A STUDY OF TOLSTOY'S USE OF SUPERFLUOUS DETAIL

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Preface

I read War and Peace for the first time as a college freshman. I did not pick up the novel again until I took a course in The Continental Novel conducted by Dr. Agnes Berrigan. The passing of time between my first reading and my second had not dimmed the vividness of the story. I was curious to examine the control Leo Tolstoy had over his readers, compelling them to feel a keen sense of reality in a setting most remote to Western experience. The examination led to a study of the most prevalent, yet least analyzed, portion of Tolstoy's technique -- his use of detail.

To Dr. Agnes Berrigan for the suggestion leading to this study, I extend sincere thanks; to Dr. Samuel Woods, Jr. for valuable help while the investigation was being made, and to Dr. Clinton Keeler, I express my appreciation.

I am also indebted to Margarite M. Edmister who translated the seledted Russian works made available by Mr. Albert Juhlin.

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Chapter I

Since Plato and Aristotle the creative process has attracted attention. It was not until the nineteenth century, however, that it gained such importance that almost every major author since Poe has felt the compulsion to say something about the machinery of the creative mind. Every aspect has been discussed -- the unconscious mind in conflict with the conscious, the "germ" of a story, character development, even disciplinary tracts urging the writer to keep regular hours -- and all resulting in diverse opinions. Most recent artists, however, are agreed upon the motive for creating. The writer wants to widen "the sphere of human sensibility," as Wordsworth said, he wants to contribute to a clarification of life, and/or present the world to us in a new light. Joseph Conrad said it thus:

> The sincere endeavour to accomplish the creative task, to go as far on that road as his strength will carry him, to go undeterred by faltering, weariness or reproach, is the only valid justification for the worker in prose. And if his conscience is clear, his answer to those who in the fulness of a wisdom which looks for immediate profit, demand specifically to be edified, consoled, amused, who demand to be promptly improved, or encouraged, or frightened, or shocked, or

> charmed, must run thus: - My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel - it is, before all, to make you see. That - and no more, and it is everything. If I succeed, you shall find there according to your deserts: encouragement, consolation, fear, charm - all you demand - and, perhaps, also that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask.[1]

If this be the motive of the creative mind, then Leo N. Tolstoy has succeeded, for he is able to evoke excitement and inexplicable satisfaction even with such recorded factual material as "Games," "Papa," "Lessons," which are examples of chapters in his Childhood, Boyhood, Youth.

Technique, the method of presentation, is an important part of the creative process, for it is what sets the final product apart as the individual effort of that particular writer. Tolstoy's use of detail, a major part of his technique, is what I wish to analyse in this study in an attempt to discover how he creates a fresh, exciting world for the reader.

In this case, however, it is important to know something first about the writer's personality. From biographies, particularly that of Earnest J. Simmons, from Tolstoy's own notes and diaries, and from the notes of those who knew him, one concludes that by his very nature Tolstoy was a stranger

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[1]Preface to The Nigger and the Narcissus and Other Stories (London, 1957), pp. ix-x.

to that Coleridgean-hinterland of the brain whose fantastic shapes there haunt some men. He was a man of the earth, whose first draft of War and Peace was weighted more heavily with the lusty, basic passions than with the soul-searching one finds in the final version.

From the following quotation in which Tolstoy recalls his first moment of conscious awareness, it becomes more obvious that here is a man who saw life primarily in terms of sensory impressions.

> I am sitting in a wooden tub. All around is the unpleasant odor of some stuff with which my little body is being rubbed. Probably it was bran and no doubt it was in the water in the tub, but the novelty of the impression made by the bran aroused me and for the first time I noticed and was pleased by my little body, with the ribs I could see on my chest, also the smooth dark tub, my nurse's arms in rolled-up sleeves, the warm steaming water mixed with bran, the sound it made, and especially the feel of the slippery edges of the tub as I passed my little hands along them.[2]

Tolstoy was smelling the unpleasant odor of the bran, he was feeling the slippery edges of the tub, he was hearing the sound of the water, even the sensitive reaction to his body is referred to in physical terms of seeing his ribs. What Henry James said of Guy De Maupassant might well be applied to Tolstoy: "His own [instrument] is that of the senses, and

[2]Alexandra Tolstoy, A Life of My Father, trans. from the Russian by Elizabeth Hapgood (New York, 1953), p. 11.

it is through them, or almost alone, that life appeals to him; it is almost alone by their help that he describes it, that he produces brilliant works."[3]

Again when Tolstoy was a young Caucasian soldier, a diary entry shows this continued absorption with physical details:

> June 11th, 1851. - The Caucasus. Stary Yurt.
>
> The camp. Night time.... The night is clear, and a fresh breeze is blowing through the tent curtains, and causing the lighted candle to flicker. Nothing is audible save the distant baying of dogs in the village, and the challenging of sentries. In the air is the scent of oak and plane leaves of which the tent curtain is made, and I am seated on a drum in a tent, to either side of which is a wing -- the one, the wing in which K. is sleeping, closed, and the other one open, yet in total darkness save that a streak of light is falling upon the end of my brother's bed. In front of me is the brilliantly lighted side of the tent, with, suspended on it, pistols, Circassian sabres, a poniard, and (undecipherable). Everything is still. Only can there be heard the sighing of the wind, the sound of a small beetle buzzing to and fro, and of a soldier coughing or heaving a sigh in the neighbourhood.[4]

Nor is there the slightest hint of abstractions in Tolstoy's early fiction; the people and events in his works all derive from actual acquaintances and experiences in his own

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[3]The Art of Fiction (New York, 1948), p. 74.

[4]Youth, the Diaries of Leo Tolstoy, trans. from the Russian by C.J. Hogarth and A. Sirnis (New York, 1917), p. 82.

life. Metaphors and similes, the implements of the poet, are also rare, and when one is used it appears as the cold, clarifying analysis of a psychiatrist or historian rather than as the emotional reaction of the poet. For example, there is more clarification for the reader than poetry in the comparison of deserted Moscow to a queenless bee hive as Napoleon waits at her gates for a formal reception which never arrives, or in the comparison of hostess Anna Pavlovna to a spinning-mill foreman as she "moved about her drawing-room, approaching now a silent, now a too noisy group, and by a word or slight re-arrangement kept the conversational machine in steady, proper, and regular motion."[5]

Even when an elusive emotion must be transmitted to the reader, Tolstoy crystallizes it with specific, concrete details. For example, shortly after the ball at which Natasha Rostov and Prince Andrew Bolkonsky meet and fall in love, they are invited to a soiree given by Vera Rostov and Berg. Before Prince Andrew's arrival, Natasha's inner feelings are exposed by Pierre Bezuhov's reaction to her face:

> Pierre, as one of the principal guests, had to sit down to boston with Count Rostov, the general, and the colonel. At the card-table he happened to be facing Natasha, and was struck by a curious

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[5] War and Peace, trans. from the Russian by Louise and Aylmer Maude (London, 1958), Book I, ch.iii, p. 12. [Note: the World's Classics editions of the Maude translations of Tolstoy's works were used throughout the study.]

> change that had come over her since the ball. She was silent, and not only less pretty than at the ball, but only redeemed from plainness by her look of gentle indifference to everything around.

Then Prince Andrew arrives:

> Prince Andrew was standing before her, saying something to her with a look of tender solicitude. She having raised her head, was looking up at him, flushed and evidently trying to master her rapid breathing. And the bright glow of some inner fire that had been suppressed was again alight in her. She was completely transformed, and from a plain girl had again become what she had been at the ball.[6]

Before Prince Andrew's arrival, Natasha's boredom and lack of interest in the party are related by Peirre's rather startling observation of how Natasha's external features have changed since he saw her last; she is silent, plain and dull, certainly different from the beautiful, spirited girl at the recent ball. With Prince Andrew's arrival at the soiree, Natasha's external features change in accordance with her inner emotional change. She becomes flushed and obviously tries to control her breathing. Thus, Natasha's inner emotions for Prince Andrew are shown by contrasting outward changes in her physical appearance.

Out of this inherent trust in the concrete and physical grew a distrust for the metaphysical. Yet like every sensitive

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6 War and Peace, Book VI, ch. xx, p. 72.

intelligent man Tolstoy was plagued by the metaphysical questions: whence, where, why? His struggle to explain away life by reducing it to a "universal principle" resulted in a too complicated and paradoxical conversion to be discussed at length in this study; however, Isaiah Berlin explains briefly the torment within Tolstoy in his fascinating and penetrating analysis of Tolstoy's theory of history, The Hedgehog and the Fox ("The fox knows many things, the hedgehog knows one big thing." Archilochus):

> Tolstoy's genius lies in a capacity for marvellously accurate reproduction of the irreproducible, the almost miraculous evocation of the full, untranslatable individuality of the individual, which induces in the reader an acute awareness of the presence of the object itself...avoiding those general terms which relate it to similar instances.... But then this same writer pleads for, indeed preaches with great fury, particularly in his last, religious phase, the exact opposite: the necessity of expelling everything that does not submit to some very general, very simple standard: say, what peasants like or dislike, or what the gospels declare to be good.
>
> This violent contradiction between the data of experience from which he could not liberate himself, and which, of course, all his life he knew alone to be real, and his deeply metaphysical belief in the existence of a system to which they must belong, whether they appear to do so or not, this conflict between instinctive judgment and theoretical conviction -- between his gifts and his opinions -- mirrors the unresolved conflict between the reality of the

> moral life. . .and the laws which govern everything.[7]

Such an interpretation of life was bound to influence his writing, and in What is Art? (1897) he rejects his earlier works, especially War and Peace and Anna Karenina primarily because of their "superfluous" detail, or in other words, detail which he felt hindered and obstructed the feeling the author wished to transmit to the reader. He said:

> Equally little can imitation, realism, serve, as many people think, as a measure of the quality of art. Imitation cannot be such a measure; for the chief characteristic of art is the infection of others with the feelings the artist has experienced, and infection with a feeling is not only not identical with description of the accessories of what is transmitted, but is usually hindered by superfluous details. The attention of the receiver of the artistic impression is diverted by all these well-observed details, and they hinder the transmission of feeling even when it exists.[8]

Because Tolstoy felt his use of detail important enough to single it out for rejection, this study must include an interpretation of what changes occurred in this technique peculiar to the creative process of one of the world's great writers.

I have chosen for analysis passages from War and Peace,

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[7] The Hedgehog and the Fox (New York, 1958), p. 40.

[8] What is Art? (New York, 1929), p. 97.

finished before Tolstoy's conversion; and from Anna Karenina, a novel in which the fermenting signs of the conversion are clear, as shown by the character Levin, a thinly disguised self-portrait of Tolstoy searching for his universal principle. As an example of his post-conversion writing and the discontent with his great skill in representing life, I have chosen Hadji Murad, his last sustained literary effort, written six years before his death in 1910.

The help from secondary sources was sparse, for the contradictions of Tolstoy's philosophy has held more attraction for the critics than his creative ability; however, I believe his talent as a story teller may well outlast his philosophy and deserves more attention than has been given to it.

Although Tolstoy's characters, theme, and plot deserve respect, it must be noted that their quality and effectiveness stem from his effort to represent reality. The characters, theme, and plot seem real chiefly as a result of Tolstoy's descriptive detail. The main purpose of description is to make the reader believe in the story, for the only way a human being can perceive the external world is through his five senses; hence, the only way in which one can make him believe in the imaginary world of fiction is to give him imaginary sensations of sight, sound, taste, feeling, and scent, which Tolstoy does. Furthermore, by carefully spacing

his discriminate choice of detail in each scene, Tolstoy is able to achieve dramatic action. By dramatic action in a story one means characters doing exciting things, deeds upon which much depends. Such dramatic action is attained by presenting the material in a dramatic method. "The dramatic method is the method of direct presentation, and aims to give the reader the sense of being present, here and now, in the scene of action. That is why those elements are undramatic which make us aware of an author explaining things...."[9] Tolstoy makes his characters and events seem exciting and worth reading about by using description not for description alone but for movement and brilliance so that things seem larger and brighter than they do in reality.

But even description is useless unless it conveys emotion as well as sensation. The roar of a lion in a cage is just a noise, but the roar of a lion running wild, as Lord Dunsany declares in his poem, makes Africa tremble. Again, Tolstoy uses description to transfer emotion to the reader by timing detail within the scenes of his story.

Because I feel this one particular technique is the foundation for what critics have termed the "freshness" in Tolstoy's fiction, I will discuss these different manipulations of the same kind of detail rather than limit the

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[9]Joseph W. Beach, The Twentieth Century Novel (New York, 1932), p. 181.

study to those details which illuminate character, plot, and the other components of a fictional work. For it is because of Tolstoy's employment of detail that these other elements become dramatic and real to the reader.

Chapter II

In What is Art? Tolstoy condemned his detail as "superfluous," but to avoid the ambiguous connotations the word has in relation to this study, I prefer to use "peripheral" when referring to that detail which lies on the outer rim of a central experience. As a non-literary example of peripheral detail, one may consider the experience of reading this essay. Although the reader's attention may be focused on this essay, he is aware of a margin of sensory impressions about him -- perhaps the sound of a car passing outside, or the buzzing of a fly, or the feel of the paper beneath his fingers, or even odors drifting from the kitchen. These details are not central to the immediate experience -- reading this essay -- yet they are as much a part of the moment as the central experience.

The general effect of such detail in literature "is to bring out the particular, the individual, the local, and the temporary at the expense of the general and the universal."[1] Actually, it is peripheral detail that gives that individual conviction which is the essence of fictional reality. But

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[1]D. S. Mirsky, History of Russian Literature (New York, 1927), p. 326.

long before the world heard of literary Realism, writers sensed the power of peripheral detail, for we find even a sixth century lament by the Cymric poet, Llywarch, containing a clear example. Llywarch is grieving for his son Gwenn, who fell while fighting the Saxons:

> Let the wave break noisily; let it cover the shore when the joined lances are in battle. O Gwenn, woe to him who is too old to avenge you! Let the wave break noisily; let it cover the plain, when the lances join with a shock. O Gwenn, woe to him who is too old, since he has lost you. A man was my son, a hero, a generous warrior, yet Gwenn has been slain at the ford of Morlas. Here is the tomb of Gwenn, the son of old Llywarch. *Sweetly a bird sang on a pear tree above the head of Gwenn before they covered him with a turf.* That broke the heart of old Llywarch.[2]

The singing bird is outside the central experience -- the father's grief --, yet its presence gives reality to the emotion, and the contrast between the song in nature and the song of grief sharpens the latter.

Not only was peripheral detail used to give a sort of tangibility to emotions, but it was used to give the illusion of reality to stories which were often very unreal, such as *Gulliver's Travels*. For example, when Gulliver returns from the land of Lilliputians, he adds this detail:

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[2]*English Literature*, ed. Ruth Weeks, Rollo Lyman, Howard Hill (New York, 1937), p. 17. [Italics mine.]

> We arrived in the Downs on the 13th of April, 1702. I had only one misfortune, that the rats on board carried away one of my sheep; I found her bones in a hole, picked clean from the flesh. The rest of my cattle I got safe on shore....[3]

The fatal meeting between the unreal Lilliputian sheep and the very real English rat serves no pertinent point in the story except to lend an authentic air to the whole fantastic voyage.

It was some years before any conscious effort was made to use peripheral detail to make so-called "realistic" stories even more real. Even though he did not do with detail what Tolstoy did, it was Honoré de Balzac, as Edith Warton observed,

> who first cared profoundly about the material circumstances in which his personages lived.... His characteristic openings...are packed with a thousand facts about the city, the quarter, the street, the house in which the action will occur, even the rooms down to the last grease-spot on the table and the broken rung of a chair. Balzac believed, as Faguet says, that the shell helps to explain the tortoise. The intensity of his care for material environment was new, and the success with which he rendered it helped to make his characters more real to the reader.[4]

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[3]Jonathan Swift (Oxford, 1919), p. 90.

[4]E.K. Brown, introd. to Pére Goriot and Eugenie Grandet (New York, 1946), p. ix.

The function of peripheral detail to aid historical reality was crystallized in a recent essay by George F. Kennan, former United States Ambassador to Soviet Russia. While working on a history of Russia, he was confronted with the familiar problem of making his account "come alive" on the printed page. Mr. Kennan said:

> On the last page of the second volume of the study I am engaged in on the early period of Soviet-American relations, I described the departure of one of the last semi-official Americans from Soviet territory in 1918. He and his companion, as it happened, found themselves locked for a time on a railroad bridge spanning the border stream between Finland and Russia, with the gates at each end of the bridge closed against them. About this incident I wrote the following:
>
> 'For an hour and a half Wardwell and Davidson sat forlornly on the railway ties of the little bridge (from which the tracks had now been removed), confined between the two strife-torn worlds of thought and feeling which no one had been able to hold together.
>
> 'The sky was leaden; a cold wind blew from the northwest. The wooden shelter on the Finnish side was deserted. Above, on the Soviet side, the figure of a Red Guard, rifle slung on shoulder, greatcoat collar turned up against the wind, was silhouetted against the low scudding clouds. The little stream, hurrying to the Gulf of Finland, swirled past the wooden pilings and carried its eddies swiftly and silently away into the swamps below. Along the Soviet bank a tethered nanny goat, indifferent to all the ruin and all the tragedy, nibbled patiently at the sparse dying foliage.'
>
> I must confess that if you asked me whether I can prove that the goat was

> there, the answer is: I cannot. But I never saw such a scene in Russia without a goat.[5]

Without the goat, Mr. Kennan's description, however accurate, seems unfocused. The goat which has nothing to do with Soviet-American relations helps "tether" the scene to reality, makes the passage "come alive," and, therefore, justifies its presence.

Even when the writer attempts to locate reality in places other than the phenomenological world, peripheral detail is necessary to add conviction to the author's theory. For example, Marcel Proust relied upon the "madeline" in Swann's Way to show his conception of reality as existing in one's memory. But wherever the artist is trying to place fictional reality, if he is motivated by the creative purpose, peripheral detail becomes important to the creative process.

Tolstoy used peripheral detail to transform raw material of recorded experience into art. The method "consists in never calling complex things by their accepted name, but always disintegrating a complex action or object into its indivisible components; in describing, not naming it. The method strips the world of the labels attached to it by habit and by social convention and gives it a 'dis-civilized' appearance, as it might have appeared to Adam on the day of creation, or

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[5]"It's History, But Is It Literature?" New York Times Book Review (April 26, 1959), p. 1.

to one blind from birth who has received his sight."[6] For example, as Count Bezuhov, Pierre's father, dies at the beginning of War and Peace, one feels it is the first time he has really been near death; or when old Prince Bolkonsky grows senile, the reader watches with poignant fascination as a brilliant mind falters and disintegrates; or when Prince Andrew's son is born, one experiences a fresh awe at the miracle; or when Natasha plunges her face into a branch of wet cherry blossoms, one feels it is the first time he has really seen and felt a wet black cherry branch and smelled the blossoms. "This method of utilizing the atoms of experience which are the common property of mankind and of rejecting the constructions of cultural habit which vary from civilization to civilization is the principal feature that distinguishes the work of Tolstoy from that of other realists...."[7] The result is fiction with an extraordinary freshness to it in which the characters and events give the reader a particularly keen feeling of unexpected familiarity. Prince Mirsky says further of this method:

> What struck the world as a new thing hitherto done by no one, was this gift of evoking memories and associations everyone recognized as his own intimate and

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[6]Mirsky, pp. 326-327.

[7]Ibid, p. 327.

> unique memories by the choice of detail memorable to everyone, but rejected by everyone as insignificant and not worth-while.[8]

By splitting these "atoms of experience" Tolstoy calls attention to the qualities of things, not to the names of things.

[8] Mirsky, p. 330.

Chapter III

The relation between fiction and empirical reality is certainly one of the most complicated problems of literary theory known, and this study does not pretend to answer what has perplexed the twentieth century critic beyond exasperation. But one cannot ignore the fact that certain writers openly seek to imitate reality as they see it. For Proust, reality was more in the memory; for Tolstoy, it was more in the phenomenological world, and a passage from his diary, written when he was a twenty two year old soldier in the Caucasus, shows this struggle to transfer his conception of reality to paper:

> July 3rd. 1851.
>
> I have been lying down outside the camp. It is a marvellous night! The moon is just rising above a low hillock, and shedding its light on two small, thin ethereal clouds. Behind me a grasshopper is chirping its endless, melancholy song. In the distance there can be heard a frog. From the vicinity of the village comes the shouting of Tartars, and, anon, the baying of a dog. Then all is still again -- ... To myself I thought: I will go forth and describe whatsoever I amy see; but how shall I describe it? I should need to seat myself at an ink-stained table and to take ink and rough paper, and to smear my fingers, and to cover the paper with letters. Letters

> make words, and words phrases, but how can one transmit _feeling_?[1]

But even with the compulsion to put down life as he saw it, the artistic struggle was not an easy one. Every manuscript went through a complicated and exhausting _otravabotka_,[2] a strong Russian verb for revision meaning "to plow up." Tolstoy's technical process on a story was usually this: a copy was made from the original on which he made corrections; a new copy was then made onto which were carried his first corrections; new corrections were written in, and again another copy. This process was repeated many times, often reaching ten copies, each with a new set of corrections.[3]

This exposure to the litter of the workroom points out that in Tolstoy's creative process there were few accidents; his stories were the results of painstaking revisions, which reveal that a basically important step in Tolstoy's art was a careful _selection_ of significant details which most closely represented life as he saw it. As the preceding passage from his diary indicated, Tolstoy knew that art must not be a

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[1]Diaries, p. 88.

[2]L. Mishkovskaya, _L. Tolstoi Rabota i Ctil_ [_L. Tolstoy, Work and Style_], trans. from the Russian by Margaret Maleev Edmister (Moscow, 1938), p. 112.

[3]Ibid.

graphic description or a mere photograph of life, but by the use of details he was able to intimate that there is something "more real to life than actuality."[4] Prince Mirsky has already pointed out that Tolstoy avoided specifically Russian detail and chose those which are common property to all mankind. It is this selection of detail which contributes in part to what Isaiah Berlin calls Tolstoy's "almost miraculous evocation of the full, untranslatable individuality of the individual, which induces in the reader an acute awareness of the presence of the object itself...."

At one of the dinner parties in _Anna Karenina_, one finds an example of Tolstoy's selection which rises to the level of invention. The question of women's rights has come up for discussion, to the delight of old Prince Oblonsky who enjoys making several indelicate remarks which, in turn, are received with mirth by Turovtsin, a good natured fellow with thick lips and a dull wit. The old Prince says:

> 'And I am hampered and oppressed by the knowledge that they won't take me as a wet-nurse in the Foundlings' Hospital,' repeated the old Prince, to the great joy of Turovtsin, who laughed till _he dropped the thick end of a piece of asparagus into the sauce._[5]

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[4]Agnes Berrigan, "The Contributions in Theory and Practice to the English Novel 1859-1914" (Dublin, 1931), p. 9.

[5]Part IV, ch. xi, p. 441.

Turovtsin has been characterized as the only dinner guest who would laugh freely at such a remark. The minute detail of dropping the thick end in the sauce is further proof of the care in selecting a detail to fit Turovtsin's personality. It is also the peripheral detail that would most commonly be rejected as unimportant; yet its presence is largely responsible for the reader experiencing the immediacy of the scene. Any writer might have had Turovtsin drop his asparagus; Tolstoy, the artist, has him drop the thick end.

One finds this kind of "personality extension" often serving as Tolstoy's guide for selecting the right detail, as we see again in an example concerning Berg in War and Peace, who marries Vera Rostov, Natasha's dull, plain older sister. Berg is a professional soldier whose ideal is secure conformity. (One may recall the soiree Berg and Vera give shortly after they are married at which they are delighted with its success since it progressed just like every other soiree they had attended.) One realizes that Berg's conventional mind can think only of small things. For example, at the height of the evacuation of Moscow, he is concerned only about a dressing table Vera has seen and wanted to buy. In the following quotation he is telling Vera his theory of success:

> 'You can get to know something, you can ask for something. See how I managed from my first promotion.' (Berg measured his life not by years but by promotions.)

> 'My comrades are still nobodies, while I am only waiting for a vacancy to command a regiment, and have the happiness to be your husband.' (He rose and kissed Vera's hand, <u>and on the way to her straightened out a turned-up corner of the carpet</u>.) 'And how have I obtained all this? Chiefly by knowing how to choose my acquaintances. It goes without saying that one must be conscientious and methodical.'[6]

The simple physical gesture is potent because it is an extension of Berg's characteristic absorption with appearance and propriety. But another important ingredient in the use of peripheral detail is revealed in this quotation; the detail is spaced in the story so that it becomes fused with the action. In other words, Tolstoy makes the setting a part of the character by portraying it in terms of his sensations, emotions, and actions. This creates in the reader an illusion of continuing motion, as if the fictional piece has taken on the activity of real life. Just as choice of detail lends a credibility to Tolstoy's characters, so does the spacing of detail lend credibility to the action of the story by inducing in the reader what Isaiah Berlin calls "an acute awareness of the presence of the object itself," all in turn contributing to what has been called the freshness of Tolstoy's fiction.

As another example of Tolstoy's ability to keep his story

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[6]Book VI, ch. xx, p. 70.

moving, and at the same time make us believe it, one may recall the scene from War and Peace in which Kutusov makes the historical decision to retreat from Moscow. He meets with his generals in a peasant's farmhouse:

> The Council of War began to assemble at two in the afternoon in the better and roomier part of Andrew Savostyanov's hut. The men, women, and children of the large peasant family crowded into the back room across the passage. Only Malasha, Andrew's six-year-old grand-daughter, whom his Serene Highness had patted and to whom he had given a lump of sugar while drinking his tea, remained on the top of the brick oven in the larger room. Malasha looked down from the oven with shy delight at the faces, uniforms, and decorations of the generals, who one after another came into the room and sat down on the broad benches in the corner behind the oven.[7]

The reader's direct contact with the scene is through the peripheral detail of Malasha. Her childish innocence and curiosity, a contrast to the worldly strategy of the central action, is more familiar to the reader, and thus the legendary sequence becomes more believable. At one point the meeting is seen through her eyes; she even has an affection for "grandad" Kutusov (this detail, along with the sugar lump, adds to his credibility as a character.). To avoid what could be a rather static scene, Tolstoy spaces references to Malasha during the meeting until he ends it appropriately with her exit. Kutu-

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[7]Book XI, ch. iv, p. 13.

sov speaks:

> 'Gentlemen, I have heard your views. Some of you will not agree with me. But I,' he paused, 'by the authority entrusted to me by my Sovereign and country, order a retreat.'
>
> After that the generals began to disperse with the solemnity and circumspect silence of people who are leaving after a funeral.
>
> Some of the generals, in low tones and in a strain very different from the way they had spoken during the council, communicated something to their commander in-chief.
>
> Malasha, who had long been expected for supper, climbed carefully backwards down from the oven, her bare little feet catching at its projections, and slipping between the legs of the generals she darted out of the room.[8]

For another example of selection and spacing, there is a memorable scene in Anna Karenina in which Alexis Karenin finally seeks legal advice about a divorce from Anna. The events leading up to the trip to the lawyer have been emotionally wrenching ones for Alexis. In order to advance in his political career he cannot afford the scandal of a divorce, but neither can he tolerate an adulterous wife. Also, the stoical Alexis is overcome with repugnance at having to expose his inner life to a complete stranger. The reader is filled with this knowledge as well as the realization that Anna and her son's future depend on this

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[8]Book XI, ch. iv, p. 16.

meeting. All in all, it is a critical, emotional scene that must seem believable. The lawyer speaks:

> 'Won't you sit down?' He indicated an armchair at a writing-table covered with papers. He sat down himself, and, rubbing his hands with short fingers covered with white hairs, he bent his head on one side. But as soon as he was settled in this position a moth flew over the table. The lawyer, with a swiftness that could never have been expected of him, opened his hands, caught the moth, and resumed his former attitude.[9]

Several peripheral moths meet their fate in this manner. One escaped, however. Note how this moth is fused with the central experience:

> The lawyer looked down at Karenin's feet, feeling that the sight of his irrepressible joy might offend his client. He glanced at a moth that flew past his nose and his hand moved, but did not catch it, out of respect for Karenin's situation.[10]

Because the moth is a familiar object to the reader (just as Malasha was more familiar than a council of war) the whole scene takes on the illusion of reality. Also, the contrast between the indifferent peripheral moth and the strong emotional tension of Alexis sharpens the feeling involved. Here, selection achieves that contrast similar to the bird singing

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[9] Part IV, ch. v, pp. 415-416.

[10] Ibid, p. 417.

above Gwenn's Cymric grave. The intruding moths also create the sensation of motion and give individuality to the lawyer.

The selection and spacing used by Tolstoy is distinct from writers who believe this kind of fictional reality consists of piling up an indefinite number of details. For example, notice in Look Homeward, Angel how Eugene recalls some moments with his sister Helen:

> She sent him to the little Jewish grocery down the street for the sour relishes she liked so well; tabled in mid-morning they ate sour pickles, heavy slabs of ripe tomatoes, coated with thick mayonnaise, amber percolated coffee, fig-newtons and ladyfingers, hot punguent fudge pebbled with walnuts and coated fragrantly with butter, sandwiches of tender bacon and cucumber, iced belchy soft drinks.[11]

Although the sound of the words have a certain fluidity of their own, this linear accumulation of detail has no sensible interconnection with the story, and therefore, clogs the movement of the story. Anytime the author stops the reader, he is violating movement, which is one of the fundamental principles of dramatic presentation. For example, if a writer tells what a man had on, he has to stop his story to do it in ordinary description; but if he can tell how he dressed himself, putting on one garment after another, the

[11]Thomas Wolfe (New York, 1952), p. 149.

costume is described in movement, and the story never halts. Even in older fiction where one finds detail chosen with typical Tolstoyan care, the large units tend to block the action and make tedious reading for many modern readers. For example, while every detail Balzac chooses to describe Eugénie Grandet's house is an excellent objective equivalent of Grandet's personality, its unbroken length of three pages halts the dramatic action.

Whether man's quick adaptibility in the machine age has made the old "seated masses of information"[12] unnecessary, or whether writers have simply realized more dramatic methods of presentation, it is evident that the solid paragraphs of setting found in Thomas Hardy have decreased to mere sentences and phrases as found, for example, in W. Somerset Maugham. This is not to imply that random descriptive phrases scattered like bits over the story is good dramatic presentation. There should be a schematic design as one finds in Tolstoy's scenes.

In the following excerpt from a dinner party in <u>Anna Karenina</u> one may see again evidence of Tolstoy's planned fusion of detail with action through selection and spacing. As Anna's brother, Stepan, tries to break up what is rapidly becoming a heated political discussion, he introduces Alexey

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[12] Henry James as quoted by Joseph Warren Beach, <u>The Twentieth Century Novel</u> (New York, 1932), p. 184.

Karenin to Levin. With typical small-talk, Stepan asks Levin about his gymnastics, but Levin's whole attention is absorbed by Kitty with whom he is falling in love:

> 'Have you really been doing gymnastics again?' he went on turning to Levin, and with his left hand he felt Levin's muscles. Levin smiled, tightening his arm, and under Oblonsky's fingers a lump like a Dutch cheese and hard as steel bulged out beneath the fine cloth of Levin's coat.
>
> 'Here's a biceps! A real Samson!'
>
> 'I expect great strength is needed for bear-hunting,' said Karenin, who had the vaguest notions about sport, as he helped himself to cheese and broke his slice of bread, cut as fine as a cobweb.
>
> Levin smiled.
>
> 'None at all. On the contrary a child can kill a bear,' he said, making room, with a slight bow, for the ladies who were coming up to the side-table with the hostess.
>
> 'You have killed a bear, I hear?' said Kitty, vainly trying to catch a wayward, slippery pickled mushroom with her fork, and so shaking the lace of her sleeve through which her arm gleamed white. 'Have you any bears near your estate?' she added, turning her lovely little head toward him and smiling.
>
> There was, it would seem, nothing unusual in what she had said, but for him what a meaning there was, expressible in words, in every sound and every movement of her lips, her eyes, and her hands as she said it! [13]

Not only does the cobweb wafer modify tall, thin, nervous Alexis, but the whole setting is told in terms of Levin's

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[13] Part IV, ch. v, pp. 434-435.

emotions, and hence his emotions become a part of ours. Notice, also, how the spacing induces the illusion of motion or an imitation of real activity.

In the scenes with Malasha and the moths we have seen how Tolstoy used peripheral detail to make the unfamiliar seem real and believable. But his ability to evoke the "individuality of the individual," has also aroused the admiration of such critics as Prince D.S. Mirsky, Victor Shkolovsky, Janko Lavrin, Boris Eykenbaum, Isaiah Berlin, and even Kasimierz Walieszewski.[14] Often this individuality is achieved by the selection of details that are singular to the fictional object while striking the reader with a keen sense of unexpected universal familiarity. For example, when Prince Andrew Bolkonsky's infant son is baptized "the wet-nurse _supported the coverlet with her chin_, while the priest with a goose feather anointed the boy's little red and wrinkled soles and palms;"[15] or when young Nicholas Rostov excitedly returns home for his

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[14] K. Walieszewski feels Tolstoy abused use of detail to give a false impression of reality, esp. in _War and Peace_. For example, Kutusov did not sleep and read a French novel while Napoleon planned strategy. Walieszewski also points out the fallacies in Tolstoy's philosophy. He is interesting reading for rare opposition to Tolstoy.

[15] _War and Peace_, Book IV, ch. x, p. 432.

first leave from the army, his "sledge bore to the right, drew up at an entrance, and Rostov saw overhead the old familiar cornice with a bit of plaster broken off, the porch, and the post by the side of the pavement."[16]

The same sense of familiarity is attained with such particular character traits as Anna Karenina's shoulders, masses of hair, and half-shut eyes, Alexis Karenin's cracking knuckles, and from War and Peace: Pierre Bezuhov's awkwardness, Natasha's black hair and slight vigourous build, Princess Mary Bolkonsky's heavy tread and large luminous eyes, Kutusov's obesity and single sleepy eye. Again, these are not static details. Tolstoy makes them function actively within the story -- the carriage step creaks under Kutuzov's weight, the old Prince Bolkonsky's heart jumps when he hears Mary's heavy tread -- so that the feeling of motion is sustained.

Because crowd scenes constitute a large part of War and Peace, it is fitting to see what use Tolstoy makes of selection in these instances. When he creates a scene dealing with large numbers, he uses a familiar movie and television technique I will call focusing. He usually concentrates on one character, building up within him the emotion of the whole crowd. Then, using this central character as a pivot, Tolstoy selects the peripheral detail from an imaginary circumference,

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[16] War and Peace, Book IV, ch. 1, p. 391.

obliging the reader to see the action through the eyes of the focused character. For example, in War and Peace the Russian and Austrian emperors are to inspect their allied armies of eighty thousand men, one of whom is Nicholas Rostov. Tolstoy first makes the reader aware of scores of men, each actively preparing for inspection. Then he focuses on Nicholas as representative of the men, all the while keeping the reader aware of the vast motion and activity continually going on about Nicholas:

> From early morning the smart clean troops were on the move, forming on the field before the fortress. Now thousands of feet and bayonets moved and halted at the officers' command, turned with banners flying, formed up at intervals, and wheeled round other similar masses of infantry in different uniforms; now was heard the rhythmic beat of hoofs and the jingling of showy cavalry in blue, red, and green braided uniforms, with smartly dressed bandsmen in front mounted on black, roan, or grey horses; then again, spreading out with the brazen clatter of the polished shining cannon that quivered on the gun-carriages and with the smell of live-stocks, came the artillery which crawled between the infantry and cavalry and took up its appointed position.... the generals in full parade uniforms with their thin or thick waists drawn in to the utmost, their red necks squeezed into their stiff collars, and wearing scarves and all their decorations, the elegant, pomaded officers, every soldier with his freshly washed and shaven face and his weapons clean and polished to the utmost, ...every horse groomed till its coat shone like satin and every hair of its wetted mane lay smooth....

As the Tzar appears with his suite,

> Rostov standing in the front lines of Kutusov's army which the Tzar approached first, experienced the same feeling as every other man in that army; a feeling of self-forgetfulness, a proud consciousness of might, and a passionate attraction to him who was the cause of this triumph.
>
> He felt that at a single word from that man all this vast mass (and himself an insignificant atom in it) would go through fire and water, commit crime, die, or perform deeds of highest heroism, and so he could not but tremble and his heart stand still at the eminence of that word.
>
> 'Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!' thundered from all sides, one regiment after another greeting the Tzar with the strains of the march, and then 'hurrah!'...Through the terrible and deafening roar of those voices, amid the square masses of troops standing motionless as if turned to stone, hundreds of riders composing the suites moved carelessly but symmetrically and above all freely, and in front of them two men -- the Emperors....

Tolstoy continues to glide back and forth between the emotions felt by young Rostov and the detail which is on the periphery, yet still a part of the central moment. As the Tzar leaves, his foot

> in the narrow pointed boot then fashionable, touched the groin of the bob-tailed bay mare he rode, his hand in a white glove gathered up the reins, and he moved off accompanied by an irregularly swaying sea of aides-de-camp. Farther and farther he rode away, stopping at the other regiments, till at last only his white plumes were visible to Rostov from amid the suites

that surrounded the Emperors.[17]

Tolstoy is fairly careful to select the details that only Rostov can see and hear, then the reader is compelled to stand with Nicholas to watch the Tzars' approach as well as their departure, all of which heightens the reader's direct contact with the fictional action.

In this step of Tolstoy's creative process, it is evident that selection and spacing are the results of planned arrangements designed to avoid such inert lumping of peripheral detail as that found in Wolfe. With selection of detail Tolstoy makes the universal seem particular, and the particular seem universal; with spacing he is able to stimulate a sense of continual movement which gives his fiction that closer imitation of reality for which he was striving.

When Tolstoy, as a young man, desperately asked his diary, "how can one transmit <u>feeling</u>?" he seemed aware even then that choice and spacing alone do not evoke that strong sympathetic reaction he demanded from the reader. He was still struggling with the problem of how to further remove those obstacles between the reader and the written page. In order to make his stories seem like extensions of life, he had to engage the unlimited emotional responses of the reader, and he does this with extraordinary <u>timing</u> of peripheral detail.

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[17]Book III, ch. viii, pp. 319-328.

Chapter IV

In his book Mimesis, a discussion of the social and national implications of realism, Erich Auerbach says:

> The most essential characteristic of the inner movement documented in Russian realism is the unqualified, unlimited, and passionate intensity of experience in the characters portrayed. That is the strongest impression which the western reader receives, before and above all else.... It seems that the Russians have preserved an immediacy of experience which had become a rare phenomenon in western civilization of the nineteenth century. A strong practical, ethical, or intellectual shock immediately arouses them in the depths of their instincts, and in a moment they pass from a quiet and almost vegetative existence to the most monstrous excesses both in practical and spiritual matters. The pendulum of their vitality, of their actions, thoughts, and emotions seems to oscillate farther than elsewhere in Europe.[1]

It is true that more than one sociologist and historian have attributed the Russian character with two ruling features - indolence and a feverish vitality, a strange contrast, but perhaps the root of this ethnological trait is partly responsible

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[1](Princeton, 1953), p. 523.

for Tolstoy's brilliant skill in making the reader feel.

It has already been noted how he used peripheral detail to create in his fiction a sensation of immediacy or "touchableness"[2] as Victor Shkolovsky calls it. With peripheral detail he seems to saturate the reader with the reality of the fictional world. Then as the reader follows a believable character through an emotional crisis, Tolstoy repeats with variations the character's distress. This repetition lulls critical reason and the reader is made to feel, not think. At the moment the reader's emotions seem to transcend all limits, Tolstoy, with almost mechanical abruptness, adds one extra detail which belongs to that indifferent reality of the external world. This detail added at the right moment affects the reader's emotions like ice water thrown in the face, as if Tolstoy is reminding the reader that emotions exist only in their correspondence to concrete phenomena. The contrast between the vibrant emotions at one extreme and the flatness of indifferent reality at the other causes the reader to feel he has experienced a moment of unqualified intensity.

Perhaps in Anna Karenina's suicide scene one may see how detail is used to cause this sudden vibration of feeling. In an agonizing effort to face the reality of her position and

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[2] Mateoil i Ctil ,,Boina i Mip'' [Material and Style of "War and Peace"] (Moscow, 1928), p. 92.

turn from it at the same time, Anna goes to the station in search of Vronsky knowing that her trip is useless. Anna and the reader are aware that Vronsky's interest has been transferred to a younger woman, but the reader pretends with Anna that there is still hope just in the action of going to him. Even long before this scene, the reader is concerned for he has in his memory Anna's recurring dream -- the mumbling peasant bending over her. The inevitability of tragedy has already begun to work on the reader's emotions.

Characteristically, Tolstoy intensifies Anna's inner emotions by showing how she reacts to concrete details in the station: the child running past her has an "affected face," the couple who share her compartment are "ugly wretches," she hears laughter which jars her painfully, two "bold-faced men" turn to speak to each other and Anna imagines it to be something "nasty" about her. Every detail is on the periphery of her own agony -- that of losing Vronsky after she has given up everything to hold him -- yet each is carefully selected to reflect her inner emotions and to transfer this agony to the reader. Motion picture technique will often use gradually increasing sound to build up in the viewer a similar emotion; and likewise, as Anna makes her decision to commit suicide, her surroundings become oblivious to her, and the reader's camera eyes moves in on Anna:

> Suddenly remembering the man who had

been run over the day she first met Vronsky, she realized what she had to do. Quickly and lightly descending the steps that led from the watertank to the rails, she stopped close to the passing train. She looked at the bottom of the tracks, at the bolts and chains and tried to estimate the middle point between the front and back wheels, and the moment when the point would be opposite her.

'There!' she said to herself, looking at the shadow of the truck on the mingled sand and coal dust which covered the sleepers. 'There, into the very middle, and I shall punish him and escape from everybody and from myself!'

She wanted to fall half-way between the wheels of the front truck, which was drawing level with her, but the little red handbag which she began to take off her arm delayed her, and then it was too late. The middle had passed her. She was obliged to wait for the next truck. A feeling seized her like that she had experienced when preparing to enter the water in bathing, and she crossed herself. The familiar gesture of making the sign of the cross called up a whole series of girlish and childish memories, and suddenly the darkness, that obscured everything for her, broke, and life showed itself to her for an instant with all its bright past joys. But she did not take her eyes off the wheels of the approaching second truck, and at the very moment when the midday point between the wheels drew level, she threw away her red bag, and drawing her head down between her shoulders threw herself forward on her hands under the truck, and with a light movement as if preparing to rise again, immediately dropped on her knees. And at the same moment she was horror-struck at what she was doing. 'Where am I?' What am I doing? Why?' She wished to rise, to throw herself back, but something huge and relentless struck her on the head and dragged her down. 'God forgive me everything,' she said, feeling the impossibility of struggling.... A little peasant muttering

> something was working at the rails. The candle, by the light of which she had been reading that book filled with anxieties, deceptions, grief, and evil, flared up with a brighter light than before, lit up for her all that had before been dark, flickered, began to grow dim, and went out forever.[3]

The little red handbag -- symbolic of that bit of free spirit stifled by Alexis, condemned by society, and abused by Vronsky -- was a part of Anna's individuality from the day she stepped off the train to straighten out things between Stepan and Dolly. As Tolstoy expertly uses it to delay Anna, emotion is pitched even higher; the sign of the cross, an unconscious gesture adding to her credibility as a character, is in poignant contrast to the act she is about to commit. When the emotions seem strained to the limit Anna throws away her purse and the exhausted reader's emotions plunge like the downward swing of a pendulum.

Another example of superb timing is found in the scene in which Vronsky enters the steeple chase. On the day of the race Vronsky, thinking Alexis is in town, boldly goes to Anna's home and asks her to leave her husband. This is the first time during their love affair that terms have been spoken, so that when Vronsky barely reaches the race in time to ride, the

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[3]Part VII, ch. xxxi, pp. 380-381.

reader's emotions have already been stimulated. At the track, one is absorbed into the structure of the horse race just as he was absorbed into the train station with Anna. The pages are filled with vital detail of the crowd, the riders, the stables and horses all carefully spaced within the action of the plot. Tolstoy's often noted talent of individualizing animals is excellently revealed as the reader meets Vronsky's horse, Frou-Frou:

> Vronsky once again glanced at the beautiful fascinating shape of the mare, whose body was trembling, and tearing himself with difficulty from this sight, he left the shed.[4]

Through active detail she becomes tangible to the reader:

> To the right the slender and beautiful Frou-Frou was being led up and down stepping as on springs with her rather long elastic pasterns.[5]

By the time Vronsky mounts Frou-Frou the reader is confidently saturated with the horsiness of the horse so that what happens to Frou-Frou as well as Vronsky will be of concern to the reader.

Like the Tzars' inspection, the reader's camera eye is focused on Vronsky. In the spirited description of the race, he rides Frou-Frou along with Vronsky, feeling the tense

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[4]Part II, ch. xxiv, p. 218.

[5]Ibid, p. 220.

rivalry between Vronsky and another rider, the urgency to win for Anna who sits in the stands, and the thrill of exciting motion.

> It was only from feeling himself nearer the ground and from the peculiar smoothness of his motion that Vronsky knew how greatly the mare had quickened her pace. She flew over the ditch as though not noticing it. She flew over it like a bird; but at the same instant Vronsky, to his horror, felt that he had failed to keep up with the mare's pace, that he had, he did not know how, made a fearful, unpardonable mistake, in recovering his seat in the saddle. All at once his position had shifted and he knew that something awful had happened. He could not yet make out what happened, when the white legs of a chestnut horse flashed by close to him, and Mahotin passed at a swift gallop. Vronsky was touching the ground with one foot, and his mare was sinking on that foot. He just had time to free his leg when she fell on one side, gasping painfully, and making vain efforts to rise with her delicate, soaking neck, she fluttered on the ground at his feet like a shot bird. The clumsy movement made by Vronsky had broken her back. But that he only knew much later. At that moment he knew only that Mahotin had flown swiftly by, while he stood staggering alone on the muddy, motionless ground, and Frou-Frou before him, bending her head back and gazing at him with her exquisite eyes. Still unable to realize what had happened, Vronsky tugged at his mare's reins. Again she struggled all over like a fish, and her shoullders setting the saddle heaving, she rose on her front legs but unable to lift her back, she quivered all over and again fell on her side. With a face hideous with passion, his lower jaw trembling, and his cheeks white, <u>Vronsky kicked her with his heel in the stomach and again fell to</u>

> tugging at the rein. She did not stir, but thrusting her nose into the ground, she simply gazed at her master with her speaking eyes.
>
> 'A-a-a!' groaned Vronsky, clutching at his hand. 'Ah! What have I done!' he cried. 'The race lost! And my fault! Shameful, unpardonable! And the poor darling, ruined mare! Ah! What have I done!'
>
> A crowd of men, a doctor and his assistant, the officers of his regiment, ran up to him. To his misery he felt that he was whole and unhurt. The mare had broken her back, and it was decided to shoot her. Vronsky could not answer questions, could not speak to any one. He turned, and without picking up his cap that had fallen off, walked away from the race-course, not knowing where he was going. He felt utterly wretched. For the first time in his life he knew the bitterest sort of misfortune, misfortune beyond remedy, and caused by his own fault.[6]

Tolstoy seems to time the exact moment he has the reader supersaturated with intensity so that the kick to Frou-Frou reacts similarly on the reader; he feels the wind sucked out of him and his emotions are sent plunging in accordance with Vronsky's.

This extraordinary sense of timing is as much a part of Tolstoy's structural design as selection and spacing. Even though characteristically Russian traits may have sharpened Tolstoy's natural ability here, it would be a mistake to accept this part of his technique as a merely ethnological

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[6]Part II, ch. xxv, pp. 236-238.

accident. Throughout each scene, measure for measure, there is a carefully calculated correspondence between meaning and the rhythm of technical structure. There is a great sweep of emotion, powerful, yet at the same time completely controlled. The reader feels the "unqualified, unlimited... intensity of experience" Auerbach speaks of, yet is kept within the bounds of Tolstoy's reality. The net result is again that almost exhilarating freshness in Tolstoy's fiction that is not easily matched elsewhere.

If Tolstoy could transfer this vivid sensation of immediacy to paper by using peripheral detail, then what happened to his fiction after he rejected the "superfluous"?

Chapter V

Isaiah Berlin says of Tolstoy:

> His genius lay in the perception of specific properties, the almost inexpressible individual quality in virtue of which the given object is uniquely different from all others. Nevertheless he longed for a universal explanatory principle; that is the perception of resemblances of common origins, or single purpose, or unity in the apparent variety of the mutually exclusive bits and pieces which composed the furniture of the world.[1]

The struggle was a long, hard one. One can see him groping for that single ruling principle in his theory of history in War and Peace; one sees it in Levin's philosophical search in Anna Karenina; from there the creative endeavors of Tolstoy are crowded with philosophical treatises and exegetical works. It is in the treatise Concerning Life and in a postscript to The Kruetzer Sonata (1889) that, after a fashion, one is able to see what religious precepts led him to reject his use of concrete detail. Tolstoy "points out the opposition between our inner consciousness of our own immortality and our material surroundings, which all speak to

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[1] The Hedgehog and the Fox, p. 36.

us of death, and from this he deduces...the idea of the huge paradox of Life. Our only resource, if we would escape from this paradox, is to remove ourselves, as far as possible, beyond the borders of the material world, which serves as a temporary agent of transmission to that inner consciousness of ours, destined to survive the world's destruction."[2] Concrete, physical detail was a part of that material world; hence, Tolstoy, whose brilliant view of life most naturally presented itself in sensory impressions, turned his back on them as something approaching evil. In What is Art? he attempts a literary explanation through the Biblical story of Joseph:

> The author of the novel of Joseph did not need to describe in detail, as would be done nowadays, the blood-stained coat of Joseph, the dwellings and dress of Jacob, the pose and attire of Potiphar's wife, and how, adjusting the bracelet on her left arm, she said, 'Come to me,' and so on, because the subject matter of feelings in this novel is so strong that all details, except the most essential, -- such as that Joseph went out into another room to weep, -- are superfluous, and would only hinder the transmission of feelings.[3]

Tolstoy's genius of creating that sensation of immediacy is scorned by the artist himself. Tolstoy no longer desired to make the particular seem universal; he wanted to write of

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[2]Kazimierz Waliszewski, A History of Russian Literature (New York, 1905), p. 388.

[3]What is Art? (New York, 1929), p. 147.

emotions already so general they needed no details to make them seem so. But as Isaiah Berlin implies, even though the fox who knows many things may desire to be the hedgehog who knows one big thing, the fox is not a hedgehog. In other words, Tolstoy could not totally reject the method that was most basic in his writing.

In the first creative stages of Hadji Murad, Tolstoy wrote Karganon, son of the colonel who had had custody of Hadji Murad, a series of questions:

> Did Hadji Murat live in a separate house or in the house of your father? What was the layout of the house? Was his clothing distinguishable from that of the ordinary mountaineers? On the day he escaped did he and his henchmen ride out with rifles on their shoulders or without them? -- There are so many things I'd like to ask but I am afraid of bothering you....[4]

He also studied a German historical account, Twenty Five Years in the Caucasus by Mr. Zisserman which provided him with much of the factual material.

Tolstoy's central story is about Hadji Murad, although he brings in several narrative threads to support his religious theories, such as a day with Tzar Nicholas whose every act is depraved, and the story of the soldier Avdeev whose death is the seemingly virtuous, simple death of a

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[4] Alexandra Tolstoy, p. 373.

peasant. Tolstoy shows Murad as a tribesman caught up in a conflict he does not understand. Hadji Murad wishes to remain independent of the Holy War, but he becomes involved as a result of a complicated tribal war, the details of which are given by Hadji Murad in a report to the Russians. At the end of the report he states his position:

> I neither wished nor could go over to Shamil [the Turkish leader], because he had caused the death of my father, my brothers, and my relations; but...I could not join the Russians because I had been dishonoured by them. (In Khunzakh, a scoundrel had spat on me while I was bound, and I could not join your people [the Russians] until that man was killed.[5]

In Tolstoy's version, Hadji Murad apparently stands for the genuine beau sauvage untouched by corrupting society as he surrenders himself to the Russians, not as an act of defeat but as a fair exchange for their help against Shamil who holds his family as prisoners. The Russians, who stand for the unconscious evil of sophistication and artificiality, misunderstand Hadji Murad's surrender and thoughtlessly force him to his destruction.

Obviously the preparation for a work in which reality must be closely imitated did not change. It was the same kind of research as he had done for War and Peace when he

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[5] Iván Ilých and Hadji Murad, trans. from the Russian by Louise and Aylmer Maude (London, 1959), p.304.

walked the battleground of Borodino and studied biographies of Napoleon and Alexander. Despite his public rejection of his characteristic style, he was still collecting details.

One also finds that power to create an illusion of movement and sensation of immediacy. Tolstoy's ability to take drab, factual material and turn it into something "sparkling," as L. Mishkovskaya calls the vividness in his fiction, is clearly seen by comparing excerpts from two histories he studied with his own version of Hadji Murad's death.

From <u>Twenty Five Years in the Caucasus</u> by Mr. Zisserman:

> Five shots met them almost point-blank, but this did not stop Hadji Aga, and they finally jumped upon the runaways. Hadji Murat, already wounded before by several bullets, had each time torn pieces of cotton out of his beshmet and stuffed the wounds. He sat under a bush with pistol in hands and as soon as the first people appeared, fired point-blank.

From Tolstoy:

> They [the militia] were shooting, at the same time nearing the obstruction, running from bush to bush. Some had a chance to run across, others fell under the bullets of Hadji Murad and his people. Hadji Murad killed without a miss....
>
> Then Hadji Murad was wounded. The bullet tore through his shoulder. He tore some cotton out of his beshmet, stopped up his wound, and continued shooting.[6]

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[6] Mishkovskaya, p. 45.

The last detail of Hadji Murad's life when he throws himself on his enemies is also provided Tolstoy in a historical account by Mr. Poteau.[7]

From Mr. Poteau:

> Then with his head bared, without cap, Hadji Murad, like a tiger, jumped from his barricade and with his cap in hand alone cut into the thick crowds of militiamen. He was chopped up on the spot.

From Tolstoy:

> Then he came out all the way from the ditch and with dagger went straight, limping heavily, to meet the enemy. Several shots rang out. He swayed and fell. Several militiamen gave triumphant shrieks and lunged toward the fallen body. But what had seemed a dead body began to move. Suddenly rose the bloody shaved head, without hat, then the torso, and, grabbing onto a tree, he raised all of him. He seemed so fearsome, that those who had run up stopped. But suddenly he shook, swayed away from the tree, and from his full height, like a thistle that had been mowed down, fell on his face and moved no more.[8]

But there is a change. Although one still finds an inventory of surrouhdings such as the whitewashed walls of the huts, Maria Dmitrievna's flaxen braid of hair and white teeth, Verontsov stretching out his hand to Hadji Murad in

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[7]Poteau may be translated as Potto. Mishkovskaya gives neither surname of the author nor title of his account.

[8]Mishkovskaya, p. 45.

its "wash-leather glove," there is not the crowding of details found in War and Peace and Anna Karenina. And even though one finds in this unfinished version signs of the old Tolstoyan technique in a rush of descriptive detail, there are moments when Hadji Murad approaches that simplicity, that artful lack of art it was meant to have. For example, there are no clear physical descriptions of Hadji Murad, yet the reader feels he knows him well enough to identify him in a crowd, for Hadji Murad becomes a part of the characters' emotions, and hence a part of the reader's. It is similar to the atmosphere Shakespeare creates in As You Like It. The whole play seems permeated with the greenwood and life under the greenwood tree, yet details of life in the forest are strangely lacking. A bush is mentioned and one or two trees, but there is practically no particular detail. The setting is presented through the reactions of the characters; the forest becomes a part of their emotions just as one feels he knows Hadji Murad through the characters reactions to him, even though Tolstoy mentions only occasionally his eyes and lame walk.

Also, the peripheral detail at times seems chosen with the "artistic inevitability" of which T.S. Eliot speaks of when he says:

> The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a

> set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.... The artistic 'inevitability' lies in this complete adequacy of the external to the emotion....[9]

One may recall that Hadji Murad begins with the story teller walking through the harvest fields where he notices a thistle plant remaining erect despite its mutilation from a cart-wheel. It is this crushed thistle in the midst of a ploughed field that reminds Tolstoy of Hadji Murad. He stays close to this objective correlative throughout the story.

Again when Hadji Murad surrenders to the Russians as payment for help against Shamil, he hears the sound of wood choppers felling trees as he rides through the forest. In view of the ending and the chosen objective correlative, this detail is certainly in "complete adequacy of the external to the emotion" as required by Mr. Eliot.

But Tolstoy is not as successful with the narrative threads he brings in to support his religious theories. The day with Tzar Nicholas, the gift of the ring to the ballet master, the night with his mistress, and the detail surrounding the soldier Avdeev exist as sermons on the evil of aristocracy and the goodness of primitive peasants. These sermons seem mechani-

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[9] "Hamlet," Elizabethan Essays (London, 1934), p. 61.

cally connected to the main narrative, they are confusing, and they are a hindrance to the central story. Tolstoy's principal concern was no longer the story but his philosophy. As a result, the edges half obscure the center as Hadji Murad is burdened with allegory. On the other hand, in War and Peace, Tolstoy's chief concern was with the story as he kept his theories pretty much confined to passages separate from the narrative, until Platón Karatáev enters the story at the end. Even Levin's philosophical search does not obscure the central story of Anna, although at times it threatens to do so.

The different structure of the novel explains more clearly the change in timing of peripheral detail which results in that sudden vibration of emotions. The structure of War and Peace has often been compared to a river in flood carrying everything in its path; Anna Karenina emerges with more conventional form as in the main plot of Anna and Vronsky's love affair supported by the sub-plot of Kitty and Levin's courtship. But the structure of Hadji Murad seems to resemble a Bysantine onion dome. The central story of Hadji Murad structurally stands as a single bolt of electricity to the emotions which come plunging with the last extraordinary detail of the nightingales -- an uncanny echo from the Cymric lament.

> Hadji Aga placed his foot on the back of the corpse and with two blows cut off the head, and carefully -- not

> to soil his shoes with blood -- rolled it away with his foot. Crimson blood spurted from the arteries of the neck, and black blood flowed from the head, soaking the grass.
>
> Kargonov and Hadji Aga and Akhmet Khan and all the militiamen gathered together -- like sportsmen round a slaughtered animal -- near the bodies of Hadji Murad and his men...and amid the powder smoke which hung over the bushes they triumphed in their victory.
>
> The nightingales, that had hushed their songs while the firing lasted, now started their trills once more; first one quite close, then others in the distance.[10]

The familiar process of selecting, spacing, and timing peripheral detail is found at times more exacting than in his pre-conversion works in the sense that there is less detail and some of it carries the added weight of symbolism. This appears to be the outstanding change in his style which resulted as a rejection of it. There are blurred moments, to be sure, when preaching becomes confused with telling a story, but as compensation there are moments when Tolstoy's dramatic presentation is more sharp and direct than before as he strove to reach the reader's spirit rather than his senses.

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[10] p. 384.

Chapter VI

Conclusion

In his book The Twentieth Century Novel, Joseph Beach points out that one of the major changes in modern fiction has been the disappearance of author intervention and the emergence of the dramatic present. In other words, modern authors attempt to "render the very feel and texture of an ...experience; not to tell about it in intellectual generalizations but to give the items of which it is composed."[1] In his analysis of the contrast between the non-dramatic presentation as found in Thackeray's Vanity Fair and the dramatic presentation as found in Tolstoy's Anna Karenina, Beach illustrates that Thackeray's novel gives the impression of being a "mere series of sketches loosely strung along on a tenuous thread of plot."[2] Not only does Thackeray seem to feel responsible in alloting each character equal attention, but he fails to develop any scene or group of scenes beyond a few pages. The most dramatic part of the book -- beginning with Becky's triumph at Lord Steyne's party, and ending with the

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[1]Beach, p. 24.

[2]Ibid, p. 168.

break-up of her marriage with Rawdon -- is deflated by the insertion of a whole chapter of backflash information at the height of the action. On the other hand, Tolstoy chooses to "represent only those major occasions that have dramatic significance; as if he could pay always in large bills and let the small change go. And then, comparing his procedure with that of Dickens and Thackeray, we might say that Dickens deals largely in small change, which he treats as if it were large bills -- that is, he erects each minor event into a major dramatic occasion. Thackeray too deals largely in what for Tolstoy would be small change, but he does not treat it as large bills -- neglecting to erect it into major dramatic occasions or scenes."[3] Tolstoy seems to brush aside the inconsequential. There is no need to summarize events for he "manages to make the large single dramatic occasions stand for the mass of minor events."[4] As Beach says:

> He passes from one scene to another, from one period to another, with the slightest reference to what was going on in the interval. This is the instinct of Tolstoy. Each new part begins at a period considerably later than the one preceding, and almost invariably without preliminaries, in the midst of a scene. 'At the end of the winter, in the Schcherbatsky's house, a consultation was being held.' 'Princess Schcherbatsky considered that it was out

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[3]Beach, p. 169.

[4]Ibid.

> of the question for the wedding to take place before Lent.' 'Vronsky and Anna had been travelling for three months together in Europe.' 'Levin had been married three months. He was happy, but not at all in the way he had expected to be.' We find ourselves planted solidly in the midst of the new scene, in the mind perhaps of one of the characters.[5]

Because Tolstoy did not rely on the old masses-of-informational exposition, he was forced to seek other devices to make his fiction more believable to the reader. In such a technique there was no room for the unabsorbed mass of detail as found in non-dramatic presentations; Tolstoy chose with exacting precision those details which would most readily establish the vivid sense of the here and now. In addition, he spaced these details in the story to create the illusion of movement and make the reading seem swift and exciting. In what seems an additional effort to remove the obstacles between author and reader and to reach the unlimited density of experience in the more crucially dramatic sdenes, Tolstoy used detail to heighten the reader's emotions in time with those of the character involved. Emotionally, the reader reacts much like a thermometer as it rises under increasing heat. At a point when the reader feels the full strain of the urgent intensity of the scene, Tolstoy chooses a cold, unemotional

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[5]Beach, p. 169.

detail which sends the reader's feelings plummeting downward.

Tolstoy's ability to make descriptive detail function dramatically is the one characteristic of his style which survived all other changes in his writing; it will remain as one of the important bases for that quality of keen freshness and inexplicable excitement found in his fiction. For this reason Tolstoy's technique deserves more attention from the critics as well as from aspiring writers. For writers, a study of Tolstoy's use of peripheral detail is as important as the brush is to an artist learning to paint. For the critics interested in Tolstoy, I respectfully urge further investigations of Tolstoy's style with special emphasis on his use of detail. More attention should be directed toward Tolstoy's use of detail to illustrate his philosophy, an area only touched upon in this essay. Such studies might also consider how peripheral detail illustrates his moral precepts, his concern with the superficial versus the genuine. Also, does his peripheral detail reflect or enlighten his theory of history which has perplexed the readers of War and Peace since its first publication?

The stylistic approach to literature may not always be the best nor the most rewarding; it has its flaws as have all single, isolated approaches to a literary work. But it is an important view to take as writers turn more toward the dramatic presentation in their efforts to engage the reader

more readily and completely. In the hands of a skillful writer, technique can be a powerful tool; and for the critic, a study of the method of presentation may provide illuminating discoveries about an author's text.

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