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II

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Courage in Tolstoy

"... why doesn’t [Tolstoy] think, instead of taking everything by bravery, charging as if he were at Sevastopol?"

In a review of War and Peace, N. N. Strakhov, the critic who was later to become one of Tolstoy’s closest friends, wrote that the novel was about “the idea of the heroic life.” An essential ingredient of heroism is courage, which was a cardinal virtue for Tolstoy. A war hero himself, he first became known to the general public as the author of war stories about the siege of Sevastopol, at which he fought. (His earlier works had been signed with initials.) As the epigraph to this chapter suggests, his contemporaries perceived him, for better or for worse, as obsessed with courage. These qualities are apparent as well to those who only know him through his writings: an admiring Ernest Hemingway, for instance, saw him as a fighter without equal. The purpose of this essay is to explore what Tolstoy meant by courage, and why it was so important to him.

Not surprisingly, from the time Tolstoy arrived in the Caucasus at the age of twenty-two in 1851 and joined the army in 1852, he began a struggle to define what courage is. The war stories that he wrote in this period were anti-romantic, and most of what passes for courage in them stands revealed as mere show. In the early war stories and War and Peace, Tolstoy, sometimes sympathetically and often sarcastically, illustrates how men, inwardly trembling, outwardly strut their courage on the battlefield to win medals and fame. While debunking romantic heroism, however, he strove to replace it with “true” courage. The narrator of his first war story, The Raid (1852), finds this in the behavior of the modest Captain Khlopov (ch. 10). Dissatisfied with this effort, Tolstoy returns obsessively to the theme.

In defining courage Tolstoy drew on Plato, whose dialogues he read while in the Caucasus in the French translations of Victor Cousin. In the earliest surviving fragment related to The Raid ("Courage is the science. . . . [PSS 3: 238–39]"), he discussed a definition of courage evidently drawn from Plato’s work devoted to the subject, the Laches.5 As an inquiry into a particular virtue, the published story resembles a Platonic dialogue, and, like the
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Laches, it provides two different definitions of courage. In the first place, the narrator asks Captain Khlopov what courage is, and then compares his answer to one of Plato’s.

“A man is brave when he behaves as he should,” he said, having thought a little. I recalled that Plato defines bravery as the knowledge of what one needs and needs not to fear... [The two definitions are similar, but Khlopov’s is superior] because he would have said that a brave man is he who fears only what he should and not what he need not fear.

The distinction between the two definitions is a moral one: the second one implies that for the brave man, duty – what one should do – overrides what is truly fearful. (The distinction is clearer in the Russian, where the word мудро, with more of a connotation of necessity, is juxtaposed to следует, which connotes obligation.) As the narrator goes on to explain:

in every danger there is a choice, and a choice made under the influence, for instance, of a feeling of duty is bravery, while the choice made under the influence of a low feeling is cowardice; therefore it’s impossible to call a person brave who risks his life from vanity, or from curiosity or from rapacity, and on the contrary, it’s impossible to call a person a coward who under the influence of an honorable feeling of family obligation or simply conviction removes himself from harm’s way. (PSS 3: 16–17)

Khlopov regards this elaboration suspiciously, as “philosophizing.” For him (as for Laches), real courage can be demonstrated only in action, not in discussion. Later, the narrator observes Khlopov in battle and judges him truly courageous because “he was just the same as I always observed him to be” (PSS 3: 37). This definition supplements the narrator’s first one, because, following Plato in the Laches, Tolstoy observed that courage required a mixture of “true knowledge” and “steadfastness.” The Greek for steadfastness is karteria, la constance in Cousin’s translation. In a diary discussion of Platonic virtue (PSS 46: 241) and many times subsequently, Tolstoy used the Russian word сила, “strength” or “force,” to express the quality of steadfastness required to do the right thing despite temptation (say, to impress others) or justifiable fear.

On the one hand, then, true courage requires knowledge, both of what is fearful, and also of when we should stand and fight. On the other, the real test of courage on the battlefield begins only when a man recognizes that he may be killed at any moment, and despite this “endures.” In the early war stories all characters, whether or not they admit it, feel fear under fire. The few exceptions include the incorrigibly foolhardy (the unit commander who perishes in chapter eleven of the second Sevastopol sketch), the
superstitious (Melnikov in the third Sevastopol sketch), and the naive. In *The Raid*, the young officer Alanin dies because he does not heed the advice of the combat-seasoned Khlopov to retreat rather than attack. If courage were merely recognition of his vulnerability such as the unfortunate Alanin acquires too late, the realities of war would make cowards of us all. But Khlopov, though wise, is no coward.

In “Courage is the science....” (that first draft of *The Raid*), Tolstoy explains why a soldier might risk his life. First, following Plato, whom he credits, he argues that, wisely or not, we fear certain things more than death. A soldier, for example, may advance in battle because he fears the whip; an officer – because he fears the reputation of coward. Neither man, inasmuch as he acts from fear, is more courageous than the horse who braves bullets because he fears the spur. In addition to these negative incentives, men at war may be seduced by such passions as “the desire to distinguish themselves, to slake their malice, hatred [or] ... rapacity” to overcome their fear of death. Therefore, “it’s not always that one fear overw hels another (although usually this is so), but [some other] feeling may overwhelm fear” (*PSS* 3: 238–39).

As Tolstoy himself had learned, and illustrated many times in his fiction, even if feelings may be influenced by true or false knowledge, courage on the battlefield depends not on what you know, but on how you feel. Captain Khlopov can do what he knows is right because he has the steadfastness to act courageously. This quality is related to the natural spiritedness that propels a youth like Alanin. To understand it, one must look at what Tolstoy in *The Woodcutting* first identified as the “desperate” type of soldier (ch. 2). Antonov, the example of such a man in this story, is related, through the Kozel’tsov brothers in *Sevastopol in August, 1855*, to Denisov in *War and Peace*. All such characters, whatever their social status, are leaders by temperament, musicians, gifted speakers – in the case of Denisov, a poet – and all of them like to fight and carouse. Their spiritedness is related to physical vitality, and therefore they are solid specimens with bushy mustaches and sinewy arms. There is something of this type in every human being; hence even cowards like Vlang in *Sevastopol in August, 1855* can blossom into heroes in desperate situations (ch. 26). In *The Woodcutting*, the “humble” soldier Zhdanov loves Antonov’s singing because it expresses a love of life undiminished in him despite his grasp of life’s tragic limitations. Spiritedness therefore can never be utterly extinguished until death. It is the source of the “noble spark” of heroism that, according to Tolstoy in *Sevastopol in August, 1855*, burns “at the bottom of [every] soul” (ch. 17). Defined as “steadfastness,” courage for Tolstoy is the natural resistance of the spirited human individual to “fearful” things, the most formidable of which is death.
Anger and shame, feelings aroused when a soldier is physically threatened or humiliated, ignite the "spark" of heroism. (Of course these secondary passions, to be legitimate, must be aroused by the right, not the wrong stimuli.) Soldiers ordered to retreat from the bastions at the end of Sevastopol in August are said to feel first confusion, then both fear and "a [mixed] feeling resembling repentance, shame and irritable anger" (raskaianie, styd i zloba). A similar sense of injury and desire for revenge animates the soldiers in War and Peace once the French invade Russia. In an appropriately spirited mood, "with venomous irony," and "excited," Prince Andrei explains to Pierre on the eve of the battle of Borodino that "the relative strength of bodies of troops can never be known to anyone," because strength depends, not on numbers, tactics, or position, but "on the feeling [of anger] that is in me and in him" (689; PSS II: 208).

Tolstoy highlights the unifying value of courage underlying what he calls the "spirit" (dukh) of an army, which, however, it must be remembered, originates in the individual. And despite Tolstoy's debunking of leadership, he shows in War and Peace that esprit de corps coalesces around leaders all of whom, even the elderly Kutuzov, communicate their own spiritedness to the troops. Of the various psychological reasons given for courage in the leader, the most powerful ones are anger and shame. Shame is most often expressed in the form of a prohibition. When Zhilin, the officer hero of the story The Prisoner of the Caucasus (1872), refuses to abandon his exhausted companion, he twice repeats "it's not right to leave a comrade behind." Tolstoy's most noble characters, Prince Andrei, whose very name comes from andrea, the Greek word for manliness, and the Chechen warrior Hadji Murat (in the posthumously published unfinished long story of the same name), act courageously out of shame at doing otherwise. Relating his life story to the Russian adjutant Loris-Melnikov, Hadji Murat says simply that, having run away once to save his life, he never did so again.

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At Austerlitz, Prince Andrei responds to the appeal for help from Kutuzov with "tears of shame and anger" (243; PSS 9: 340). Later, at Borodino, even as Andrei stares at the smoking shell which in a second will explode and maim him, even as he inwardly declares "I cannot, I do not wish to die," at the same time he hesitates, "remembers that people were looking at him," and shouts aloud to his adjutant, who has flung himself on the ground: "It's
shameful, sir" (722-34; PSS II: 254). Andrei's concern for his reputation—the "desire to distinguish oneself" mentioned in "Courage is the science"—is not in his case ignoble. In the natural leader, what is mere vanity in lesser men takes the form of desiring not only to appear, but to be, best. He feels shame when he does not live up to standards of conduct worthy of the best men.

In "Courage is a science," in place of Plato's negative definition, Tolstoy proposes a new one, namely, that "courage is the ability of a human being to suppress the feeling of fear in favor of a higher feeling." This definition both accounts for courageous behavior in the person who knows what is truly fearful and adds a very important qualification, that the feeling that motivates the courageous man must be "higher" than fear of death. This is necessary, Tolstoy explains, because otherwise courage would not be a virtue. So a naturally spirited man can be evil or good, depending on his "egotism" or his "self-abnegation" ("Courage is the science..." [PSS 3: 239]). Antonov, the good "desperate" type in The Woodcutting, "fought and brawled not so much for his own satisfaction, as in support of all soldiery, of which he felt himself the representative."

The ranking of feelings as "higher" and "lower" is a form of knowledge, but—essential for Tolstoy—it is practical, not theoretical knowledge. Tolstoy's new definition is reflected in the narrator's correction of Plato in The Raid. When Captain Khlopov says that a brave man behaves as he should, he means that in certain circumstances, a brave man, fully aware of what it is necessary to fear (Tolstoy's rendering of the Platonic formulation), will suppress his fear in order to do right. In The Woodcutting, the battle-hardened Zhdanov comes to the assistance of Velenchuk, whose critical wound arouses in his comrades a natural revulsion arising from fear for their own safety (ch. 7). In another relevant example, the quite ordinary Captain Mikhailov (from Sevastopol in May), who dreams of a medal and yet repeatedly struggles with fear, returns to check on a wounded, possibly dead officer because he feels that it is his duty to do so (ch. 13).

While Mikhailov heeds the voice of duty reluctantly, other more spirited characters do so gladly. In Sevastopol in August, the elder Kozelskoy dies happy because "he had fulfilled his duty well [and] for the first time in his entire service he had acted as well as he could have, and there was nothing for which he could reproach himself" (ch. 25). In the case of Prince Andrei, both educated and thoughtful, honor takes precedence over both piety and duty as the principle that can overcome fear of death. For all the apparent differences, however, both duty and honor are enforced in the individual by a sense of shame that only vicious or bestial men lack. There is a tension between the two sides of courage. As steadfastness, it originates as self-defense which blurs the distinction between egotism and "self-abnegation."
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Honor, too, is a personal, not a social goal. Hadji Murat and Prince Andrei both understand that no honorable man can permit himself to be cowardly. The man of honor is first concerned with his own worthiness, and only then, because honor demands it, with the good of the community. In his search for confirmation of himself as an individual, Andrei's political ambitions gradually give way to more personal goals.

Tolstoy minimizes the dark side of courage. Already in The Raid "rapacity" (al'chnost') is declared by the narrator an illegitimate reason for it. Young Alanin is not angry but innocent and, strange to say, without bloodlust. He is horrified when he thinks, mistakenly, that soldiers are about to kill a child. Like Petia Rostov in War and Peace, he expects neither to die nor to kill others. In The Cossacks (1863), Lukashka listens to Olenin's reasons why he should not kill Chechens but refuses to internalize them. When such a character survives his initiation into the realities of war, we see him revising his attitude in response to them. The old cossack Eroshka condemns killing men. In War and Peace Nikolai Rostov loses his appetite for war once he has confronted the possibility of his own death and has looked into the utterly human eyes of his supposed enemy. The ferocity that others might associate with natural spiritedness is for Tolstoy a secondary phenomenon, brought on by the presence of danger. Natural spiritedness, itself innocent and healthy, curdles into evil when, instead of learning the sobering truth of human limitations from death, the spirited man occupies himself with futile efforts at self-aggrandisement in order to overcome it.

Tolstoy insists that courage rightly understood is a virtue, based on moral knowledge, and he therefore as much as possible distances it from its ugly relatives, whose kinship to it he nonetheless, for the sake of truthfulness, acknowledges. Surprisingly in fact, given his later pacifism and anti-militarism, not a single man of true courage in all his fiction, early or late, commits an atrocity. Although Prince Andrei declares himself ready to massacre Frenchmen wherever he finds them, he does not do this. There are characters whose seemingly courageous behavior is fueled by selfish and even evil intentions. Dolokhov in War and Peace is the most developed example in Tolstoy of egotistical courage. Dolokhov's vicious aggressiveness in battle notwithstanding, the "pale-greenish tint" of his face during the partisan raid in which Petia Rostov dies suggests fear? Tolstoy seems to imply that an unregenerate egotist like Dolokhov, whose primary motivation is lust for power, ultimately cannot rank any good greater than the preservation of his own life. As we learn after Dolokhov's injury in the duel with Pierre, he has never grown up and still basks narcissistically in the uncritical spotlight of his mother's and sister's adoration. The second half of courage, a need for true knowledge, comes into play as the spirited youth, chastened by contact
with necessity, seeks for a principle that will trump fear of death. Dolokhov
has iron nerves because he never gets beyond the youthful sense of invinci­
bleness. The fleeting moments of the partisan raid pass without making any
lasting impression on him. In another episode, at the millpond in book 3,
Dolokhov disperses a crowd trying to cross a narrow dam by beckoning men
out onto the thin ice of the pond. Some forty of them drown in the ensuing
break-up of the ice. Dolokhov disappears from the scene altogether, and one
can assume that he has stepped back and crossed safely to the other side by
the dam. What seems like an act of desperate courage on his part is a ploy,
perhaps unselfconscious, to save himself at the expense of others. We cannot
be sure of this, of course, because here as elsewhere we have no direct ac­
cess to Dolokhov’s inner life. This is appropriate, because Dolokhov, having
never critically examined himself let alone acknowledged his own mortality,
does not connect with others.

Dolokhov represents the frightening combination of charisma, ferocity,
and cruelty that Tolstoy observed in certain warlike men. A more sympa­
thetically portrayed ferocious man in War and Peace is the peasant partisan
Tikhon Shcherbatyi, whose preferred weapon is an ax, and who takes no
prisoners. The other partisans treat Shcherbatyi as a comic character, and
his ferocity is more understandable than Dolokhov’s, because it is based on
anger rather than aggressiveness. Shcherbatyi, like Gamzalo in Hadji Murat
and other angry Chechen characters, depicts excesses of justifiable rage. Men
like Dolokhov and Shcherbatyi function in the comprehensive account of
courage in War and Peace as scapegoats who display the dark qualities of
courage and therefore leave heroic characters like Andrei or Nikolai Rostov
unblemished by these.

The representation of courage, false and true, is one of the building blocks
from which War and Peace is constructed. Central to this account is the story
of Nikolai Rostov’s baptism of fire during the skirmish at the Enns bridge
soldier’s first experience of war: no one seems to notice his reactions because
“everyone knew the sensation that the cadet under fire for the first time had
experienced.” As the hussars are fired upon, all of them, with “faces so alike
yet so different,” hold their breath, stand up in their stirrups, sink back down
into their saddles. “Every face, from Denisov’s to that of a bugler, showed one
common expression of conflict, irritation, and excitement.” Rostov alone has
“a clear, bright expression” as he looks around for approval of his bravery
under fire. Even he, however, “despite himself,” displays “something new
and stern . . . around the mouth.”

On some level Nikolai already suspects “what it is necessary to fear.”
Nonetheless, he goes through a number of stages before he acknowledges
that death is the real enemy. He begins by fearing the disapproval of others. During the first stage of his initiation, he is preoccupied with an imagined duel with his colonel, whom he suspects of testing his courage, and whom he regards as his “enemy.” A little later, the imagined contest with the colonel continues as he orders Nikolai’s squadron to return to the bridge under fire. “‘There, it’s just as I thought,’ said Rostov to himself. ‘He wishes to test me!’ His heart contracted and the blood rushed to his face. ‘Let him see whether I am a coward!’ he thought.”

When, at the colonel’s command, the squadron dismounts, the fear of being separated from his comrades replaces Nikolai’s fear of dishonoring himself.

Rostov no longer looked at the colonel, he had no time. He was afraid of falling behind the hussars, so much afraid that his heart stood still. His hand trembled as he gave his horse into an orderly’s charge, and he felt the blood rush to his heart with a thud.

Nikolai’s focus shifts. He runs, he is “brave,” “trying only to be ahead of the others,” not because of his fear of the colonel, but because he fears not being part of the group. He no longer acts as an individual. This realization of his dependency on others is a crucial one in the moral education of the soldier.

Once at the bridge, Nikolai has returned to the duel with his imaginary enemy, the colonel, when someone next to him falls wounded. Now at last Rostov grasps the situation, and his untested courage, uncertainly supported by imagination and vanity, dissolves. In its place, “the fear of death and of the stretchers, and love of the sun and of life, all merged into one feeling of sickening agitation.” Afterward Rostov counts himself a coward. In fact, however, everyone, including Denisov, and the colonel himself, who sets to bragging at the end of the chapter, has felt the way he does.

A few days later, during the Battle of Schön Grabern, Rostov is under fire again (160–63; PSS 9: 227–29). His colonel and an infantry general engage in a battle of “courage” like the one that Rostov had imagined earlier between himself and the colonel. They are like “two fighting cocks preparing for battle, each vainly trying to detect signs of cowardice in the other.” Without a detailed explanation now, because we understand this particular element of the psychology of war from the earlier scene, Tolstoy shifts from this mock contest to the fact that the French have cut off the hussars from behind, and they “had to attack in order to cut a way through for themselves.” Once again Rostov imagines himself a hero. “Oh, how I will slash him!” thought Rostov, gripping the hilt of his saber.” But then his horse, hit, goes down, his arm is trapped under the horse, he is wounded, and he experiences the
full terror of war. The reverse of what he has previously imagined happens: running “with the feeling of a hare fleeing from the hounds,” he is not the hunter, but the hunted. A wounded, thoroughly dispirited Rostov closes the final chapter of book 2. Simple soldiers and line officers, sitting around a fire, comfort him.

So who in the first battles of the novel is truly courageous? It is Denisov, in the first place, whose demeanor once in battle changes only to reflect heightened excitement. Denisov knows the true enemy, cowardice, and, in a telling example, he challenges death in full knowledge of its arbitrary power. When the colonel at Enns bridge chastises Denisov for running unnecessary risks, he responds that “every bullet has a name on it” (126; PSS 9: 177). Perhaps rashly, Denisov believes that he cannot control his fate on the battlefield, and this fatalism, which he shares with Homeric heros, liberates him to behave bravely.8

The courageous man who receives the most extended treatment in the first battle of the novel is Captain Tushin, the artillery officer who comes to Nikolai’s aid after his wounding. The story of Captain Tushin functions within the larger narrative as a lesson for Prince Andrei in heroism.9 As Andrei sets off for Schön Grabern from Brünn to “save the army,” the diplomat Bilibin declares (in French) “My dear fellow, you are a hero!” (142; PSS 9: 199). At the council after the battle, Andrei claims that “we owe today’s success chiefly to the action of that battery and the heroic steadfastness of Captain Tushin and his company” (172; PSS 9: 241).

We view Tushin first through Andrei’s eyes, as a figure of slight ridicule (149; PSS 9: 209–10). Not a good parade soldier, he feels embarrassed and guilty around higher officers. Then, just before the battle, Andrei overhears a conversation in a bunker. Tushin and two others are discussing, not careers or promotions, not even courage, but death and what comes after it (153; PSS 9: 215–16). This conversation, precisely the right one for the place, is interrupted by the beginning of the battle. A cannonball lands near the bunker, and Tolstoy allows himself a Homeric image to describe the awesome impression it makes: “the ground seemed to groan at the terrible impact.” Next we see Tushin after consultation with his sergeant-major deciding on the spot to fire on the village of Schön Grabern. General Bagration, rather than objecting, pretends that this was his intention. We see the battle shaping up and being decided by men like Tushin, with Bagration allowing his officers to respond to facts on the ground.

Eventually Tushin, maintaining his position, holds the whole French army at bay (165–67; PSS 9: 231–35). Excited but composed, he inspires his men, who take their cues from him. In this expanded treatment of the good field officer, Tolstoy suggests how such a man might stay calm on the battlefield.
Vulnerable, outside the bunker, his “home,” Tushin resists death even to the point of creating fantasies in which he is a giant throwing cannonballs at the enemy, or the enemy guns are pipes puffing smoke. When he awakes from his trance, he feels like weeping. His tears both reflect and release the incredible emotional tension generated by his effort to “endure” in the face of death. Like Captain Khlopov, Tushin does “what he should” even though he knows most definitely “what it is necessary to fear.” In a significant departure from Mikhailov (in Sevastopol in May), moreover, he does so, as we know from the conversation in the bunker, without a firm belief in an afterlife. He acts simply out of duty, without expectation of reward.

Hadji Murat is an example of a man who dies “like a hero” (molodtsom; ch. 24), seeming not to struggle at all with fear. He is thoughtful, but his thoughts are all practical and therefore, as Tolstoy portrays him at the end of his life, there is no disharmony between thought and action in him. Once he decides that he must somehow rescue his family, he moves decisively to do this. When during the final siege he realizes that he might die, “his soul suddenly [becomes] serious” as he accepts this eventuality (ch. 25). He puts duty above self-preservation or even glory. Unlike Andrei before Austerlitz, he chooses not to sacrifice his family to his hopes for glory if he stays with the Russians. Like Denisov, he believes in fate – “Allah’s will” – as he tells Butler (ch. 20), and this frees him to act courageously without worrying about future consequences. Like Prince Andrei, as he is dying he fixes his mind’s eye upon something grander “that was beginning and had begun in him.” As courage is the battle against death, however, so Hadji Murat’s body continues to fight.

If the greatest act of courage is to die well, then all of us are eventually called upon to be courageous. Socrates’ death as depicted in Plato’s dialogue the Phaedo was Tolstoy’s model for the good death: in his early works, the deaths of Natalia Savishna in Childhood, of the humble soldier Velenchuk in The Woodfelling, and of the peasant in Three Deaths are all Socratic in their calmness and acceptance. These characters die well in large part because they have lived right. All of them come from a peasant milieu that emphasizes community over the individual, and this cultural orientation makes death psychologically easier for them. Other, non-peasant characters in Tolstoy’s fiction have to change in order to face death well. Such a man is the judge Ivan Ilich, whose terrifying death is as random as any on the battlefield.

Chapter 6 of The Death of Ivan Ilich (1886), which begins with the line “Ivan Ilich knew that he was dying,” openly makes the connection to war. The pleasant existence led heretofore by Ivan Ilich has depended on his ability to ignore his own mortality. Now death forces itself to the center of his consciousness just as it does to the soldier in wartime. Ivan Ilich himself
compares the event that may have triggered his illness - a fall from a ladder while decorating a new apartment - to a “military assault in which I lost my life.” As the chapter ends, he lies on his couch like a downed soldier, mortally wounded, face to face with it.

Ivan Ilich must now live on for several chapters fully aware of his impending death, and his psychological adjustment to that fact resembles the reaction of simple soldiers to the “knowledge of what is to be truly feared.” Like them, he becomes aware of his personal vulnerability and therefore of his need for others. It is in chapter seven that the peasant Gerasim begins to help him. In chapter eight his progress toward death moves beyond his need for Gerasim to a solitary confrontation with the enemy. In preparation for this, “he dismissed Gerasim and stretched out his legs.” This second action mimics a dying man’s final gesture – indeed the story ends with the traditional formula “he stretched himself out, and died” – and it is meant to convey that Ivan Ilich tries to imagine his death. In chapter nine he begins to distance himself from his body. Listening more intently to the voice of his soul than to his pain, he begins to doubt the worth of his earlier life.

In place of his cardinal principles of respectability and pleasure, Ivan Ilich comes to value pity, at first of Gerasim toward himself, and then, at the end, of himself toward his son and others. In his dream after Borodino, Pierre also connects a distancing from bodily concerns with an increased concern for others (749-51; PSS II: 92-94). The starting point of Pierre’s meditation has been his relief at the cessation of his own fear at the end of the battle, and his observation that during it the soldiers, unlike him, “were steady and calm all the time, to the end.” He wishes that he could “enter communal life entirely, to be imbued with what makes them what they are. But how [can I] cast off all the superfluous, devilish burden of my outer man?” The courage to face death in battle and an acceptance of communal life in both war and peace have a common psychological origin in the “true knowledge” of the inescapability of death. Like the soldiers whom Pierre so admired, Ivan Ilich switches from an egotistic to a communal point of view and is rewarded by the cessation of his spiritual torment. Totally helpless, dragged toward physical annihilation, Ivan Ilich discovers that while he can do nothing to prevent it, he can still help others.

For ordinary men like Tushin, Nikolai Rostov, or Ivan Ilich, virtue requires a moderate life for oneself and kindness to others. In the extreme case described in Master and Man, however, active love leads the hero, Vasili Brekhunov, to sacrifice his life to save his servant Nikita. Unlike Ivan Ilich, Brekhunov is a seeker after fame and the love of others, which at the outset he wrongly imagines that he has procured. In the course of a fatal battle (with a blizzard), he, like Ivan Ilich, must come to terms with death. He first
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abandons Nikita in an effort to save himself. Yet when he returns accidentally to his cart, he lies down upon Nikita and warms him through the night at the cost of his own life. His point of view shifts from an individual to a communal one.

[... ] it seems to him that he is Nikita and Nikita is him, that his life is not in him himself, but in Nikita [...] “Nikita lives, and that means so do I,” he says triumphantly to himself [...] And he remembers about the money, the shop, the house, the purchases, the sales and the Mironov millions; it is hard for him to understand why this person called Vasilii Brekhunov occupied himself with what occupied him.

(ch. 9)

Brought to a standstill by the blizzard, Brekhunov does not just give up; he responds with a resolute act that deprives death of its sting. His active concentration on the task at hand, reflected in the narrative by a switch to the present tense, signals his escape from fear of death, always a future event for individual consciousness. He has separated himself from “this person called Vasilii Brekhunov” and identifies himself with his manservant, who will live on after him, at least for a little while. Brekhunov’s sacrifice, calculated with the same verve employed earlier to increase his assets, is courageous in the way Tolstoy defined courage back in 1852, in “Courage is the science...”, as “the ability of the soul to be carried away by a higher feeling to the point of forgetting fear of death” (PSS 3: 239).

In chapter 8 of What I Believe (1882–84), Tolstoy argues that the acquisition of material goods and even glory are attempts, bound to fail, to avoid death, and he calls upon people to instead take up “an activity that will not be destroyed by inevitable death.” The activity he has in mind is communal and in extreme circumstances even self-sacrificing, and the question arises as to why this activity, unlike others, should be spared from death. After all, in the case of Master and Man, Nikita is saved by Brekhunov only to die himself a few years later. The answer resides in Tolstoy’s religious beliefs, which are based on ethics rather than dogma. Unlike the ancient Stoics, whom he admired, or for that matter twentieth-century Existentialists, Tolstoy did not regard life as humanly incomprehensible. It does make sense, but not to our minds. Eternal clarifying truths are accessible only through certain feelings, among them a sense of duty and self-sacrifice. So ethics replaces dogma or theology as the only real proof of the existence of God in Tolstoyan religion. When we act out of duty or self-sacrifice, we are responding to the eternal truths within us, and to this extent, temporarily and through our subjectivity, escaping death.

For Tolstoy, religion rather than philosophy is the source of the true wisdom necessary for courage. Not reason or knowledge, but religious feeling
or instinct guides us in choosing a higher over a lower feeling ("Courage is the science..." [PSS 3: 239]). To this extent, courage has nothing to do with knowledge understood as the power to reason. As Captain Mikhailov, quaking, makes his way back to check up on his missing comrade, he fingers the saint's image hanging round his neck. Contrary to the contention of Guskov, the main character in Caucasian Notes: The Demoted Officer (1856), Tolstoy observed that education and intelligence make it harder, not easier to be courageous. Captain Mikhailov, in contrast to the adjutants who despise him, has a low brow and a "dullness of mental abilities." According to the narrator of The Raid, a Russian soldier like Captain Khlopov does not verbalize his courageous feelings (as a Frenchman might do) for fear of weakening them (ch. 10). A critically wounded soldier explains in Sevastopol in December (1855) how to cope on the battlefield: "The most important thing... is not to think a lot; if you don't think, you'll be all right. Everything happens because you think."

Like anger and shame, piety reinforces the sense of duty, and in Christianity at least, piety includes belief in an afterlife. In The Woodcutting, one example of many, Velenchuk dies courageously because his "simple faith in a future heavenly life could [not] waver at the decisive moment." In descriptions of death, especially of heroes, Tolstoy seems to promise, if not immortality, freedom from limitations imposed by material existence. For the dying Prince Andrei, death is "liberation from the force that had previously bound him and [a feeling of] strange lightness"; Hadji Murat turns his attention to "something grander" than his present life; Vasilii Brekhunov, as his body slowly freezes, also experiences death as freedom. The Death of Ivan Ilich, Master and Man, and Hadji Murat all end with references to an afterlife the existence of which cannot be refuted even if it cannot be proved.

Belief in an afterlife would seem to undercut courage by rendering it superfluous, because death itself is understood as only an illusion or even a passage to a better life. Rather than facing death, the pious Christian (or Muslim) denies its reality and therefore has no need for courage at all. It’s true that the dying often seem more like saints than warriors in Tolstoy, as if something transcendental were comforting them for the loss of life. As a psychologist, Tolstoy assumed that people find it difficult to do necessary or right things that are not obviously in their self-interest; and as a moralist he welcomed encouragement from any source, including traditional religion, to right action. He envied men like Hadji Murat whose piety made them more resolute than he, as a modern man and a thinker, felt himself to be. He himself, however, never claimed to have achieved the level of certainty about an afterlife that he ascribes to some of his characters. Less certain and saintly than them, he was called upon to be more courageous, because his instincts for the good
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were not supported by his milieu. He had to live right and die well without any outside certainty that there was any universal sanction for this. His only compass was his own conscience and the strength of will to abide by its dictates.

It is no accident that these two ingredients correspond respectively to the wisdom and strength of which courage is composed: for Tolstoy, right living and heroism were synonymous. He tried to demonstrate this in his writings, but as he grew older, he seems to have decided that he would have to model it in life in order to convince people that it was true. His reputation as a hero only grew over time. It depended not only upon heroic feats in various arenas, but also, especially later in his life, on his own determination to make himself an example of upright conduct, a Christian warrior for the good. One can easily ascribe this ambition to incorrigible hubris, but it is also a reflection of his religious and philosophical beliefs, according to which individuals rather than institutions introduce transcendental truths into the world and nourish them. Tolstoy may have modeled his own activity partly on the English essayist Thomas Carlyle’s notion of the hero. He read at least parts of Carlyle’s *On Heroes* in the 1850s, and was a great admirer of Carlyle in later life.¹⁰

Tolstoyan heroism is anti-romantic because it is in the service of the good of the community rather than the individual. At the same time, and paradoxically, in its emphasis on authenticity rather than rationality as the source of ultimate truths it is individualist in the extreme. Whereas in Plato as Tolstoy presents him in *The Raid*, knowledge understood as reason is necessary to moderate excesses inherent in courage, for Tolstoy both parts of courage – steadfastness and the knowledge of where to direct it – are grounded in sentiment, and human reason acts to weaken, not strengthen it. The wise man listens to his heart, not his head, and his heart will always tell him to do the right thing. Courage then becomes the “strength” necessary to stay the course in the face of external and internal resistance or temptation. To live entirely authentically, bowing neither to received opinion nor to threats from man or nature, was the heroic and humanly impossible task Tolstoy set himself in old age, and it is doubtful whether any other person has tried harder than he to succeed at it.

NOTES

5 Both the *Laches* and the *Phaedo*, mentioned below, are named after participants in the respective dialogues.
6 Page references to *War and Peace* are to the Norton Critical edition of the novel (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996). They are followed by volume and page references to the standard Russian Jubilee edition (PSS). I use the Maude translation from the Norton edition, but change it wherever necessary to stress a point.
8 The Russian proverb, of which Denisov quotes only the second half, is *Pulia durna, a vinovatogo naidet*, "A bullet may be a fool, but it will find the guilty party." Compare this to Eroshka's advice to Olenin in *The Cossacks* to avoid crowds on the battlefield.
9 Thanks to Edwina Cruise for pointing this out to me.