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## TWO IMMODEST PROPOSALS IN TOLSTOY'S "WAR AND PEACE"

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Tolstoy, the arch critic of conventional viewpoints, is constantly reminding us that things are not what they seem. This technique of awakening the observer to the truth of experience is called by Victor Shklovsky the keynote to *War and Peace*. For the device Shklovsky has coined a word, *ostranenie*, "bestrangement."<sup>1</sup> Tolstoy makes it strange—antithetical to preconceived notions—not only in *War and Peace* but also in earlier works. His "trade-mark" is stamped on the Sevastopol sketches, "The Raid," and "The Cossacks," based on his military experience in the Caucasus and at the siege of Sevastopol. The author tells us repeatedly that war is not like that, heroism is not like that, and death is not like that either.

In domestic scenes in *War and Peace* Tolstoy reminds us that love is not like that either. Literary conventions representing artificial sensibilities of romantic love are distortions of experience. Hence they must be made strange, unconventional. This Tolstoy does by resorting to parody, in which the irony of the author's attitude is unmistakable. The result is comic treatment of an erstwhile solemn occasion. Thus the marriage proposal of Boris Drubetskoy to Julie Karagina is reduced to melodrama and the proposal (by proxy) of Pierre Bezukhov to Helene Kuragina becomes a farce.

That Tolstoy consciously ridicules romantic conventions may be observed in his ironic treatment of melodrama. With ironic intent he describes the scene of the first encounter of Nicholas Rostov and Mary Bolkonsky. Here Nicholas meets a lady in distress. The rioting serfs, the day after Mary's father's funeral, refuse to assist her in evacuating the estate as war comes threateningly closer. Tolstoy describes the heroine and her romantic rescuer.

Princess Mary was sitting helpless and bewildered in the large sitting room, when Rostov was shown in. She could not grasp who he was and why he had come, or what was happening to her. When she saw his Russian face, and by his walk and the first words he uttered recognized him as a man of her own class, she glanced at him with her deep radiant look and began speaking in a voice that faltered and trembled with emotion. This meeting immediately struck Rostov as

a romantic event. "A helpless girl overwhelmed with grief, left to the mercy of coarse, rioting peasants! And what a strange fate sent me here! What gentleness and nobility there are in her features and expression!" thought he as he looked at her and listened to her timid story. (817-818)<sup>2</sup>

With tears in his eyes, he listens to Mary's words, not meant to move him to pity, and he responds, "I cannot express, Princess, how glad I am that I happened to ride here and am able to show my readiness to serve you." Then Tolstoy tells us, "Rostov's deferential tone seemed to indicate that though he would consider himself happy to be acquainted with her, he did not wish to take advantage of her misfortune to intrude upon her" (818).

In this scene fate has sent the hero to the helpless, gentle, grief-stricken heroine, to the woman who will become Rostov's wife, but not until he has regained self-esteem after the dissipation of the family fortune in payment of a gambling debt. He will then allow himself to marry not for money but for love. Here the author's ironic treatment of the conventions of romantic love is an antidote for sentimentality.

With this scene in mind, we may observe the author's treatment of two romantic proposals in which money, not love, is the motivation. The first scene shows the twenty-seven year old Julie entertaining not prospective suitors but those who no longer fear compromising her or committing themselves. Chief of that company is Boris, who can enter with abandon into her hospitality as well as share her feigned disillusionment with life. As a fellow sufferer, he participates in her melancholy moods, perusing with her the mournful verses in her album and listening to the doleful nocturnes on her harp. He begins to share with her also the thought that they are the only souls who understand one another "in a world of indifferent people" (608). These two sensitive souls are urged to unite by Boris' mother, who has mentally evaluated the inheritance of the "charming and melancholy" Julie.

"Julie had long been expecting a proposal from her melancholy adorer and was ready to accept it; but some secret feeling of repulsion for her, for her passionate desire to get married, for her artificiality, and a feeling of horror at renouncing the possibility of real love still restrained Boris" (609). Also, her red face, powdered chin, and moist eyes made him hesitate.

As a ruse, the melancholy Julie becomes gay in the presence of Anatole Kuragin. Thereupon Boris decides to act, for "the idea of being made a fool of and of having thrown away that whole month of arduous melancholy service to Julie, and of seeing all

the revenue from the Penza estates which he had already mentally apportioned and put to proper use fall into the hands of another, and especially into the hands of that idiot Anatole, pained Boris" (609). Just before he commits himself, he reflects, "I can always arrange so as not to see her often" (610).

The triumphant Julie forces Boris to say all that is said on such occasions, "that he loved her and had never loved any other more than her." This profession of love she knew she could demand in payment for her estates and forests, "and she received what she demanded." Melancholy now dispelled, the affianced couple make plans for a brilliant wedding.

In another scene money again is the magnet drawing Helene to Pierre in a farcical proposal. After Helene's name-day party, Pierre and Helene are left in a room together in order that Pierre may utter the expected proposal. He is awkwardly silent. Helene's parents wait anxiously outside, but nothing happens. After long silence, Helene's father, Prince Vasili, bursts into the room, and with one arm around Pierre and one around his daughter, gives them God's blessing. Pierre has proposed by proxy. He is relieved, however, that it is now "definite." He feels it is useless to ask whether it is good or bad; but he is disturbed because he cannot remember the "something special" which is said on such occasions. Then Helene draws nearer and orders him to take off his glasses. In his near-sighted perplexity, as she kisses him, he observes her "unpleasantly excited expression." Thereupon Pierre reflects, "It is too late now, it's done; besides I love her." Then, suddenly remembering what ought to be said on such occasions, "*Je vous aime!*" he says (using the formal *vous*) (231). Thus Pierre becomes the possessor of a celebrated beauty as well as heir to his father's millions. Such farce would have delighted Molière.

No modesty marks the quest of Julie and Helene for a mate. In the comic treatment of these two episodes the conventions of the marriage proposal have been distorted by the author's art of bestrangement.

#### NOTES

1. Victor Shklovsky, *Material i stil v romane Tolstogo 'Voyna i mir'* (Moscow, 1928), pp. 86-108.
2. Page references throughout refer to the Norton Edition of *War and Peace*.