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## EPIC FEATURES OF LEO TOLSTOY'S NOVELS *WAR AND PEACE*, *ANNA KARENINA* AND *RESURRECTION*<sup>1</sup>

The article examines the converging epic lines in three novels by Leo Tolstoy.

The author argues that in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian novelists were able to create the artistic worlds, in which prominence is given both to common destiny of the nation and individual fates. The novel *War and Peace*, specifically, is described as an innovative work of epic fiction based on current and recent Russian history that became a model of epic writing for many novelists then and later. It's claimed that Tolstoy developed and deepened the epic dimensions of fictional world in his subsequent novels, namely, *Anna Karenina* and *Resurrection*. For these three novels the author offers a close analysis of the following parameters: the ratio of the individual and the common; the integrity and totality of fictional worlds, the scope of events, narrative objectivity, precedential worldview, etc. In addition, a special emphasis is laid on the religious consciousness of Russian novelists, their search and affirmation of Orthodox Christian values, instrumental to the making of an epic novel.

*Key words:* Leo Tolstoy, epic, epic novel, epic features, genre, individual, world, Christian anthropology, precedential worldview.

Most literary scholars of the Russian novel of the 19<sup>th</sup> century habitually quote Vissarion Belinsky, who defined the novel as “contemporary epic.” Even though scholars both inside and outside Russia have been able to accumulate a wealth of materials on thematic and genre properties of the Russian novel to-date, genetic kinship of the 19<sup>th</sup> century novel with the epic still seems to remain an open issue. In particular, still insufficiently explored remains the matter of the epic majorant in the genre and the principles of genre formation. According to Georgiy Gachev, “virtually in each historical context there potentially coexist all states of the world and all types of worldview, the epic being one of them, as thirst for universal inclusion and understanding of being.” (Gachev 1968: 87). For the epic genre to emerge, he continues, there must be a condition, “*when the people and the state celebrate their birthday on the edge of death and non-existence,*” and in this way, “*making the primordial creation of the world, of all things and relations possible.*” (Gachev 1968: 87)

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The condition of “birthday on the edge of death” could be characteristic of the country in a state of global war, for example, when all the foundations of people’s lives are shaken. However, in Russian literature, in the relatively peaceful time of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there occurs, one might say, the awakening of the epic roots, the emergence or rather the renaissance of *the epic novel*, a unique genre, synthesizing all current genre classifications of novels, also rising above them to affirm special depth and integrity of Russian novels in their unity. If the European novel that came to replace the epic poem had lost its national breadth in the process, by foregrounding the conflict between the individual and society, the Russian novel of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was able to preserve *the epic majorant*, embracing the entropy of the epic tradition as well as its rebirth on new spiritual and moral grounds.

The 1860s proved to be a turning point for Russia. The 1861 Emancipation Manifesto and ensuing reforms posed the question of the scale of changes and the issue of preservation of entrenched national institutions and traditions. Profound changes in the life of the country threatened the sacrosanct Orthodox values and precepts. Many scholars correctly point out the dramatic tension in the Russian novel of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. On the other hand, it’s worth keeping in mind that the portrayed tension is nothing but a period feature. Russian writers were able to perceive the causes of the crisis that engulfed Russia and the rest of the civilized world then. More than that, they sought to show by literary means a way out - through collective effort, through unity rather than self-isolation. In a manner of speaking, global epic worldview is a staple of the Russian novelistic approach at the time, striving to map out a future course of development not only for Russia, but also for the rest of humanity. Epic worldview essentially implies a panoramic perspective on life, predicated on perennial values.

In his search of the subject matter for his epic novel Leo Tolstoy turns to the period of French invasion of Russia, *illustrating the dependence of the state’s destiny on its people*. Likewise his other two novels *Anna Karenina* and *Resurrection* aspire to a similar *global scale*. In *War and Peace* the fictional world in which live its characters is laid bare for the reader. In fact, the very title of this epic novel speaks for itself. The word ‘mir’ in Russian is polysemic. It might mean “peace, freedom from disturbances or war, quiet and tranquility”, and it might mean “the world, society, social life” (Bocharov 1987: 54). In *Anna Karenina* the omniscient narrator enables Tolstoy to take a back seat, thus bringing the inner life of the novel as ‘secondary reality’ to ‘primary reality’. It is made possible by epiphanic awareness of the unified law governing both realities as well as by recognition of the highest creative authority, God, presiding over them. The reader is encouraged to rise above Anna’s tragedy and above Levin’s searchings, to bring together various plotlines, pick up the attitude of the protagonists to common people, and more importantly, to become conscious of the highest laws of Being, embodied in Tolstoy’s novel.

*Resurrection*, in its turn, is based on a series of contrasts. Varied antitheses permeate the fictional world of the novel, complementing one another. In addition to becoming aware of the opposition of the ‘social floors’, the reader is expected to take notice of polar worldviews and conflicting points of view as well as of multidirectional prose movement in the novel in order to fully comprehend the degree of contrasting and the groundwork for antitheses. All things considered, it is the Russian people en masse, not Dmitri Nekhlyudov, who constitute the protagonist of the novel. In his effort to improve Katyusha’s wellbeing Nekhlyudov, as time goes by, takes up a number of other cases to help other people. He can’t remain insouciant any more, and his active involvement speeds up his awakening to spiritual life. In the second half of the novel the lawyer, while discussing current legal matters, calls Nekhlyudov “a funnel — a spout through which all the complaints of the prison are poured” (Leo Tolstoy 1928–1958, v. 32: 237). We see Nekhlyudov put in a good word in the arson case of the Menshovs and in the case of Theodosia Birukova. He tells the lawyer about the peasants who would come together to read the gospel, only to be sentenced to exile afterwards. Nekhlyudov pleads for Vera Bogodukhovskaya, the woman he has met in his life journey earlier. In short, he voluntarily helps total strangers. Tolstoy portrays the disenfranchisement, oppression and framing of common people so masterfully, that the reader may have the impression of *utter despondency* of life, where the truth (justice) is in the hands of wayward power brokers. The action of *Resurrection* takes place in the time of relative peace, no external threat to the country in sight. What is in focus, however, is a deep *state crisis*, a terrible plight of the common Russian folk. “The people are *dying out*, and have got used to *dying-out*; they have adopted a way of life appropriate to dying-out; staggering *mortality* rate among children, overwork of women, poor sustenance, especially of the old folk. And so gradually have the people come to this condition that they do not realize the full horror of it, and do not complain” (the italics are mine — *V. Andreyeva*) (Leo Tolstoy 1928–1958, v. 32: 217). *War and Peace* got to be a truly innovative work of fiction that later became a model writing epic novels based on the material of contemporary Russian history and social life in the country. Understandably, Russian novelists of the period, Tolstoy being no exception, derived their inspiration from ancient epics, too. For example, we know that Tolstoy read Homer assiduously before writing *War and Peace*. In the late summer of 1857 he praised Gnedich’s translation of the Iliad, while both the Iliad and the Odyssey made it to the list of his favorite books from 1848 to 1863, marked as “read in Russian” (Gusev 1957: 487). Before writing *Anna Karenina* he studied Greek intensively and acquired decent fluency in the language.

It is the scale of epic worldview that defines the global intent of Russian novelists at the time when they engaged in discussions of an all-encompassing approach to writing and understanding of Being. Let us sketch out briefly the ideological and artistic foundations for the Russian epic novel in the second

half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The most renowned Russian writers of the period, such as Ivan Goncharov, Ivan Turgenev, Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoevsky, attempted to bring out in their works a protagonist of epic dimensions, a cutting-edge role model for the new time. They maintained the idea that transformation of the Russian way of life is to be masterminded by the nobility who have adopted the time-honored folk values. The epic novel leaned towards a folk philosophy of life and folk conception of the world. Tolstoy's protagonists discover the meaning of life for themselves by tapping into folk wisdom. Even though the life of common people may seem far from ideal, and the sins of secular society may be hidden from view, in the peasant world transgressions of the ten commandments become conspicuous in half no time. Agafea Mihalovna, for instance, tells Lyovin, how "...Prohor has forgotten his duty to God, and with the money Lyovin had given him to buy a horse, he has been drinking without stopping, and has beaten his wife to death..." (Leo Tolstoy 1928–1959, v. 18: 102). The protagonist's ability to live in close proximity to the peasant world, to learn to work the land and ennoble his soul, favorably sets him apart from the drawing-room society, where any attempt to start a conversation about menial labor is immediately nipped in the bud by a rhetorical question, such as "What am I supposed to work for if my work is of no use to anybody?" (Leo Tolstoy 1928–1959, v. 18: 318).

The focus on the folk ideals of "simplicity, goodness and truth" gives an epic novel breadth and scope. At the same time, Tolstoy does not diminish the importance of individuality, either. He seems to be interested not so much in the role of an individual in history, but rather in bringing the individual and collective feelings together. "War and Peace", as an epic novel, differs from the epics in the days of yore in that Tolstoy's protagonists are already the people of the new era. They are perfectly conscious of their freedom of choice and their personal responsibility. In old epics the protagonist was never an individual. As György Lukács put it, "Strictly speaking, an epic protagonist is never an individual. From time immemorial it has been believed that the subject of an epic is always the fate of a certain community, rather than the fate of an individual. It makes perfect sense, as the completeness and insularity of the system of values that define the epic cosmos form a unity, too organic and too integral, to allow a part of it to self-isolate and imagine himself or herself an intrinsically singular individuality" (Lukács 1994: 37). In Tolstoy's fictional universe the inclusion of the individual will in the general mood and movement of the common people occurs in two ways. One: through unconscious rallying with the people in the face of external threat, requiring consolidation of actions. Two: through a prolonged, painstaking process of soul searching to discover a personal niche in this world.

The novelists of that period were able to create fictional worlds in which the fate of the common people is of paramount importance, although the importance of an individual is never diminished at that. Contrasting the novel with the epic, György Lukács points out that a novel protagonist springs into

being via alienation from the outside world. Conversely, in the Russian epic novel it is the other way around — the protagonist looks for ways to reunite to the world.

Against the backdrop of the French invasion of Russia in 1812 Tolstoy's protagonists (Andrei Bolkonsky, Nikolai Rostov, Pierre Bezukhov) lose faith in secular power and its omnipotence. "It is clear that a theory of their 'genius' was invented for them long ago because they are the power!" (Leo Tolstoy 1928–1959, v. 11: 53), reflects Andrei Bolkonsky. He joins the army precisely because there the people are tested and evaluated objectively, because only in the army personal initiative can be appreciated and emulated en masse. A protagonist of the Russian epic novel stands up for truth, rather than his personal "self". As befits an epic character, he is ready to dissolve his ego in the elements. In such a communion, Tolstoy says, he discovers his true self.

Tolstoy pays a lot of attention to the human condition, demonstrating how his protagonist builds up his spiritual path to become one with the world. Olga Panova, examining Andrei and Pierre's dialogue in the novel, concludes: "The meaning of the dialogue between Tolstoy's protagonists is made clear by the context of world history. It indicates not only their personal spiritual development and their life paths, but also the mytho-symbolic Path of Man and Mankind to Truth and genuine Immortality. This is what gives the philosophical dialogue between Andrei Bolkonsky and Pierre Bezukhov a timeless, ontological, parablelike feel" (Panova 2007: 26). It is worthwhile to evaluate the actions of the protagonists in the three novels from the point of view of Christian anthropology that defines the timeless value of Man and his soul.

It wouldn't be a stretch to say that Tolstoy, as well as a number of other Russian writers after him, prophetically foresaw the coming of new challenging times, the planetary crises of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that caused conscientious scholars and scientists to raise the alarm only recently. Rudiments of impending calamities we may trace already in the novels of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, namely, the degrading mutation in individual consciousness, the emergence of consumer culture, disregard for honest work, the cult of money and luxury, neglect of natural life, gain oriented short-term forecasts, unilateral deception-based systems.

"We have entered into a civilisation of lies, where anti-nature, deception and self-deception reign supreme. <...> General philosophical analysis of the state of affairs in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century enables us to claim that what is happening at present is a multi-aspect, multifaceted systemic global catastrophe — ecological, social, anthropic" (Nalivaiko, Ushakov, Ushakova 2016: 21). Needless to say, it did not happen overnight. Russian novelists sensed it all at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as mentioned above.

In *Resurrection* Russian nature and land are sacralized as a source of life. The image of the awakening and blossoming earth, a symbol of victory over death, is used several times, always paired up with antitheses. The earth is one of the greatest values in the novel, however the attitudes to the earth vary

dramatically. The earth as a material good, a source of income above life's needs becomes a temptation. The earth as a provider, as a source and cause of all living things is revered.

Tolstoy's meditations on the individual have a special significance. Central to them is the idea of Man's oblivion, oblivion of his place in the world, a vain attempt to put himself in God's place. This misunderstanding of Man's role in the world is prevalent in society and in academia to-date. As Nikolay Petrov rightly notes, "What is characteristic of modern noosphere research is a misconception about the role of Man; they make him 'the main determining factor in the development of the entire biosphere'" (Petrov 2018: 481). He rightly points out that the words "Man conquers nature and space" are nothing but pure hubris. "Man is not called upon to conquer nature, but only to adapt to living in the evolving natural environment, only to having the opportunity to fly planes and launch ships, without changing either the Earth's or space ecosystems in doing so" (Petrov 2018: 482).

In his novels Tolstoy depicts effectively the misconceptions of people who have imagined they have the right to command others and dispose of their lives. This motif of unrighteous power is dramatized to its maximum capacity in *Resurrection*. In the beginning Nekhlyudov, like most others, lives a life full of deception and pretenses. The mistake of the people who have forgotten about beauty and love Tolstoy describes in relation to the cult of power: "...What is sacred and worthy of consideration is what they have invented themselves to *enslave one another*" (the italics are mine — V. Andreyeva) (Leo Tolstoy 1928–1958, v. 32: 4). As for Dmitri Nekhlyudov, he gradually comes to realize the injustices of oppression. He abandons his power position and comes to assert the will of God. The final quotations from the Gospel of Matthew which Nekhlyudov reads, ideologically are on a par with the rest of the novel. On the list of Gospel quotations Tolstoy intentionally puts the lines about the pardoning of a slave by the sovereign. In the novel there appears an image of the human sovereign who recognizes the authority above him, and is capable of acting at behest of his heart rather than by the book.

The French invasion, a threat to the Fatherland, in *War and Peace* becomes a decisive factor in determining the fate of both individuals and the nation per se. It is the moment when individuals are measured by their ability to experience common grief, to become part of the 'big world'. In *Anna Karenina* righteous life also correlates with the folk world. The episode where Lyovin's scything with peasants and the joy of joint work experienced by him could be a case in point. On the other hand, communal work experience here merely helps the protagonist discover the law of love and kindness. Fyodor's remark that has a profound impact on Levin also points to two different paths in life: "Oh, well, of course, folks are different. One man lives for his own wants and nothing else, like Mituh, he only thinks of filling his belly, but Fokanitch is a righteous man. He lives for his soul. He does not forget God". (Leo Tolstoy 1928–1959, v. 19: 376).



What is significant in *Resurrection* is a contrast between the people who can work and those who cannot and do not want to work. Among the latter, we see many dignitaries who pretend to be engaged in noble service and useful activities. It would suffice to recall Wolf, Maslennikov, Toporov, Count Ivan Michaelovitch Tcharsky. Life without labor seems alien to a Russian man. Tolstoy sees the seeds of catastrophic changes in society in the unpreparedness of a person to create things. Before leading Dmitri Nekhlyudov to perceiving real work, Leo Tolstoy raises him from the abyss. The same applies to the female protagonist Katusha Maslova, who, after all, gets significantly transformed once she finds herself among political prisoners. She admires her cell-mates, especially Simonson and Mary Pavlovna: "She was struck by the fact that this beautiful girl, daughter of a general, who could speak three languages, had given away all that her rich brother had sent her, and lived like a simplest working girl..." (Leo Tolstoy 1928–1959, v. 32: 367).

Tolstoy evaluates all actions from the point of view of eternity. His omniscient narrator abdicates his position of a judge, which is made prominent already in the epigraph for *Anna Karenina*. It is important to understand here that the epigraph "Vengeance is mine; I will repay" refers not only to Anna Karenina, but also to all the other protagonists in the novel. Often vengeance is identified only with retaliation. Anna Karenina's storyline in the novel is believed to be the main one, her sins being central to the narrative. But Tolstoy shows that this is not so, for every act and even every thought of any of his protagonists are taken into account and are fully evaluated.

A salient feature of the epic novel, as well as of the epic as such is their impressive sweep. In *Anna Karenina*, there are fewer voices of the common people than, say, in *War and Peace* and *Resurrection*, but these voices acquire special significance, since coming together with the masses is exactly the trajectory of Lyovin's movement throughout the novel. In *Anna Karenina* antithetic parallelisms, among them scything and croquet, ask one to imagine not only two different societies, but also two different paths in life, two different destinations.

In *Resurrection*, Nekhlyudov's involvement with Katyusha's case is simultaneously his involvement with a bigger picture, so to speak, his growing awareness of the plight of the common people. He leaves Moscow for St. Petersburg, visits his estates, follows Katyusha to Siberia. As he overcomes one hardship after another on his travels across Russia, he gets to know more and more commoners. The vastness of the country evoke in the reader's mind both the need for unity, expressed vividly already in Old Russian literature, as well as a profound sense of the good of the land for the good of mankind.

Precedence will be another marked feature of Tolstoy's fictional world. To be clear, by precedence here I mean the repeatability of events associated with the cyclical movement of mankind, with the living recurring moments, which is not quite the same as 'text precedence', the concept popular in literary

studies and linguistics these days. It should be noted that precedence in the epic novels of the new time is significantly different from that in old epics, which may be at least partly explained by the anthropocentrism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century literature, with its emphasis on the role and significance of Man, his moral and spiritual choices. Precedence in the new epic art is two-fold. On the one hand, in relation to the initial precedent, it is a super-event of 'restorative' nature (Tyupa: 20). On the other, it incorporates the rhyming episodes in the life and fate of common people and the repetition of stages in the spiritual movement of the person. As *War and Peace* scholars observed earlier, there are two most significant battles in the novel, two injuries of Andrei Bolkonsky, two similar scenes of genuflection before Emperor Alexander I performed by the Rostov brothers, Nikolai and Petya, Mikhail Kutuzov tenaciously resorting several times to waiting as a military tactic.

In all the three novels precedence is related to the general laws of being that operate in the world independently of Man. In *Anna Karenina* Tolstoy makes a conscious effort to reach out for the universal laws of being. External rhyming events and actions of the protagonists in the novel seem far from being accidental. Lyovin proposes to Kitty twice, Vronsky experiences death wish twice, first time as he attempts suicide via self-inflicted gunshot wound, and second time as he leaves for war at the end of the novel. After recuperation Anna Karenina more than once recalls her near death experience during the illness, in this way, bringing together Anna's postpartum infection and her eventual death to form a meaningful parallel.

*Resurrection* also features repeating events. For example, Nekhludov visits his aunts twice, twice he considers the land issue, which he initially planned to resolve in his youth. The fictional universe of the novel built on the principle of multiple depiction, is rife with images of groundless and baseless accusation of commoners who committed no crime at all, of their trials and subsequent sentences. Examples of such cases could be infinite. At that Tolstoy repeatedly stresses that the inflicted punishment barely contributes to the rehabilitation of the 'offender' in the future. Consider, for instance, the erroneous accusation of Katusha, who had nothing to do with the poisoning of the merchant, the story of the theft of the floormats by the boy, mentioned in the novel in passing, the case of cultists exempt from their families and exiled to the Caucasus for reading and interpreting the gospel on their own, the imprisonment of Theodosia, who had tried to poison her husband, but later became the dearest person for him. All these people certainly have no impunity. They are guilty. For Tolstoy however the absurdity of the Russian penal system and of the Criminal Code as such overshadows their offenses in store.

Finally, let us take a brief look at how late Tolstoy dramatizes antithetically the motif of secular trial versus God's judgment. He does not question the right of the State to punish criminals for the well-being of Society. At the same time, he specifies that Russian penal measures correspond neither to



civil understanding of Order nor a sense of humanness. The epic dimension of the novel manifested in the fact that almost each collision and almost each conflict are brought to the level of global generalization.

If in *War and Peace* it is *external historical events* that transfer numerous individual actions of protagonist *to the global national level*, in *Resurrection*, behind the absurdity of the Russian penal system and all the outrages of the state functionaries, Tolstoy lays bare *ontological contradictions*.

To sum up, the Russian classic epic novel of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century offered the reader spiritual points of reference, oblivion of which was fraught with risks of a devastating worldview and religious crisis. The Russian men of letters then gave the novel an epic feel, namely, special integrity and totality of the fictional world, objectivity of the narrative, broad scope of events and abundance of protagonists, depiction of folk life, model for overcoming the collision between individual and society, enormity of conflicts, engagement of multiple points of view and speaking voices, recurrence of events characteristic of precedential worldview, etc. In other words, they created a unique epic literary form, drawing on the actuality of their own lifetimes, their Orthodox sensibilities in the search and affirmation of Orthodox values.

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Валерија Андрејева

# ЕПСКЕ КАРАКТЕРИСТИКЕ РОМАНА ЛАВА ТОЛСТОЈА *РАТ И МИР*, *АНА КАРЕЊИНА* И *ВАСКРСЕЊЕ*

## Резиме

У раду се разматра конвергенција епског између сижејних линија три романа Лава Толстоја. Доказано је да су руски писци у другој половини XIX века били у стању да створе уметничке светове у којима је људска судбина изузетно важна, истовремено не умањујући значај појединца. Аутор чланка показује да је *Рат и мир* за бројне савременике Лава Толстоја постало изистински оригинално дело, које је отворило могућност стварања епског романа, заснованог на материјалу из нове и недавне историје и модерног живота Русије. Штавише, сам Лав Толстој је у каснијим романима пронашао основе за стварање епског света. Аутор чланка анализира елементе: посебан однос између личног и општег, потпуност и целовитост уметничког света, објективност приповедања, широк опсег догађаја, обичајно право итд., који су присутни у епском роману *Рат и мир*, као и у епским романима *Ана Карењина* и *Васкрсење* Лава Толстоја. За стварање епског романа главни значај је имала религијска свест руских писаца, њихова афирмација и потрага за православним вредностима.

*Кључне речи:* Лав Толстој, епопеја, епски роман, карактеристике епа, жанр, појединац и свет, хришћанска антропологија, обичајно право.