrenie', 1–29.

[2] [More literally: 'Fortunately, the author […] is a poet and an artist ten thousand times more than a philosopher.'] N. D. Akhsharumov, *Voina i mir, sochinenie grafa L. N. Tolstogo, chasti 1–4: razbor* (St Petersburg, 1868), 40.

[3] e.g. Professors Il′in, Yakovenko, Zenkovsky and others. [When invited to provide initials or forenames (see index), and to identify the specific works in question, IB responded that their omission was deliberate. Yakovenko did not hold a professorship.]

but treat the 'philosophy' with nervous respect; even Derrick Leon, who treats Tolstoy's views of this period with greater care than the majority of his biographers, after giving a painstaking account of Tolstoy's reflections on the forces which dominate history, particularly of the second section of the long epilogue which follows the end of the narrative portion of *War and Peace*, proceeds to follow Aylmer Maude in making no attempt either to assess the theory or to relate it to the rest of Tolstoy's life or thought; and even so much as this is almost unique.[1] Those, again, who are mainly interested in Tolstoy as a prophet and a teacher concentrate on the later doctrines of the master, held after his conversion, when he had ceased to regard himself primarily as a writer and had established himself as a teacher of mankind, an object of veneration and pilgrimage. Tolstoy's life is normally represented as falling into two distinct parts: first comes the author of immortal masterpieces, later the prophet of personal and social regeneration; first the aristocratic writer, the difficult, somewhat unapproachable, troubled novelist of genius, then

[1] Honourable exceptions to this are provided by the writings of the Russian writers N. I. Kareev and B. M. Eikhenbaum, as well as those of the French scholars E. Haumant and Albert Sorel. Of monographs devoted to this subject I know of only two of any worth. The first, 'Filosofiya istorii L. N. Tolstogo', by V. N. Pertsev, in '*Voina i mir*': *sbornik*, ed. V. P. Obninsky and T. I. Polner (Moscow, 1912), 129–53, after taking Tolstoy mildly to task for obscurities, exaggerations and inconsistencies, swiftly retreats into innocuous generalities. The other, 'Filosofiya istorii v romane L. N. Tolstogo, "Voina i mir"', by M. M. Rubinshtein, in *Russkaya mysl'*, July 1911, section 2, 78–103, is much more laboured, but in the end seems to me to establish nothing at all. Very different is Arnold Bennett's judgement, of which I learnt since writing this: 'The last part of the Epilogue is full of good ideas the johnny can't work out. And of course, in the phrase of critics, would have been better left out. So it would; only Tolstoy couldn't leave it out. It was what he wrote the book for.' *The Journals of Arnold Bennett*, ed. Newman Flower (London etc., 1932–3), ii (1911–21) 62. As for the inevitable efforts to relate Tolstoy's historical views to those of various latter-day Marxists – Kautsky, Lenin, Stalin etc. – they belong to the curiosities of politics or theology rather than to those of literature.

the sage – dogmatic, perverse, exaggerated, but wielding a vast influence, particularly in his own country – a world institution of unique importance. From time to time attempts are made to trace his later period to its roots in his earlier phase, which is felt to be full of presentiments of the later life of self-renunciation; it is this later period which is regarded as important; there are philosophical, theological, ethical, psychological, political, economic studies of the later Tolstoy in all his aspects.

And yet there is surely a paradox here. Tolstoy's interest in history and the problem of historical truth was passionate, almost obsessive, both before and during the writing of *War and Peace*. No one who reads his journals and letters, or indeed *War and Peace* itself, can doubt that the author himself, at any rate, regarded this problem as the heart of the entire matter – the central issue round which the novel is built. 'Charlatanism', 'superficiality', 'intellectual feebleness' – surely Tolstoy is the last writer to whom these epithets seem applicable: bias, perversity, arrogance, perhaps; self-deception, lack of restraint, possibly; moral or spiritual inadequacy – of this he was better aware than his enemies; but failure of intellect, lack of critical power, a tendency to emptiness, liability to ride off on some patently absurd, superficial doctrine to the detriment of realistic description or analysis of life, infatuation with some fashionable theory which Botkin or Fet can easily see through, although Tolstoy, alas, cannot – these charges seem grotesquely unplausible. No man in his senses, during this century at any rate, would ever dream of denying Tolstoy's intellectual power, his appalling capacity to penetrate any conventional disguise, that corrosive scepticism in virtue of which Prince Vyazemsky tarred *War and Peace* with

the brush of *netovshchina* (negativism)[1] – an early version of that nihilism which Vogüé and Albert Sorel later quite naturally attribute to him. Something is surely amiss here: Tolstoy's violently unhistorical and indeed anti-historical rejection of all efforts to explain or justify human action or character in terms of social or individual growth, or 'roots' in the past; this side by side with an absorbed and lifelong interest in history, leading to artistic and philosophical results which provoked such queerly disparaging comments from ordinarily sane and sympathetic critics – surely there is something here which deserves attention.

III

Tolstoy's interest in history began early in his life. It seems to have arisen not from interest in the past as such, but from the desire to penetrate to first causes, to understand how and why things happen as they do and not otherwise, from discontent with those current explanations which do not explain, and leave the mind dissatisfied, from a tendency to doubt and place under suspicion and, if need be, reject whatever does not fully answer the question, to go to the root of every matter, at whatever cost. This remained Tolstoy's attitude throughout his entire life, and is scarcely a symptom either of 'trickery' or of 'superficiality'. With it went an incurable love of the concrete, the empirical, the verifiable, and an instinctive distrust of the abstract, the impalpable, the supernatural – in short an early tendency to

[1] P. A. Vyazemsky, 'Vospominaniya o 1812 god', *Russkii arkhiv* 7 (1869), columns 181–92, 01–016, esp. 185–7.

a scientific and positivist approach, unfriendly to romanticism, abstract formulations, metaphysics. Always and in every situation he looked for 'hard' facts – for what could be grasped and verified by the normal intellect, uncorrupted by intricate theories divorced from tangible realities, or by other-worldly mysteries, theological, poetical and metaphysical alike. He was tormented by the ultimate problems which face young men in every generation, about good and evil, the origin and purpose of the universe and its inhabitants, the causes of all that happens; but the answers provided by theologians and metaphysicians struck him as absurd, if only because of the words in which they were formulated – words which bore no apparent reference to the everyday world of ordinary common sense, to which he clung obstinately, even before he became aware of what he was doing, as being alone real. History, only history, only the sum of the concrete events in time and space – the sum of the actual experience of actual men and women in their relation to one another and to an actual three-dimensional, empirically experienced, physical environment – this alone contained the truth, the material out of which genuine answers – answers needing for their apprehension no special sense or faculties which normal human beings did not possess – might be constructed.

This, of course, was the spirit of empirical enquiry which animated the great anti-theological and anti-metaphysical thinkers of the eighteenth century, and Tolstoy's realism and inability to be taken in by shadows made him their natural disciple before he had learnt of their doctrines. Like M. Jourdain, he spoke prose long before he knew it, and remained an enemy of transcendentalism from the beginning to the end of his life. He grew

up during the heyday of the Hegelian philosophy, which sought to explain all things in terms of historical development, but conceived this process as being ultimately not susceptible to the methods of empirical investigation. The historicism of his time doubtless influenced the young Tolstoy, as it did all enquiring persons of his time; but the metaphysical content he rejected instinctively, and in one of his letters he described Hegel's writings as unintelligible gibberish interspersed with platitudes. History alone – the sum of empirically discoverable data – held the key to the mystery of why what happened happened as it did and not otherwise; and only history, consequently, could throw light on the fundamental ethical problems which obsessed him as they did every Russian thinker in the nineteenth century. What is to be done? How should one live? Why are we here? What must we be and do? The study of historical connections and the demand for empirical answers to these *proklyatye voprosy*[1] became fused into one in Tolstoy's mind, as his early diaries and letters show very vividly.

In his early diaries we find references to his attempts to compare Catherine the Great's *Nakaz*[2] with the passages in

[1] 'Accursed questions' – a phrase which became a cliché in nineteenth-century Russia for those central moral and social issues of which every honest man, in particular every writer, must sooner or later become aware, and then be faced with the choice of either entering the struggle or turning his back upon his fellow men, conscious of his responsibility for what he was doing. [Although 'voprosy' was widely used by the 1830s to refer to these issues, it seems that the specific phrase 'proklyatye voprosy' was coined in 1858 by Mikhail L. Mikhailov when he used it to render 'die verdammten Fragen' in his translation of Heine's poem 'Zum Lazarus' (1853/4): see 'Stikhotvoreniya Geine', *Sovremennik* 1858 no. 3, 125; and *Heinrich Heines Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Oskar Walzel (Leipzig, 1911–20), iii 225. Alternatively, Mikhailov may have been capitalising on the fact that an existing Russian expression fitted Heine's words like a glove, but I have not yet seen an earlier published use of it. Ed.]

[2] Instructions to her legislative experts.

Montesquieu on which she professed to have founded it.[1] He reads Hume and Thiers[2] as well as Rousseau, Sterne and Dickens.[3] He is obsessed by the thought that philosophical principles can be understood only in their concrete expression in history.[4] 'To write the genuine history of present-day Europe: there is an aim for the whole of one's life.'[5] Or again: 'The leaves of a tree delight us more than the roots',[6] with the implication that this is nevertheless a superficial view of the world. But side by side with this there is the beginning of an acute sense of disappointment, a feeling that history, as it is written by historians, makes claims which it cannot satisfy, because like metaphysical philosophy it pretends to be something it is not – namely a science capable of arriving at conclusions which are certain. Since men cannot solve philosophical questions by the principles of reason, they try to do so historically. But history is 'one of the most backward of sciences – a science which has lost its proper aim'. The reason for this is that history will not, because it cannot, solve the great questions which have tormented men in every generation. In the course of seeking to answer these questions men accumulate a knowledge of facts as they succeed each other in time: but this is a mere by-product, a kind of 'side issue' which – and this is a mistake – is studied as an end in itself. Again, 'history will

[1] L. N. Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow/Leningrad, 1928–64) [hereafter T] xlvi 4–28 (18–26 March 1847).

[2] ibid. – Hume: 113, 114, 117, 123–4, 127 (11–27 June 1852); Thiers: 97, 124 (20 March, 17 June 1854).

[3] ibid. – Rousseau: 126, 127, 130, 132–4, 167, 176 (24 June 1852 to 28 September 1853), 249 ('Journal of daily tasks', 3 March 1847); Sterne: 82 (10 August 1851), 110 (14 April 1852); Dickens: 140 (1 September 1852).

[4] ibid. 123 (11 June 1852). [5] ibid. 141–2 (22 September 1852).

[6] 'Filosoficheskie zamechaniya na rechi Zh. Zh. Russo' (1847), T i 222, where the next two quotations also appear.

never reveal to us what connections there are, and at what times, between science, art and morality, between good and evil, religion and the civic virtues. What it *will* tell us (and that incorrectly) is where the Huns came from, where they lived, who laid the foundations of their power, etc.' According to his friend Nazar′ev, Tolstoy said to him in the winter of 1846: 'History […] is nothing but a collection of fables and useless trifles, cluttered up with a mass of unnecessary figures and proper names. The death of Igor, the snake which bit Oleg – what is all this but old wives' tales? Who wants to know that Ivan's second marriage, to Temryuk's daughter, occurred on 21 August 1562, whereas his fourth, to Anna Alekseevna Koltovskaya, occurred in 1572 […]?'[1]

History does not reveal causes; it presents only a blank succession of unexplained events. 'Everything is forced into a standard mould invented by the historian. Tsar Ivan the Terrible, on whom Professor Ivanov is lecturing at the moment, after 1560 suddenly becomes transformed from a wise and virtuous man into a mad and cruel tyrant. How? Why? – You mustn't even ask …'.[2] And half a century later, in 1908, he declares to Gusev: 'History would be an excellent thing if only it were true.'[3] The proposition that history could (and should) be made scientific is a commonplace in the nineteenth century; but the number of those who interpreted the term 'science' as meaning natural science, and then asked themselves whether history could be transformed into a science in this specific sense, is not great. The

[1] V. N. Nazar′ev, 'Lyudi bylogo vremeni', *L. N. Tolstoi v vospominaniyakh sovremennikov* (Moscow, 1955), i 52.

[2] ibid. 52–3.

[3] N. N. Gusev, *Dva goda s L. N. Tolstym* […] (Moscow, 1973), 188.

most uncompromising policy was that of Auguste Comte, who, following his master Saint-Simon, tried to turn history into sociology, with what fantastic consequences we need not here relate. Karl Marx was perhaps, of all thinkers, the man who took this programme most seriously; and made the bravest, if one of the least successful, attempts to discover general laws which govern historical evolution, conceived on the then alluring analogy of biology and anatomy, so triumphantly transformed by Darwin's new evolutionary theories. Like Marx (of whom at the time of writing *War and Peace* he apparently knew nothing), Tolstoy saw clearly that if history was a science, it must be possible to discover and formulate a set of true laws of history which, in conjunction with the data of empirical observation, would make prediction of the future (and 'retrodiction' of the past) as feasible as it had become in, say, geology or astronomy. But he saw more clearly than Marx and his followers that this had, in fact, not been achieved, and said so with his usual dogmatic candour, and reinforced his thesis with arguments designed to show that the prospect of achieving this goal was non-existent; and clinched the matter by observing that the fulfilment of this scientific hope would end human life as we knew it: 'If we allow that human life can be ruled by reason, the possibility of life [i.e. as a spontaneous activity involving consciousness of free will] is destroyed.'[1]

But what oppressed Tolstoy was not merely the 'unscientific' nature of history – that no matter how scrupulous the technique

[1] *War and Peace*, epilogue, part 1, chapter 1 (end), T xii 238; Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, trans. Louise and Aylmer Maude (London, 1942: Macmillan) [hereafter W] 1248. [Because the Maudes' subdivisions of the text vary from edition to edition of their translation, and also differ from those in T, references to W are given by page alone.]

of historical research might be, no dependable laws could be discovered of the kind required even by the most undeveloped natural sciences. He further thought that he could not justify to himself the apparently arbitrary selection of material, and the no less arbitrary distribution of emphasis, to which all historical writing seemed to be doomed. He complains that while the factors which determine the life of mankind are very various, historians select from them only some single aspect, say the political or the economic, and represent it as primary, as the efficient cause of social change; but then, what of religion, what of 'spiritual' factors, and the many other aspects – a literally countless multiplicity – with which all events are endowed? How can we escape the conclusion that the histories which exist represent what Tolstoy declares to be 'perhaps only 0.001 per cent of the elements which actually constitute the real history of peoples'? History, as it is normally written, usually represents 'political' – public – events as the most important, while spiritual – 'inner' – events are largely forgotten; yet prima facie it is they – the 'inner' events – that are the most real, the most immediate experience of human beings; they, and only they, are what life, in the last analysis, is made of; hence the routine political historians are talking shallow nonsense.

Throughout the 1850s Tolstoy was obsessed by the desire to write a historical novel, one of his principal aims being to contrast the 'real' texture of life, both of individuals and of communities, with the 'unreal' picture presented by historians. Again and again in the pages of *War and Peace* we get a sharp juxtaposition of 'reality' – what 'really' occurred – with the distorting medium through which it will later be presented in the official accounts

offered to the public, and indeed be recollected by the actors themselves – the original memories having now been touched up by their own treacherous (inevitably treacherous because automatically rationalising and formalising) minds. Tolstoy is perpetually placing the heroes of *War and Peace* in situations where this becomes particularly evident.

Nikolay Rostov at the battle of Austerlitz sees the great soldier Prince Bagration riding up with his suite towards the village of Schöngrabern, whence the enemy is advancing; neither he nor his staff, nor the officers who gallop up to him with messages, nor anyone else, is, or can be, aware of what exactly is happening, nor where, nor why; nor is the chaos of the battle in any way made clearer either in fact or in the minds of the Russian officers by the appearance of Bagration. Nevertheless his arrival puts heart into his subordinates; his courage, his calm, his mere presence create the illusion of which he is himself the first victim, namely, that what is happening is somehow connected with *his* skill, *his* plans, that it is *his* authority that is in some way directing the course of the battle; and this, in its turn, has a marked effect on the general morale around him. The dispatches which will duly be written later will inevitably ascribe every act and event on the Russian side to him and his dispositions; the credit or discredit, the victory or the defeat, will belong to him, although it is clear to everyone that he will have had less to do with the conduct and outcome of the battle than the humble, unknown soldiers who do at least perform whatever actual fighting is done, that is, shoot at each other, wound, kill, advance, retreat and so on.

Prince Andrey, too, knows this, most clearly at Borodino, where he is mortally wounded. He begins to understand the

truth earlier, during the period when he is making efforts to meet the 'important' persons who seem to be guiding the destinies of Russia; he then gradually becomes convinced that Alexander's principal adviser, the famous reformer Speransky, and his friends, and indeed Alexander himself, are systematically deluding themselves when they suppose their activities, their words, memoranda, rescripts, resolutions, laws and so forth, to be the motive factors which cause historical change and determine the destinies of men and nations; whereas in fact they are nothing: only so much self-important milling in the void. And so Tolstoy arrives at one of his celebrated paradoxes: the higher soldiers or statesmen are in the pyramid of authority, the farther they must be from its base, which consists of those ordinary men and women whose lives are the actual stuff of history; and, consequently, the smaller the effect of the words and acts of such remote personages, despite all their theoretical authority, upon that history.

In a famous passage dealing with the state of Moscow in 1812 Tolstoy observes that from the heroic achievements of Russia after the burning of Moscow one might infer that its inhabitants were absorbed entirely in acts of self-sacrifice – in saving their country or in lamenting its destruction, in heroism, martyrdom, despair – but that in fact this was not so. People were preoccupied by personal interests. Those who went about their ordinary business without feeling heroic emotions or thinking that they were actors upon the well-lighted stage of history were the most useful to their country and community, while those who tried to grasp the general course of events and wanted to take part in history, those who performed acts of incredible self-sacrifice or

heroism, and participated in great events, were the most useless. Worst of all, in Tolstoy's eyes, were those unceasing talkers who accused one another of the kind of thing 'for which no one could in fact have been responsible'; and this because 'nowhere is the commandment not to taste of the fruit of the tree of knowledge so clearly written as in the course of history. Only unconscious activity bears fruit, and the individual who plays a part in historical events never understands their significance. If he attempts to understand them, he is struck with sterility.'[1] To try to 'understand' anything by rational means is to make sure of failure. Pierre Bezukhov wanders about, 'lost' on the battlefield of Borodino, and looks for something which he imagines as a kind of set piece: a battle as depicted by the historians or the painters. But he finds only the ordinary confusion of individual human beings haphazardly attending to this or that human want.[2] That, at any rate, is concrete, uncontaminated by theories and abstractions; and Pierre is therefore closer to the truth about the course of events – at least as seen by men – than those who believe them to obey a discoverable set of laws or rules. Pierre sees only a succession of 'accidents' whose origins and consequences are, by and large, untraceable and unpredictable; only loosely strung groups of events forming an ever-varying pattern, following no discernible order. Any claim to perceive patterns susceptible to 'scientific' formulae must be mendacious.

Tolstoy's bitterest taunts, his most corrosive irony, are reserved for those who pose as official specialists in managing human

[1] ibid. vol. 4, part 1, chapter 4 (beginning), T xii 14; W 1039–40.

[2] On the connection of this with Stendhal's *La Chartreuse de Parme* see *Paul Boyer (1864–1949) chez Tolstoï: entretiens à Iasnaïa Poliana* (Paris, 1950), 40.

affairs, in this case the Western military theorists, a General Pfuel, or Generals Bennigsen and Paulucci, who are all shown talking equal nonsense at the Council of Drissa, whether they defend a given strategic or tactical theory or oppose it; these men must be impostors, since no theories can possibly fit the immense variety of possible human behaviour, the vast multiplicity of minute, undiscoverable causes and effects which form that interplay of men and nature which history purports to record. Those who affect to be able to contract this infinite multiplicity within their 'scientific' laws must be either deliberate charlatans or blind leaders of the blind. The harshest judgement is accordingly reserved for the master theorist himself, the great Napoleon, who acts upon, and has hypnotised others into believing, the assumption that he understands and controls events by his superior intellect, or by flashes of intuition, or by otherwise succeeding in answering correctly the problems posed by history. The greater the claim the greater the lie: Napoleon is consequently the most pitiable, the most contemptible of all the actors in the great tragedy.

This, then, is the great illusion which Tolstoy sets himself to expose: that individuals can, by the use of their own resources, understand and control the course of events. Those who believe this turn out to be dreadfully mistaken. And side by side with these public faces – these hollow men, half self-deluded, half aware of being fraudulent, talking, writing desperately and aimlessly in order to keep up appearances and avoid the bleak truths – side by side with all this elaborate machinery for concealing the spectacle of human impotence and irrelevance and blindness lies the real world, the stream of life which men understand, the attending to the ordinary details of daily existence. When

Tolstoy contrasts this real life – the actual, everyday, 'live' experience of individuals – with the panoramic view conjured up by historians, it is clear to him which is real, and which is a coherent, sometimes elegantly contrived, but always fictitious construction. Utterly unlike her as he is in almost every other respect, Tolstoy is, perhaps, the first to propound the celebrated accusation which Virginia Woolf half a century later levelled against the public prophets of her own generation – Shaw and Wells and Arnold Bennett – as blind materialists who did not begin to understand what it is that life truly consists of, who mistook its outer accidents, the unimportant aspects which lie outside the individual soul – the so-called social, economic, political realities – for that which alone is genuine, the individual experience, the specific relation of individuals to one another, the colours, smells, tastes, sounds and movements, the jealousies, loves, hatreds, passions, the rare flashes of insight, the transforming moments, the ordinary day-to-day succession of private data which constitute all there is – which are reality.

What, then, is the historian's task? To describe the ultimate data of subjective experience – the personal lives lived by men, the 'thoughts, knowledge, poetry, music, love, friendship, hates, passions'[1] of which, for Tolstoy, 'real' life is compounded, and only that? That was the task to which Turgenev was perpetually calling Tolstoy – him and all writers, but him in particular, because therein lay his true genius, his destiny as a great Russian writer; and this he rejected with violent indignation even during his middle years, before the final religious phase. For this was

[1] *War and Peace*, vol. 2, part 3, chapter 1, T x 151; W 453.

not to give the answer to the question of what there is, and why and how it comes to be and passes away, but to turn one's back upon it altogether, and stifle one's desire to discover how men live in society, and how they are affected by one another and by their environment, and to what end. This kind of artistic purism – preached in his day by Flaubert – this kind of preoccupation with the analysis and description of the experience and the relationships and problems and inner lives of individuals (later advocated and practised by Gide and the writers he influenced, both in France and in England) struck him as both trivial and false. He had no doubt about his own superlative skill in this very art, or that it was precisely this for which he was admired; and he condemned it absolutely.

In a letter written while he was working on *War and Peace* he said with bitterness that he had no doubt that what the public would like best would be his scenes of social and personal life, his ladies and his gentlemen, with their petty intrigues and entertaining conversations and marvellously described small idiosyncrasies.[1] But these are the trivial 'flowers' of life, not the 'roots'. Tolstoy's purpose is the discovery of the truth, and therefore he must know what history consists of, and recreate only that. History is plainly not a science, and sociology, which pretends that it is, is a fraud; no genuine laws of history have been discovered, and the concepts in current use – 'cause', 'accident', 'genius' – explain nothing: they are merely thin disguises

[1] Cf. the profession of faith in his celebrated – and militantly moralistic – introduction to an edition of Maupassant, whose genius, despite everything, he admires: 'Predislovie k sochineniyam Gyui de Mopassana' (1893–4), T xxx 3–24. He thinks much more poorly of Bernard Shaw, whose social rhetoric he calls stale and platitudinous (diary entry for 31 January 1908, T lvi 97–8).

for ignorance. Why do the events the totality of which we call history occur as they do? Some historians attribute events to the acts of individuals, but this is no answer: for they do not explain how these acts 'cause' the events they are alleged to 'cause' or 'originate'.

There is a passage of savage irony intended by Tolstoy to parody the average school histories of his time, sufficiently typical to be worth reproducing in full:

> Louis XIV was a very proud and self-confident man. He had such and such mistresses, and such and such ministers, and he governed France badly. The heirs of Louis XIV were also weak men, and also governed France badly. They also had such and such favourites and such and such mistresses. Besides which, certain persons were at this time writing books. By the end of the eighteenth century there gathered in Paris two dozen or so persons who started saying that all men were free and equal. Because of this in the whole of France people began to slaughter and drown each other. These people killed the king and a good many others. At this time there was a man of genius in France – Napoleon. He conquered everyone everywhere, i.e. killed a great many people because he was a great genius; and, for some reason, he went off to kill Africans, and killed them so well, and was so clever and cunning, that, having arrived in France, he ordered everyone to obey him, which they did. Having made himself Emperor he again went to kill masses of people in Italy, Austria and Prussia. And there too he killed a great many. Now in Russia there was the Emperor Alexander, who decided to re-establish order in Europe, and therefore fought wars with Napoleon. But

in the year '07 he suddenly made friends with him, and in the year '11 quarrelled with him again, and they both again began to kill a great many people. And Napoleon brought six hundred thousand men to Russia and conquered Moscow. But then he suddenly ran away from Moscow, and then the Emperor Alexander, aided by the advice of Stein and others, united Europe to raise an army against the disturber of her peace. All Napoleon's allies suddenly became his enemies; and this army marched against Napoleon, who had gathered new forces. The allies conquered Napoleon, entered Paris, forced Napoleon to renounce the throne, and sent him to the island of Elba, without, however, depriving him of the title of Emperor, and showing him all respect, in spite of the fact that five years before, and a year after, everyone considered him a brigand and beyond the law. Thereupon Louis XVIII, who until then had been an object of mere ridicule to both Frenchmen and the allies, began to reign. As for Napoleon, after shedding tears before the Old Guard, he gave up his throne, and went into exile. Then astute statesmen and diplomats, in particular Talleyrand, who had managed to sit down before anyone else in the famous armchair[1] and thereby to extend the frontiers of France, talked in Vienna, and by means of such talk made peoples happy or unhappy. Suddenly the diplomats and monarchs almost came to blows. They were almost ready to order their troops once again to kill each other; but at this moment Napoleon arrived in France with a battalion, and the French, who hated him, all immediately submitted to him. But this annoyed the allied monarchs very much and they again went to war with the French. And the ge-

[1] Empire chairs of a certain shape are to this day called 'Talleyrand armchairs' in Russia.

> nius Napoleon was defeated and taken to the island of St Helena, having suddenly been discovered to be an outlaw. Whereupon the exile, parted from his dear ones and his beloved France, died a slow death on a rock, and bequeathed his great deeds to posterity. As for Europe, a reaction occurred there, and all the princes began to treat their peoples badly once again.

Tolstoy continues:

> The new history is like a deaf man replying to questions which nobody puts to him. [… T]he primary question […] is, what power is it that moves the destinies of peoples? […] History seems to presuppose that this power can be taken for granted, and is familiar to everyone, but, in spite of every wish to admit that this power is familiar to us, anyone who has read a great many historical works cannot help doubting whether this power, which different historians understand in different ways, is in fact so completely familiar to everyone.[1]

He goes on to say that political historians who write in this way explain nothing: they merely attribute events to the 'power' which important individuals are said to exercise over others, but do not tell us what the term 'power' means; and yet this is the heart of the problem. The problem of historical movement is directly connected with the 'power' exercised by some men over others: but what is 'power'? How does one acquire it? Can it be transferred by one man to another? Surely it is not merely physical strength that is meant? Nor moral strength? Did Napoleon possess either of these?

[1] *War and Peace*, epilogue, part 2, chapter 1, T xii 298–300; W 1307–9.

General, as opposed to national, historians seem to Tolstoy merely to extend this category without elucidating it: instead of one country or nation, many are introduced, but the spectacle of the interplay of mysterious 'forces' makes it no clearer why some men or nations obey others, why wars are made, victories won, why innocent men who believe that murder is wicked kill one another with enthusiasm and pride, and are glorified for so doing; why great movements of human masses occur, sometimes from east to west, sometimes the other way. Tolstoy is particularly irritated by references to the dominant influence of great men or of ideas. Great men, we are told, are typical of the movements of their age: hence study of their characters 'explains' such movements. Do the characters of Diderot or Beaumarchais 'explain' the advance of the West upon the East? Do the letters of Ivan the Terrible to Prince Kurbsky 'explain' Russian expansion westward? But historians of culture do no better, for they merely add as an extra factor something called the 'force' of ideas or of books, although we still have no notion of what is meant by words like 'force'. But why should Napoleon, or Mme de Staël or Baron Stein or Tsar Alexander, or all of these, plus the *Contrat social*, 'cause' Frenchmen to behead or to drown each other? Why is this called 'explanation'? As for the importance which historians of culture attach to ideas, doubtless all men are liable to exaggerate the importance of their own wares: ideas are the commodity in which intellectuals deal – to a cobbler there's nothing like leather – the professors merely tend to magnify their personal activities into the central 'force' that rules the world. Tolstoy adds that an even deeper darkness is cast upon this subject by political theorists, moralists, metaphysicians. The celebrated notion of the social

contract, for example, which some liberals peddle, speaks of the 'vesting' of the wills, in other words the power, of many men in one individual or group of individuals; but what kind of act is this 'vesting'? It may have a legal or ethical significance, it may be relevant to what should be considered as permitted or forbidden, to the world of rights and duties, or of the good and the bad, but as a factual explanation of how a sovereign accumulates enough 'power' – as if it were a commodity – which enables him to effect this or that result, it means nothing. It declares that the conferring of power makes powerful; but this tautology is too unilluminating. What is 'power' and what is 'conferring'? And who confers it and how is such conferring done?[1] The process seems very different from whatever it is that is discussed by the physical sciences. Conferring is an act, but an unintelligible one; conferring power, acquiring it, using it are not at all like eating or drinking or thinking or walking. We remain in the dark: *obscurum per obscurius*.[2]

After demolishing the jurists and moralists and political philosophers – among them his beloved Rousseau – Tolstoy applies himself to demolishing the liberal theory of history according to which everything may turn upon what may seem an insignificant accident. Hence the pages in which he obstinately tries to prove that Napoleon knew as little of what actually went on during

[1] One of Tolstoy's Russian critics, M. M. Rubinshtein, referred to above (9/1), 80 ff., says that every science employs *some* unanalysed concepts, to explain which is the business of other sciences; and that 'power' happens to be the unexplained central concept of history. But Tolstoy's point is that no other science can 'explain' it, since it is, as used by historians, a meaningless term, not a concept but nothing at all – *vox nihili* ['the voice of nothing'].

[2] ['The obscure through the more obscure', i.e. explaining something obscure in terms of something even more obscure.]

the battle of Borodino as the lowliest of his soldiers; and that therefore his cold on the eve of it, of which so much was made by the historians, could have made no appreciable difference. With great force he argues that only those orders or decisions issued by the commanders now seem particularly crucial (and are concentrated upon by historians) which happened to coincide with what later actually occurred; whereas a great many other exactly similar, perfectly good orders and decisions, which seemed no less crucial and vital to those who were issuing them at the time, are forgotten because, having been foiled by unfavourable turns of events, they were not, because they could not be, carried out, and for this reason now seem historically unimportant.

After disposing of the heroic theory of history, Tolstoy turns with even greater savagery upon scientific sociology, which claims to have discovered laws of history, but cannot possibly have found any, because the number of causes upon which events turn is too great for human knowledge or calculation. We know too few facts, and we select them at random and in accordance with our subjective inclinations. No doubt if we were omniscient we might be able, like Laplace's ideal observer, to plot the course of every drop of which the stream of history consists, but we are, of course, pathetically ignorant, and the areas of our knowledge are incredibly small compared to what is uncharted and (Tolstoy vehemently insists on this) unchartable. Freedom of the will is an illusion which cannot be shaken off, but, as great philosophers have said, it is an illusion nevertheless, and it derives solely from ignorance of true causes. The more we know about the circumstances of an act, the farther away from us the act is in time, the more difficult it is to think away its consequences; the more

solidly embedded a fact is in the actual world in which we live, the less we can imagine how things might have turned out if something different had happened. For by now it seems inevitable: to think otherwise would upset too much of our world order. The more closely we relate an act to its context, the less free the actor seems to be, the less responsible for his act, and the less disposed we are to hold him accountable or blameworthy. The fact that we shall never identify all the causes, relate all human acts to the circumstances which condition them, does not imply that they are free, only that we shall never know how they are necessitated.

Tolstoy's central thesis – in some respects not unlike the theory of the inevitable 'self-deception' of the bourgeoisie held by his contemporary Karl Marx, save that what Marx reserves for a class, Tolstoy sees in almost all mankind – is that there is a natural law whereby the lives of human beings no less than that of nature are determined; but that men, unable to face this inexorable process, seek to represent it as a succession of free choices, to fix responsibility for what occurs upon persons endowed by them with heroic virtues or heroic vices, and called by them 'great men'. What are great men? They are ordinary human beings who are ignorant and vain enough to accept responsibility for the life of society, individuals who would rather take the blame for all the cruelties, injustices, disasters justified in their name than recognise their own insignificance and impotence in the cosmic flow which pursues its course irrespective of their wills and ideals. This is the central point of those passages (in which Tolstoy excelled) in which the actual course of events is described, side by side with the absurd, egocentric explanations which persons blown up with the sense of their own importance

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Douglas Matthews