The Expressive Self in War and Peace

1. The Expressivist Vision of the Self

When Tolstoi sent the manuscript of his first work Childhood to Nekrasov in 1852 for publication in the journal The Contemporary, he wrote to him by way of introducing the work: “This manuscript composes the first part of a novel, Four Epochs of Growth. . . .”1 Childhood and as much of the tetralogy as Tolstoi completed is shaped by the notion of a self unfolding in time in responsive sympathy with its surroundings and experiences. This emphasis on growth and formation and the consequent fluid image of the self was to become a keystone of Tolstoi’s vision as artist. Though it was not his own invention, he devoted a lifetime of creative work and thought to its examination. Indeed, we might say that this vision of the self, which has lately come to be called “expressivist,” was at the heart of those far-flung endeavors and generous expenses of energy, mind and emotion that characterized this man’s prodigious life.2

The vision of the self expressing itself freely in obedience to the inner laws of its being has its origins in Rousseau’s sense of the “expanding plenitude” that “extends our being.” As Georges Poulet has said, “Nothing in the young Rousseau’s experience. . . . gives a more adequate image of happiness than the phenomenon of the expansive fullness of the mind. Thanks to it there takes place in the universe the delightful unfoldment of the self.”3 This notion of the unfolding self was developed in German thought into the idea that man is the center of existence. Again, Poulet has summarized the point forcefully. German thought alone was “capable of bringing itself back to the central and initial point of man, of conceiving him in the manner of a seed of which there is foreseen and estimated the gradual growth.”4 If man is the seed, he also becomes in the expressivist vision as it develops the gardener. Potentiality enjoins

4. Ibid., p. 97.
upon us the duty of self-development. “Man achieves his highest point when he recognizes his own life as an adequate, a true expression of what he potentially is.”

Tolstoi assimilated the body of assumptions about growth and formation from a multitude of points of encounter afforded him by the culture in which he grew up. He had read through Rousseau at the age of sixteen and reread a number of his works throughout his life, thus acquainting himself with the expressive idea of self at the very source. Beginning in the 1830s Russia had undergone the waves of influence of German romanticism and idealist philosophy. This flow had reached its height in the forties during Tolstoi’s youth, when, as he himself said, “Hegelianism was the foundation of everything: it was borne on the air, expressed in newspaper and magazine articles, in lectures on history and law, in tracts, in art, in sermons, in conversations. A man who didn’t know Hegel didn’t have the right to speak. If one wanted to know truth, one studied Hegel. Everything rested on him.” The whole experience of European expressive thought in its increasingly sophisticated formulations existed in the Russia of Tolstoi’s time as successive layers in which no previous movement was ever wholly superceded. It remained there to be drawn upon as convenience suggested.

Isaiah Berlin, who has identified and named that thread running through European thought which occupies itself with the idea of the expressive self, has summarized the fundamental features of the expressivist theory as it is formulated in Herder, perhaps the most characteristic thinker in that mode (and as we shall see, an important influence on War and Peace). Central to Herder’s vision is the idea of the unity of man: one and undivided, whatever he is and does flows from a single center. The artist becomes the type of perfectly expressed and therefore perfectly realized man. Art itself is enlisted in turn as a part of the process of formulation and recognition by which the self grows. It is the artist’s mission to testify in his works to the truth of his own inner experience.

There had been worked out in Herder’s thought and the thought of those who followed him the modes of feeling that were appropriate to the natural unfolding of the self. In Childhood Tolstoi shows himself to be well aware of

5. Taylor, p. 17.
6. Tolstoi’s acquaintance with various writers and philosophers can conveniently be traced by referring to the index for the volumes edited by N. N. Gusev, Lev Tolstoi: materialy k biografii (Moscow: Akademia nauk SSSR, 1954).
7. This influence as it bears upon the development of Russian literature has been discussed by Lidia Ginzburg, O psikhologicheskoi proze. In this article I refer to its second edition (Leningrad: Khud. literatura, 1977).