

Nachkriegserfahrungen

Heroism, Apophthegms, and the Plutarchan Hypotext in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*

Tolstoy vs Plutarch

There is no question that Homer's *Iliad* is a legitimate and powerful comparandum for Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*.¹ Yet the most overtly present ancient author in *War and Peace* (hereafter *W&P*) is in fact Plutarch. The novel, written in 1860s, uses Plutarch's *Lives* for the purposes of cultural authentication; Tolstoy aims to capture the interest in classical heroism among the Russian nobility during the Napoleonic era.² But Plutarch also matters to Tolstoy conceptually and polemically. It would not be an exaggeration to say that *W&P* regards the Plutarchan *Lives* as the archetypal heroic text – and, therefore, an intensely problematic text, because Tolstoy is determined to challenge the idea of heroic greatness. Throughout *W&P* there is sustained authorial effort to expose and debunk the self-centredness and bombastic insincerity of heroism at the level of ideology and agency alike. Plutarch's *Lives* are implicated in and responsible for the discursive ethos that Tolstoy attacks.³ The first mention of Plutarch in *W&P* is framed as commentary from the high society in Saint Petersburg on the patriotic zeal displayed by the Moscow gentry and merchants (cf. *W&P* III.1.22–23) in the summer of 1812 when the French invasion of Russia is underway:

Anna Pavlovna's circle [...] was enraptured by this enthusiasm, and spoke of it as Plutarch speaks of the ancients (*i govorili o nikh, kak govorit Plutarkh o drevnikh*). (*W&P* III.2.6)⁴

Plutarch's *Lives* here are a ready-made matrix for broadcasting patriotic pathos in an elite environment whose inhabitants Tolstoy repeatedly finds

¹ E.g. Jepsen 1978, 12–21. For fresh appraisal of Tolstoy's intertextual dialogue with the *Iliad*, see Orwin 2015.

² Zadorojnyi 2018a, 155–62.

³ See further Carden 1988; Zadorojnyi 2018a.

⁴ English translations of *W&P* are taken from *Leo Tolstoy: War and Peace*, translated by Louise and Aylmer Maude, revised and edited by Amy Mandelker, Oxford 2010. For Plutarch's *Lives*, Robin Waterfield's translations (Plutarch: *Greek Lives*. Oxford 1998; Plutarch: *Roman Lives*. Oxford 1999) as well as Bernadotte Perrin's older translation in the Loeb Classical Library series are used.

wanting in integrity and genuine humane commitment.⁵ Anna Pavlovna's group consists of manipulative rhetorical operators, but this does not diminish the fact that the Plutarchan text plays into their hands.

The second time Plutarch appears in *W&P* at the very end of the narrative, in the last chapter of the First Epilogue. Here the focalizer is the teenaged son of the late Prince Andrei.

Nikolenka [...] had awoken from a terrible dream (*strashnyi son*). He had dreamt that he and Uncle Pierre, wearing helmets such as were depicted in his Plutarch (*v kaskakh – takikh, kotorye byli narisovany v izdanii Plutarkha*), were leading a huge army. The army was made up of white slanting lines that filled the air like the cobwebs (*podobno [...] pautinam*) that float about in autumn [...]. In front was Glory (*slava*), which was similar to those threads but rather thicker. (Epilogue 1.16)

Nikolenka's inner monologue foregrounds emulation of ancient, specifically Plutarchan heroes:

» [...] Mucius Scaevola burnt his hand. Why should not the same sort of thing happen to me? I know they want me to learn. And I will learn. But some day I will have finished learning, and then I will do something (*sdelaiu*). I only pray to God that something may happen to me such as happened to Plutarch's men, and I will act as they did (*chtoby bylo so mnoiu to, chto bylo s liudmi Plutarkha, i ia sdelaiu to zhe*). I will do better (*Ya sdelaiu lutshe*). Everyone shall know me, love me, and be delighted with me.« And suddenly his bosom heaved with sobs and he began to cry. (ibid.)

Unlike the aristocrats in the Saint Petersburg salon, Nikolenka is certainly sincere.⁶ The Tolstoyan diagnosis, however, still does not seem to be a happy one: a keen reader of the *Lives* and a worshipper of »Plutarch's men«, the boy is drawn towards heroic self-assertion, which before his birth his father Andrei had pursued so traumatically.⁷ Plutarch's biographies inspire heroic imagination and thus, to Tolstoy, constitute an ideological pitfall. Patricia Carden aptly speaks of *W&P*'s disapproval of the »Plutarchan tradition«, in the sense of authoritative cultural template of heroic excellence that is energised, ultimately, by individualism which can and often does carry one towards misguided ambition, falsehood, and outright evil; according to Carden, the most monstrous as well as the most logical offspring of the

⁵ Silbajoris 1995, 71–72, 100.

⁶ Yet the motif of admiration links Nikolenka's monologue (»Everyone shall [...] be delighted with me«; *use voskhitiatsia mnoiu*) to the language deployed in Anna Pavlovna's salon (III.2.6 »were enraptured by this enthusiasm«; *voskhischalis' etimi vostorgami*).

⁷ Orwin 2012, 109; Samet 2012, 173–74; Zadorojnyi 2018a, 172–75; further, Carden 1988, 86, 88–90. See also n. 29 below.

»Plutarchan tradition« of heroism in Tolstoy's narrative is Napoleon, with his criminal mega-egotism.⁸

Tolstoy thus flags up Plutarch's *Lives* as great text that is likely to lead us astray. In one of the novel's extensive drafts, when Tolstoy dwells on the mismatch between lofty discourse and the actual behaviour of military leaders, Plutarch is singled out, again, as literature that produces unhelpfully unrealistic benchmarks of heroism:

Fine generals and men, all of them [...] were always writing in the style of Derzhavin⁹ about love for the Fatherland and the tsar and other suchlike nonsense (*vzdor*), yet essentially they were thinking most of the time about dinner and medal ribbons – a blue one, or a red one. This is a human motive, which should not be condemned, but it should be stated plainly, otherwise the young generation are misled as they observe with bewilderment and despair the weakness inside their own souls, whereas in Plutarch and in their national history they see exclusively heroes. (*PSS* XIV.155–156)¹⁰

In the long essay on the nature of history, forming the Second Epilogue to *W&P*, Tolstoy queries the notion of »great men« and the »biographical« approach to the past. »Biographical history« prioritises »great men«:

The biographical and special national histories are like paper money. They can be used and can circulate and fulfil their purpose without harm to anyone, and even advantageously, as long as no one asks what is the security behind them. (*W&P* Epilogue 2.3)

The representative of such an approach and the immediate target of Tolstoy's critique here is Louis Adolphe Thiers (1797–1877), whose work about the Napoleonic era is cited tauntingly on several occasions in the novel (e.g. III.2.7, IV.2.9–10). It is, nevertheless, tempting to assume that Plutarch as the most household name within the genre of biography is implicitly on Tolstoy's radar too. At the end of the day, *W&P* needs the »Plutarchan tradition« and, more generally, the heroic paradigms of classical antiquity precisely because Tolstoy seeks to invalidate them while maintaining a resistant awareness of their established cultural importance.¹¹ Tolstoy's fight

⁸ Carden 1988, 84–88; cf. Love 2004, 63.

⁹ An eminent Russian poet (1743–1816), whose oeuvre includes high-style odes.

¹⁰ The acronym *PSS* refers to Tolstoy's Complete Collected Works (*Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*) in ninety volumes (Moscow 1928–58); translations of Tolstoy's manuscript material, as published in volumes XIII–XV of *PSS*, are my own.

¹¹ Samet 2012, 174. Compare and contrast Stendhal's invocations of Plutarch: Manzini 2004, 32–33, 79–80, 113, and 190 n. 1.

against the conventional discourse of heroism calls for high-calibre inter- and hypotextual adversaries.

The Plutarchan apophthegm

This paper is going to explore Tolstoy's polemical engagement with the »Plutarchan tradition« of heroism through the lens of apophthegms, that is, striking and memorable sayings mounted in a cameo narrative. Even though based on the ancient classifications the term »chreia« should be perhaps preferred to »apophthegm«,¹² I am going to stick to »apophthegm« out of loyalty to Plutarch, who is fond of the word;¹³ besides, the transmitted titles of several collections of sayings in the Plutarchan corpus feature the word *apophthégmata*.¹⁴ It is right to treat apophthegms as a vital component of the »Plutarchan tradition«, because apophthegms play a major role in Plutarch's *Lives*. The climax of an anecdote, which is the essential unit of the Plutarchan biographical text, is very often an apophthegmatic phrase – in line with the declaration in the proem to the *Alexander and Caesar*:

yet frequently it takes a little act, a word or a joke (*prágma brakhú [...] kaí rhéma kaí paídiá tis*) to showcase one's character better than battles (*Alexander* 1.2)

There is much good scholarship on Plutarch's anecdotes and apophthegms,¹⁵ yet in order to gauge the impact of the Plutarchan apophthegm on the anti-heroic debate in *W&P* it would be more opportune to follow up the original, at times pointedly unorthodox, cross-cultural taxonomy of aphoristic sayings that is proposed by the renowned Tolstoyan specialist Gary Saul Morson in his stimulating book *The Long and Short of It*.¹⁶ One type of short

¹² For review of the ancient terminology, see Stenger 2006.

¹³ *Lycurgus* 20.1, 20.6; *Themistocles* 18.9; *Cato Maior* 2.6; *Coniugalia praecepta* 145E; *De Alexandri fortuna aut virtute* 330F, 331A; *De Pythiae oraculis* 408E; *De vitioso pudore* 532F; *Adversus Colotem* 1111C. Also the adjective *apophthegmatikós*: *Lycurgus* 19.2, 19.6; *Cato Maior* 3.2, 7.1; *Brutus* 2.5; *De garrulitate* 510F.

¹⁴ *Apophthegms of Kings and Commanders* (which may or may not be identical with *Apophthegms of Leaders, Generals and Tyrants*, listed as number 108 in the so called Lamprias Catalogue); *Apophthegms of Spartans*; *Apophthegms of Spartan Women*. See Beck 2002; Stadter 2014; Scott 2015 and 2017.

¹⁵ E.g. Stadter 1996 and 2008; Beck 2000; Duff 2005.

¹⁶ Morson 2012a. It is worth stressing that Morson chooses to apply the term »apophthegm« itself to aphoristic reflection on the unfathomable mysteries of being: *ibid.*, 9–10, 20–23, 230.

sayings, which Morson calls »summons«, belongs in the political sphere. A »summons« conveys and propagates martial valour, civic virtue, patriotism, and so on;¹⁷ it is heroic by default. Another, more self-explanatory category in Morson's taxonomy is »wit«, that is sharp, often sarcastic comment enacted as an extempore riposte.¹⁸

Tolstoy's critique of heroism in *W&P* extends to heroic speech. A revealing manuscript passage depreciates, quite literally, the acoustic dimension of heroism on the battlefield:

A hero's voice resonates as much as a coward's voice. Whereas a cannon is louder than a hundred heroes. P[rince] A[ndrei] learned this at Auster[litz]. (*PSSXIII.37*)

Morson's terminology cannot fail to give us a firmer handle on understanding Tolstoy's attitude towards heroism expressed in language. Indeed, Morson himself notes that *W&P* is consistently hostile to »summons« and »wit«; the Tolstoyan narrative undermines these categories of dicta by connecting them to deluded fascination with grandeur and power, or to hypocrisy, which are both facets of individualistic self-assertion.¹⁹

Tolstoy's dislike of heroic and witty sayings can be read in the light of his polemics against the »Plutarchan tradition«. Plutarch's *Lives* offer plenty of apophthegmatic material that meets Morson's criteria for »summons« and »wit«, respectively. A Plutarchan biographical anecdote would regularly culminate in a punchy phrase that is either a statement of valour, or a wisecrack.

Pelopidas was told that the tyrant was advancing against him with a large force. He remarked, »All the better, there will be more for us to conquer.« (*Pelopidas* 32.2)

a strong wind arose and the helmsmen were hesitant about setting sail. But Pompey led the way aboard [...] declaring in a loud voice, »We have to sail; we don't have to live!« (*Pompey* 50.2)

This man [Marcus Livius] was vexed by the honours paid to Fabius, and once, carried away by his jealousy and ambition, said to the senate that it was not Fabius, but himself, who should be credited with the capture of Tarentum. At this Fabius laughed, and said, »You are right; had you not lost the city, I would not have had not taken it.« (*Fabius* 23.4)

¹⁷ Morson 2012a, 173–90.

¹⁸ Morson 2012a, 67–95.

¹⁹ Morson 2012a, 9: »Many short genres play a role in *War and Peace*. Although this work respectfully explores the wisdom of proverbs, maxims, and apothegms, Tolstoy treats the summons with irony and the witticism with contempt.« Further, Morson 2012a, 87–89, 185–86, and 2012b. On the meaning Morson attaches to »apophthegm«, see n. 16 above.

After the defeat, when Nonnius said that they ought still to have hope since there were seven eagles [legionary standards] left in Pompey's camp, Cicero replied, »Excellent advice, if only we were fighting against jackdaws.« (*Cicero* 38.7)

Obviously, the examples could go on. But it should be already clear that »summons« and »wit« are staple ingredients of the Plutarchan biographical portrayal and, by the same token, of the heroic biographical paradigm that *W&P* imputes to Plutarch. Notwithstanding the absence of explicit quotations of apophthegms from the *Lives* in Tolstoy's novel, these speech acts are relevant as a cumulative *extratextual* hypotext and target for the Tolstoyan cross-examination. It is also apparent that Tolstoy ascribes to his characters a strongly unified reading of Plutarch's *Lives* (»Plutarch's men«: Epilogue 1.16; »as Plutarch speaks of the ancients«: III.2.6); there is no attempt in *W&P* to differentiate between the Plutarchan biographees,²⁰ who are of course not all heroic in the same way, nor invariably praiseworthy.

How to Ruin a Heroic Apophthegm

W&P resorts to a range of strategies aimed at vitiating heroic and/or witty apophthegmatic sayings. The most decisive way to undercut a heroic pronouncement is through voiceover by the omniscient narrator. Heroic language rings hollow when checked against psychological and historical truth.

»I am convinced that we Russians must die or conquer,« he [Nikolai] concluded, conscious – as were others – after the words were uttered that his remarks were too enthusiastic and bombastic (*slishkom vostorzhenno i napysschemo*) for the occasion and were therefore awkward. (I.1.16)

»I gift (*dariu*) you that column, lads,« he [General Miloradovich] would say, urging up to the troops and pointing out the French to the cavalry. And the cavalry, urging on horses that could scarcely move [...] trotted with much effort to the column presented to them – that is to say, to a crowd of Frenchmen stark with cold, frost-bitten and starving – and the column that had been presented to them threw down its arms and surrendered, as it had long been anxious to do. (IV.4.4)

Tolstoy is equally fond of creating a bathetic effect via juxtaposition of grand words with the phonetic and generally physical details of the utterance.

²⁰ In Plutarch, by contrast, even very compact references to famous historical figures entail rudimentary cognizance of their individualised biographical profiles: Zadorojnyi 2018b.

He [the old Prince Bolkonsky] paused unexpectedly, and then in a querulous voice (*krikliwym golosom*) suddenly shrieked (*uzvizgnul*): »but if I hear that you have not behaved like a son of Nikolai Bolkonsky, I shall be ashamed!« (I.1.25)

In the scene where Napoleon interviews the captive Russian officers after Austerlitz, the phonetic factor is at odds with the heroic posture: »Youth is no hindrance to courage,« muttered Sukhtelen in a failing voice.« (I.3.19). A more ironic and elaborate approach to sabotaging an apophthegm is repetition, which saps away its verbal energy, and thus leaves it looking contrived and sterile. The prime example of such repetition in *W&P* is the Russian emperor's aphoristically formulated condition for making peace with Napoleon in 1812 (»not as long as a single armed enemy remains in my territory«). The words are repeated thrice in the text (twice in III.1.3, then III.1.4),²¹ confirming to the point of overkill that Alexander I sets great store by this phrase. Yet Alexander's obsessive restatements build up to the moment of frustration, when his envoy eventually fails to deliver the words to Napoleon, and not due to faulty memory:

Here Balashov hesitated: he remembered the words the Emperor Alexander had not written in his letter, but had specifically inserted in the rescript to Saltykov and had told Balashov to repeat to Napoleon. Balashov remembered these words, »So long as a single armed foe remain on Russian soil«, but some complex feeling²² restrained him. He could not utter them, though he wished to do so. He grew confused, and said, »On condition that the French army retired beyond the Niemen.« (III.1.6)

Repetitiveness is bad for witty sayings, too. Bilibin, who is foremost master of quips (*mots*) in the novel, keeps rehearsing one particular witticism (I.2.10 »repeating one of his own *mots*«); the readers are likely to think even less

²¹ »The Emperor, with the agitation of one who has been personally affronted, was finishing with these words: »To enter Russia without declaring war! I will not make peace as long as a single armed enemy remains in my country!« It seemed to Boris that it gave the Emperor pleasure to utter these words. [...] he insisted on the words being inserted into the rescript that he would not make peace so long as a single armed Frenchman remained on Russian soil.« (*W&P* III.1.3). »When dispatching Balashov the Emperor repeated to him the words that he would not make peace so long as a single armed enemy remained on Russian soil, and told him to transmit those words to Napoleon. Alexander did not insert them in his letter to Napoleon because, with his characteristic tact, he felt it would be injudicious to use them at a moment when a last attempt at reconciliation was being made, but he definitely instructed Balashov to repeat them personally to Napoleon.« (*W&P* III.1.4).

²² Compare the more specific explanation in the draft text (*PSS* XIV.27): »some inexplicable complex feeling, called tactfulness (*takt*) [...] probably, instinct was forbidding [...] «.

of Bilibin when the same *mot* resurfaces in III.2.6. In Bilibin's case, a clever apophthegm proves to be a calculated bid for social recognition – as soon as he has come up with an acerbic pun, he anticipates that it »would be repeated« (I.2.12) by others.

Apophthegms are prominent in *W&P* as part of the cultural repertoire of Russian nobility in the early 1800s. During this period, the Russian elite's self-fashioning had a penchant for heroic aphoristic speech that was drawing at will on the discursive codes of Sentimentalism, Neoclassicism and the nascent Romanticism.²³ But while acknowledging the historicity of Russian aristocratic apophthegmatism, Tolstoy takes a stance against such heroically oriented language per se as a symptom of an outlook that he believes to be fundamentally flawed, not least because it is stamped with the »Plutarchan tradition«. It makes sense, then, to assume that Tolstoy's quarrel with Plutarch is alive not only when his narrative explicitly impugns »ancient heroism« (III.1.12; III.3.5; III.3.16; *PSS* XIV.93), but also when Tolstoy picks at the heroic or witty apophthegms.

The bias against the heroic language of the elite in *W&P* is thrown into relief by the fact that quasi-aphoristic remarks from the common people are handled markedly differently. Throughout the novel the voices of anonymous rank-and-file soldiers or peasants are heard as profound and authoritative assessments of the events, for example on the eve or in the aftermath of a major battle.

»What a lot of men have been damaged today – frightful!« (I.2.21)

»They want the whole nation to lay into it – in a word, it's Moscow. They want to make an end of it.« (III.2.20)

»– Eh, book books! [...] – Yep, they worked all day and didn't play!« (III.2.14)

»Eh, what people! Against God's might our hands can't fight.« (III.3.21)

»Well, we're going to end it anyways. He [Napoleon] won't be walking again.« (IV.4.8)

»They are men, too. [...] Even wormwood grows on its own root.« (IV.4.9)

The anonymity and the homey intonation of such comments signal a drift away from the grandiloquent selfishness of aristocratic apophthegms towards proverbs as speech that transcends individuality, and Tolstoy welcomes

²³ Lotman 2008, 208–9; Prikazchikova 2010 and 2018, 272–83; Sdvižkov 2012.

exactly that.²⁴ The Tolstoyan peasants and soldiers get it right without linguistic artifice and self-promotion. The reader is invited to agree with Pierre, who endorses these folksy maxims and comes to understand that the common people are wise beyond language:

In spite of the obscurity of the soldier's words Pierre understood what he wanted to say, and nodded approval. (III.2.20)

»And *they* are simple. *They* do not talk but act (*delaïut*). The spoken word is silver but the unspoken is golden.« (III.3.9)

Saliently, Nikolénka Bolskónsky in the Epilogue 1.16 promises to »act« (*sdelaiut*) on a par with »Plutarch's men« and better – to act, not to speak: the mimetic appeal of Plutarchan heroism is potent, yet in the eyes of a pure young reader apophthegms are less central to heroic identity than action. For a brief second towards the end of *W&P* the favourite Tolstoyan dichotomy between language and the fabric of life itself is projected onto Plutarch's text.

The upshot of this overview of Tolstoy's treatment of apophthegms is that they are unequivocally on the wrong side of the Tolstoyan ethical theorems for society and history. *W&P*'s attack on apophthegmatic »Plutarchan« heroism is vigorous yet, as an exercise in classical reception, rather one-dimensional. Tolstoy appears to align apophthegmatic sayings with heroism in a drastically straightforward fashion, thus overlooking the much more balanced and nuanced deployment of apophthegms in Plutarch's *Lives*. The apophthegmatic anecdotes reported by Plutarch are frequently meant not to celebrate the protagonist but instead to evaluate and problematize his ethico-political character.

There is a story that one of his sons, while still a boy, asked him [Pyrrhus] which of them would inherit the kingdom. »The one with the sharpest sword,« Pyrrhus replied. Which is no different from the infamous curse from the tragedy, that brothers should »divide their house with sharpened steel« [Euripides, *Phoenician Women* 68]. This just goes to show that savagery and brutality of any enterprise that is driven by greed. (*Pyrrhus* 9.5–6)

Caesar went on, »So if there is any attempt to violate the laws, will you come to the help of the Roman people?« »Of course,« Pompey replied, »I'll bring my

²⁴ Proverbs prevail in the speech of the saintly Platon Karataev by whom Pierre is inspired when in French captivity (IV.1.13).

swords and shield against their threat of swords.« This was widely held to be the most meretricious thing that Pompey had said or done up until then; even his friends sprang to his defence and claimed that the words must have slipped out in the heat of the moment. (*Pompey* 47.7–8)

Alexander gave a celebrated reply – »I am not a thief, to steal my victory,« he said – but it struck some people as a childish and foolish response, and they thought he was being flippant in the face of danger. To others, however, his reply seemed to indicate that he was not dismayed by the situation and had correctly judged the future (*Alexander* 31.12–13)

An apophthegm may even backfire on the Plutarchan biographee:

When people asked where the troops were to keep Caesar away from Rome if he marched against it, he smiled and [...] told them not to worry. »All I have to do,« he said, »is stamp my foot on the ground anywhere in Italy, and foot soldiers and cavalry will arise.« [...] One Favonius [...] asked Pompey why he did not stamp his foot on the ground and call up the forces he had promised. Pompey put up with these tactless remarks without losing his self-composure. (*Pompey* 57.8–9, 60.7–8; cf. *Caesar* 33.5)

Moreover, in Plutarch, just as in *W&P*, an apophthegm can be delivered by a background figure of low social status (e.g. *Demetrius* 42.7: the old woman reproaches the king).

In short, the genuine Plutarchan practice of writerly-readerly management of apophthegms is richer and more sophisticated than *W&P* seems to imply. The inevitable conclusion has to be that, in order to confront the »Plutarchan tradition«, Tolstoy chooses to oversimplify and distort this tradition. Not unlike Anna Pavlovna's guests and Nikolenka (III.2.6; Epilogue 1.16), the narrator of *W&P* operates with a streamlined notion of Plutarchan biography here.

Such a conclusion risks, in turn, to be an oversimplification of Tolstoy. Consider the collage of apophthegms in the digression on the vanity of Marshal Murat.

He was so sure that he really was the King of Naples that when on the eve of his departure from that city, while walking through the streets with his wife, some Italians called out to him: »*Viva il re!*« he turned to his wife with a pensive smile and said: »*Les malheureux, ils ne savent pas que je les quitte demain!*« But though he firmly believed himself to be King of Naples, and pitied the grief felt by the subjects he was abandoning, latterly, after he had been ordered to return to military service, and especially since his last interview with Napoleon in Danzig, when his august brother-in-law had told him: »*Je vous ai fait Roi pour régner à ma manière, mais pas à*

la votre!« – he had cheerfully taken up his familiar business, and – like a well-fed but not over-fat horse that feels himself in the harness and grows skittish between the shafts – he dressed up in clothes as variegated and expensive as possible, and gaily and contentedly galloped along the roads of Poland (III.1.4)

The tactics of appraising a historical figure by means of several apophthegmatic snapshots is of course ubiquitous in Plutarch's *Lives*, so here Tolstoy is arguably on the Plutarchan wavelength.²⁵

Tolstoy's Kutuzov as Supra-Apophthegmatic Hero

W&P drives a revisionist ideology of heroism and greatness, yet it is not a post-heroic narrative. Tolstoy is not ruling out an alternative model of greatness (IV.3.18 »And there is no greatness without simplicity, goodness, and truth.«; IV.4.5). The character of Kutuzov is the most tangled and interesting case in terms of apophthegms and biographical heroism in *W&P* generally.²⁶ The narrative urges us to size up Kutuzov's heroism through the description of his appearance,²⁷ zooming in on »his eagle nose on a puffy face« (I.2.13), and especially his scar:

Prince Andrei glanced at Kutuzov's face [...] and involuntarily noticed the carefully washed seams of the scar near his temple, where an Izmail bullet had pierced his skull, and the empty eye-socket. »Yes, he has a right to speak so calmly of those men's death,« thought Bolkonsky. (I.2.13)

Any historically savvy reader would immediately spot the error in this passage; Kutuzov fought in the siege of Izmail (1790), but the wound which left him blind in one eye occurred some years earlier.²⁸ It is certainly possible yet perhaps short-sighted to attribute the error to Tolstoy himself, bearing in mind that he received generous assistance with research and editing of *W&P* from the eminent historian Petr Bartenev (1829–1912). Prince Andrei as the internal focalizer might be a more suitable culprit. In the first quarter of the novel Andrei is addicted to heroism and exemplary heroic biography,

²⁵ Whereas the horse simile points towards the *Iliad* 6.506–11 – although perfectly feasible in Plutarch's prose too.

²⁶ Scholarship on Tolstoy's Kutuzov is vast; see especially Skaftymov 1972, 187–92; Love 2004, 89–95.

²⁷ On the significance of Kutuzov's body in *W&P*, see Kokobobo 2014, 220–22.

²⁸ For an accessible account of Kutuzov's wounds from the medical perspective, see Kushchayev et al. 2015.

primarily Napoleon's (e.g. I.1.4).²⁹ His passion for heroic past could have prompted Andrei to associate Kutuzov's wound with the most famous and bloodiest campaign of the Russo-Turkish wars of the eighteenth century; Kutuzov is thus entitled to bona fide, biographically embedded heroism.³⁰ Serendipitously, Plutarch demonstrates a similar (in fact, more self-conscious) willingness to uphold legendary characterization at the expense of chronology:

Some think they can prove, on chronological grounds, that the celebrated meeting between Solon and Croesus is a fiction. However, when a story is so famous and well attested and, more importantly, so much in keeping with Solon's character and worthy of his self-assurance, I for one do not feel inclined to reject it on the basis of some so-called chronological tables (*Solon* 27.1)

Kutuzov's heroic past in *W&P* is mythical but also, at core, authentic. At the same time Tolstoy takes care to ring-fence his Kutuzov from grandiloquent heroism. Kutuzov cannot stand heroic rant:

He turned away with a grimace as if to say that everything Dolokhov had said to him and everything he could say had long been known to him, that he was weary of it and it was not at all what he wanted. (I.2.2)

»Russia's ancient and sacred capital!« he suddenly said, repeating Bennigsen's words in an angry voice and thereby drawing attention to the false note in them. (III.3.4)

Kutuzov's own rhetorical policy is unpretentious and random because, according to Tolstoy, he has no faith in words.

Kutuzov never talked of »40 centuries looking down from the Pyramids«,³¹ of the sacrifices he offered for the Fatherland, or of what he intended to accomplish or had accomplished: in general he said nothing about himself, adopted no pose, always appeared to be the simplest and most ordinary of men, and said the simplest and most ordinary things. [...] Not merely in these cases, but continually, did that old man – who by experience of life had reached the conviction that thoughts, and the words serving as their expression, are not what move people – use quite meaningless words that happened to enter his head. (IV.4.5)

²⁹ On Andrei's evolution in *W&P*, see e.g. Hagan 1969: 168–190; Jepsen 1978, 28–29, 38–53; Love 2004, 162–71 and 2012, 86–89.

³⁰ Cf. PSS XIII.534 »as if he recalled his youth, his charge at Izmail, he straightened up, his only eye flashing, and galloped forward.«

³¹ A swipe at Napoleon's florid rhetoric. Tolstoy alludes here to the colourful (if somewhat apocryphal) phrase that dates back to the Battle of Embabeh, in July 1798.

Tolstoy's Kutuzov thus comes across as a kind of »Taoist sage«³² in charge of an army. And yet on closer reading one notices that Kutuzov in *W&P* is a highly confident and versatile speaker. At the meeting with an unnamed Austrian general, his oral skills border on smugness:

he said with a pleasant elegance (*s priatnym iziaschestvom*) of expression and intonation that obliged one to listen to each deliberately spoken word. It was evident that Kutuzov himself listened with pleasure to his own voice. (*i sam s udovol'stviem slushal sebia*) (I.2.3)

Crucially, Kutuzov is prepared to avail himself of the conventional idiom of heroism, as he does in the letter to Prince Andrei's father when Andrei is presumed dead:

»Your son,« wrote Kutuzov, »fell before my eyes, a standard in his hand and at the head of a regiment – he fell as a hero (*pal geroem*), worthy of his father and his Fatherland.« (II.1.7, cf. *PSS XIII.569*)

Furthermore, Kutuzov is capable of snappy extempore apophthegms, such as his retort to the emperor Alexander on the morning of the Battle of Austerlitz: »That is just why I do not begin, sire, because we are not on parade and not on the Tsaritsyn Field.« (I.3.15). In a moment of crisis Kutuzov combines words with a deictic gesture:

Blood was flowing from his cheek. [...] »The wound is not here, it is there!« – said Kutuzov, pressing the handkerchief to his wounded cheek and pointing to the fleeing soldiers. (I.3.16)

When addressing the soldiers, he masterly switches on the folksy style: »And with such fine fellows to retreat and retreat!« (III.2.15); »But after all, who asked them [the French] here? Serves them right, the b... b...!« (IV.4.6). Among the high society, however, Kutuzov has the reputation of an accomplished and astute conversationalist:

»*Vous savez ce que le dit à l'Empereur?*« – And Prince Vasili repeated the words supposed to have been spoken by Kutuzov to the Emperor: *I can neither punish him [the Grand Duke] if he does wrong, nor reward him if he does right.* »Oh, a very wise man is Prince Kutuzov, *et quel caractère! Je le connais de longue date!*« (III.2.6)

³² After Morson 2012b, 83.

Tolstoy's text does not shut down the possibility that Kutuzov's excuse, as quoted by the slippery Prince Vasili, might be spurious (»supposed to have been spoken«). Yet towards the end of the narrative of 1812 Tolstoy himself mentions the »phrases« (*frazy*) of Kutuzov as a routine feature of his communication with the other Russian commanders:

They did not talk seriously to him. [...] Because they could not understand him, all these people assumed that it was useless to talk to the old man; [...] that he would answer with his phrases (which they thought were mere phrases) about a »golden bridge«, about the impossibility of crossing the frontier with a crowd of vagabonds, and so forth. They had heard it all before. (IV.4.10)

Kutuzov's *frazy* qualify as apophthegms by dint of their aphoristic verbal form, but their message is supra-verbal, as it were. These »phrases« are misunderstood by the Russian military chiefs, who are tired of hearing the same apophthegmatic soundbites from the old Field-Marshal. But Tolstoy knows better. He suggests that Kutuzov's repetitive apophthegmatism channels a meaning pertinent to the survival of the Russian nation in 1812:

But that man, so heedless of his words, did not once during the whole time of his activity utter one word inconsistent with the single aim towards which he moved throughout the whole war. (IV.4.5)

Kutuzov in *W&P* turns out to be a skilful and tenacious yet simultaneously »heedless« and blasé apophthegmatist. The answer to the paradox is that language and leadership itself for the Tolstoyan Kutuzov are merely tools towards a righteous supra-individualistic goal. Whatever he says, he is no ordinary apophthegmatist and no ordinary hero.

That simple, modest, and therefore truly great, figure could not be cast in the false mould of a European hero – the supposed ruler of men – that history has invented. (IV.4.5)³³

Hence the narrator's refusal to find fault with the repetitiveness of apophthegmatic sayings uttered by Kutuzov. (Indeed in IV.4.10 it is Kutuzov's audience who are blamed for being deaf to his reiterated message.) Kutuzov's prophecy that Napoleon's soldiers in Russia will end up starving and eating horse-flesh, is repeated twice in *W&P*:

³³ The quintessential European hero, to Tolstoy, is Napoleon who is characterised as an ambitious and supremely self-important speaker (III.2.26; III.1.6).

»but I took more fortresses than Kamensky and made the Turks eat horse-flesh. [...] And the French shall too, trust me,« he went on, growing warmer and beating his chest, »I'll make them eat horse-flesh!« And tears again dimmed his eyes. (III.2.16)

»But no! They shall eat horse-flesh yet, like the Turks!« exclaimed Kutuzov without replying, striking the table with his podgy fist. »They shall, too, if only...« (III.3.4)

Apart from repetition,³⁴ there is the accent on biographical achievement (victory over the Turks in 1811) and a great deal of physicality (chest-beating, tears, the »podgy« fist). Still, sarcasm and bathetic effect are hardly applicable here, unlike in the other apophthegmatic scenes throughout *W&P*. Kutuzov is heroic above biographical accuracy (the scar), and his apophthegms are likewise immune to repetitiveness and undignified naturalism. It is not accidental that Kutuzov's words about horse-flesh are validated by Prince Andrei, who is by now an experienced and much disillusioned student of »great men«:

»And above all,« thought Prince Andrei, »one believes in him because he's Russian, despite the novel by Genlis and the French proverbs, and because his voice shook when he said: ›What they have brought us to do!« and had a sob in it when he said he would ›make them eat horse-flesh!« (III.2.16)

When Kutuzov repeats the phrase in III.3.4, his aide-de-camp is present, yet Kutuzov is not really addressing himself to anybody (»exclaimed [...] without replying«); his apophthegm shifts from being a public utterance to a heartfelt soliloquy.

W&P is largely anti-heroic and broadly anti-Plutarchan, given Tolstoy's rejection of the heroic paradigm and apophthegms as a strand thereof. But apophthegms in *W&P* are also a resource for characterization, albeit usually ironic and negative, and this may be seen as Tolstoy's compromise with the »Plutarchan tradition«. In the portrayal of Kutuzov the stakes are higher. Kutuzov's apophthegms in the novel gradually acquire meaning that reflects his supra-heroic mission and fits in with Tolstoy's ideas about the relationship between the individual and history. Kutuzov in *W&P* is, for all his human and bodily foibles, a figure of mythological stature as the conduit and coordinator of true (that is, collective, instinctive, existential) patriotic energy

³⁴ Which was noted even more forcefully in the draft text (*PSS XIV.155*): »This saying Kutuzov was repeating often« (*Eto izrechenie chasto povtorial Kutuzov*).

in the Tolstoyan sense. The historical teleology of Kutuzov's life does not extend beyond the defeat of the French invasion:

For the representative of the Russian people, after the enemy had been destroyed and Russia had been liberated and raised to the summit of her glory, there was nothing left to do as a Russian. Nothing remained for the representative of the national war but to die. And he [Kutuzov] died. (IV.4.11)

Poignantly, there are no famous last words to report.³⁵

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³⁵ An earlier version of this paper was published in Russian as »Tolstoj protiv Plutarkha: apofegmy v *Voine i mire*.« In *Lev Tolstoj i mirovaia literature: Materialy X Mezhdunarodnoi nauchnoi konferentsii*, edited by Galina Alexeeva, 81–96. Tula: Yasnaya Polyana, 2018. I am grateful to the audiences in Yasnaya Polyana and Freiburg for their questions and comments. Special thanks are due to Michael A. Denner.

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