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A Note on the Use of Narrative and Dialogue in *War and Peace*

This note is an attempt to relate the use of narrative and dialogue to the chief characters and their actions in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, and to see what general relations, if any, obtain between the individual characters and the mode of narration.

I have chosen for study the five chief personages of *War and Peace*: Pierre, Andrei, Natasha, Nikolai, and Marya. For each of them I have counted those chapters in which the character is presented mainly as speaking in dialogue (direct discourse with another character), as opposed to those in which his actions or thoughts are described mainly through third-person narration. These two groups of chapters have been designated by the symbols D (dialogue) and N (narrative) respectively. Those chapters for which no clear determination of a predominant technique was possible have been designated as mixed (M).

A number of chapters in *War and Peace* are divided into several sections by means of breaks on the page. Such parts of chapters I have counted as full chapters, since they are usually distinct scenes. Thus the unit under consideration is, for all practical purposes, the scene. I have not, however, tried to isolate separate scenes except as they are set off by breaks in the text, since to do so would require a good many dubious and subjective judgments.

It can of course be objected that these two modes of narration do not exhaust all possibilities: there is indirect discourse, and there is internal monologue, for which Tolstoy is justly famed; internal monologue in turn might be further divided into direct discourse (quotation marks used) and indirect discourse (no quotation marks used). There is description. Finally, there is generalized narrative (Pierre often drank, went to the club, etc.). All these modes of narration could of course be separately identified and studied. If we did so, however, we should have to abandon the convenient chapter unit which I have chosen as the unit of measurement, for hardly a single chapter in the entire novel would show most of its content devoted to the description of a given character, to his internal monologue, and so on. Tolstoy's descriptions are rather brief and mostly confined to a character's first appearance (in spite of all that has been written about his preference for description and his use of

leitmotiv techniques to recall a character to our eye). Though certain scenes are famous for their use of internal monologue, such as the scene where Nikolai is under fire for the first time, or the scene of Andrei's death, still there are very few, if any, chapters devoted mainly to those techniques. Such narrative modes of course can, ought to be, and have to some extent been studied. But the proper way to study them is by examination of specific passages and not by general statistical techniques applicable to the entire novel.

There are several chapters in the novel devoted principally to letters and diary entries; these chapters I have counted only if the chapter in question contained other materials. It is of course important for us that Pierre keeps a diary, or that Princess Marya in the country corresponds with Julie Karagin in Moscow, but these remain exceptional techniques which, again, can better be studied as specific passages rather than as general techniques.

The results I have obtained are presented below. I give separate totals for each of the four volumes of the novel and for the first epilogue. In the final outcome this breakdown by volumes did not prove very significant for analysis—a fact which may suggest the limitations of the present approach—except insofar as it was carried out with an eye to the actual development of the narrative and the psychological state of the characters. It seems to me, nonetheless, that the approach has value, at least for a preliminary study of the problem of characterization in the novel. Though detailed analysis of individual passages is of course much more valuable, and there is no substitute for it, such analysis suffers from the necessity of presenting a great mass of quotations and from the frequent difficulty of arriving at any generalized conclusions whatsoever; the trees are clear but the forest remains invisible.

Each entry above reflects the actual appearance of a character; it is not enough for him to be mentioned in a given chapter by another character or by the author unless he appears in person. No record has been made of chapters in which none of the main characters appear, but, for the sake of curiosity, I should mention that there are 103 such chapters in *War and Peace* (out of a total of 360);¹ most of them are, of course, devoted to historical events or to a discussion of their meaning, though a number are fictional and given over to lesser personages. The total number of chapters and part chapters in which the five main personages appear may also have some interest: Pierre, 106 (including one chapter devoted entirely to Pierre's diary and not counted above); Andrei, 77; Natasha, 78; Nikolai, 70; and Marya, 55.

Let us analyze our results, starting with the more obvious cases. Most obvious, no doubt, is Princess Marya, and our figures are hardly needed to

1. Broken down by volumes of the novel, the figures are as follows: 9 chapters in volume 1 out of a total of 65; 2 out of 98 in volume 2; 37 out of 96 in volume 3; 39 out of 74 in volume 4; 4 out of 15 in the first epilogue; and 12 out of 12 in the second epilogue.

TABLE OF NUMBER OF CHAPTERS DEVOTED PREDOMINANTLY TO NARRATIVE
OR DIALOGUE, BY CHARACTERS IN *War and Peace*

(1 = chapter or part chapter set off by a break)

	PIERRE	ANDREI	NATASHA	NIKOLAI	MARYA
Volume 1	8N + 6D + 1M	12N + 12D + 7M	1N + 4D + 1M	8N + 5D + 2M	5N + 1D + 1M
Volume 2	20N + 7D + 6M	15N + 6D + 6M	18N + 16D + 7M	16N + 15D + 8M	9N + 2D + 4M
Volume 3	15N + 5D + 7M	9N + 3D + 2M	6N + 4D + 3M	3N + 3M	5N + 1D + 3M
Volume 4	17N + 5D + 1M	3N + 2D	5N + 1D + 5M	2N + 2M	9N + 5D + 2M
Epilogue 1	3N + 2D + 2M		5N + 1D + 1M	2N + 1D + 3M	2N + 2D + 4M
Total	63N + 25D + 17M	39N + 23D + 15M	35N + 26D + 17M	31N + 21D + 18M	30N + 11D + 14M

tell us that Marya is a character who listens and suffers silently rather than one who talks very much. Her failure to speak underlines her passivity, especially in relation to her father. After she falls in love, and in particular after her marriage to Nikolai, she talks a great deal more, as is evidenced by the relatively larger number of D and M chapters at the end of volume 4 and in epilogue 1; this of course suggests her acquisition of self-confidence. The high point in this change is the scene in which she confesses her love for Nikolai and her regret that he stands aloof from her.²

Pierre's case is also clear from the figures, which show an overwhelming preponderance of narrative free of dialogue, a preponderance that continues unbroken throughout the entire novel. This may not surprise us, but it does raise certain questions. Tolstoy several times describes Pierre as fond of society and conversation, in which he is said to take an active part.³ Yet, in spite of this characterization, Pierre appears in society and even at parties as preoccupied, absent-minded, and silent. Occasionally this behavior has a clear motivation, as in the scene at H el ene's name-day party, at which he sits beside her and contemplates marriage to her (1:2:2), or at the dinner in honor of Prince Bagration, at which he broods over his wife's infidelity and finally challenges Dolokhov to a duel (2:1:4). But for the most part taciturnity seems to be simply a fixed trait of Pierre's character, and we are forced to explain this apparent inconsistency.

Tolstoy compounds the riddle by a late reference to Pierre's garrulity (4:4:13): "Before he had talked much, and had been carried away when he talked, and listened very little; now rarely was he carried away in conversation, and he acquired the art of listening so that people gladly related their most intimate secrets to him." The reference here is to the change in Pierre's nature after his captivity and his friendship with Platon Karataev. But though the author tells us of the change, it remains largely or entirely unreflected in our statistics: if anything, Pierre speaks a bit more in the first epilogue, in which he debates his political convictions with Nikolai Rostov, than he did in earlier parts of the book.

Is it possible that Tolstoy depicted Pierre from the outset the way he was to be after the "change"? In other words, Tolstoy, like many another author faced with the difficulty of transforming one of his main characters, resolved it by building into the character the ready potentiality for change. From the beginning, Pierre is absent-minded and apparently preoccupied with his own thoughts, and in society he is taciturn. The only change that the reader is called upon to accept, then, is the fact that previously he was a poor

2. Epilogue 1, chapter 6.

3. See, for example, volume 2, part 3, chapter 9; volume 4, part 4, chapter 13. Hereafter I will use a tripartite system of reference (e.g., 3:2:12 means volume 3, part 2, chapter 12), giving the citations in the text itself and avoiding footnote references.

listener (which corresponds to the other *données*); now he has become a good one—a fact for which we have to take the author's word, of course, since there are few enough scenes demonstrating Pierre's new skill as a listener.

But we are still faced with a very considerable contradiction: the early Pierre is described as fond of talking, but in fact he rarely talked. No doubt this is a basic weakness in Tolstoy's characterization. But if we approach the contradiction from an expressionistic rather than a purely realistic point of view, it ceases to be quite so puzzling. Pierre's role in the novel is to pursue a spiritual quest for the good life. All his characteristics—his absent-mindedness and preoccupation, his awkwardness in society—accord with this somewhat quixotic role. But his talkativeness, which suggests a lack of seriousness, does not accord very well with the essentially serious nature of his quest. Yet Tolstoy found it necessary to describe Pierre as an inveterate talker, perhaps to suggest a side of him which was silly and which resisted and impeded that spiritual quest. Had this proclivity been allowed to blossom, we would have had a fully developed comic character of the quixotic type. Yet Pierre's quest is ultimately to win out, so we are given, rather, a fundamentally serious Pierre from the outset. The alternative of complete consistency would have risked the danger of planting in the reader's mind a suspicion that Pierre might be so frivolous and silly that his quest could never succeed. At that, more than one reader, myself included, has expressed his impatience with Pierre's fumbling slowness in pursuit of his quest.

In some ways, the case of Natasha is the most instructive of the five, and the one most clearly illumined by our approach. Natasha begins as a talkative child, depicted almost entirely by her speeches. This technique is a consistent and convincing one, and emphasizes her freshness, spontaneity, and vivacity. Volume 1 and the first half of volume 2 contain almost no passages in which we have any more direct insight into her mind or behavior other than that conveyed by her speeches.

A decisive change occurs when she meets Anatole Kuragin, becomes infatuated with him, attempts suicide, and subsequently falls ill. All this suggests a quite different Natasha from the lively child: an adolescent impatient to become adult at the risk of self-destruction. Of Natasha's total of eighteen N chapters in volume 2, seven N chapters belong to this narrative sequence. The Anatole sequence itself includes only two D chapters, both necessitated by specific purposes and not interrupting the gravity of the narration: in the first D chapter of the sequence Natasha confesses her infatuation to Sonya; in the second she holds a conversation with Pierre which serves to conclude the entire episode, at least in a dramatic sense. Two N chapters early in volume 3 show her still ill; a third shows her at church, praying for the army and for Russia. Her recovery from illness (in 3:1:20) is expressed by a dramatic return of dialogue. At the end of volume 3, however, she learns that

Andrei is wounded and that he is traveling with the Rostovs as they leave Moscow. The subsequent chapters of volumes 3 and 4 which depict her nursing of Andrei and his death are entirely N or M. Finally, after her marriage to Pierre, she remains fundamentally taciturn. Her old garrulousness is gone, lost in part because of the tragic events she has experienced and the consequent seriousness she has acquired, in part because of her sense of dedication to Pierre and her children. Her vivacity was a part of her role as a girl looking for love and marriage; as a wife her role is different: her vivacity is no longer needed and can be sacrificed along with her looks and attention to dress.

More puzzling are the last two characters—Andrei and Nikolai. The figures for both indicate a predominantly mixed treatment. No doubt our impression of Andrei is that of a proud, sensitive, and rather taciturn person, and our figures might seem to square with this impression. But aside from several celebrated internal monologues, such as those connected with the symbol of the oak tree, or those of his death, we do not “get inside” Andrei very much either. Nor, even, do we learn much about him from the author, as we do, say, about Pierre. Andrei’s sensitivity, even his intellect, are to a large extent only suggested but never really completely demonstrated by Tolstoy. Some of the contradictions and weaknesses of Andrei as a character must be explained through Tolstoy’s failure to tell us very much about him.

Many of Andrei’s chapters that are primarily N or M in character are devoted to his military experiences, in which he serves Tolstoy as an “eye” through which we behold battlefields, attend staff conferences, and so forth, in which Andrei himself may be very little involved. Hence for much of the first volumes of the novel we depend to a greater extent than we may realize on his rather restrained conversations for information concerning his make-up.

This reluctance on Tolstoy’s part has its expressive reasons, of course. Andrei may be defined as a man who never learns how to live but only how to die, that is, he comes to accept his death in that special, Tolstoyan sense. For this reason Tolstoy emphasized a predominantly external view and stressed characteristics such as pride and taciturn nature. By doing so he made those final internal monologues when Andrei is wounded and dying all the more effective.

The case of Nikolai Rostov is perhaps the least striking. Like Andrei, Nikolai is of course frequently employed as an “eye” to witness events, and some of the predominantly narrative chapters can be explained through this kind of role. Nikolai usually seems to appear in a type of “mixed” chapter (whether reflected in our statistics as M, N, or D) in which both narration and dialogue (sometimes dialogue in which he does not play a very active part) are found. In these chapters Tolstoy seems to intend to give us a picture of military life, and Nikolai largely figures as a typical officer, as well as an “eye” through which such scenes of army life can be viewed. He is not a very

talkative person, and in this respect his essential mediocrity as well as masculinity and somewhat excessive sense of *amour propre* can be felt.

Besides Andrei and Nikolai, the other personages also serve the author as eyewitnesses in chapters that are not necessarily much concerned with them as characters. One thinks of Pierre inducted into the Masons (2:2:3–4), Pierre at Borodino (3:2:20–23, 30–32), or Natasha at the opera (2:5:8). This use is less typical for Marya.

What may likely be concluded from this study is that Tolstoy shows considerable freedom and flexibility in shifting back and forth from straight narrative to dialogue, depending on context and the psychic state of the characters. Also, he uses such shifts as permanent indices of character change, as is clearest in the cases of Marya and Natasha.