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Hélène Bezukova as the Extension of the Great Man

Across the web of interactions that is Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, the character Hélène Bezukova appears only in flashes. There are a few occasions that reveal more than a glimpse of the socialite, though she is always viewed externally by the narrative. One such instance concerns her scheme to divorce her wealthy husband, Pierre, and remarry one of two suitors. Her suitor of choice, a prince, accedes easily to her plan to convert to Catholicism for an annulment, as does the priest she enlists to facilitate the conversion. Through her machinations, Hélène's perspective of the world is revealed to parallel that of the emperor of France, Napoleon himself. Though much more ink is devoted to the character of Napoleon, the paragon of the Great Man, and he occupies a different sphere within the novel than Hélène, these two characters are still linked within the novel. They cross paths, just long enough for Napoleon to say of Hélène, "*C'est un superbe animal*" (Tolstoy 470), and more parallels draw them together if Hélène is viewed with enough scrutiny. Although Hélène and Napoleon are treated differently by the text, particularly in their deaths, analyzing them as two variations of a single archetype, the great man, expands Tolstoy's critique of the ideas underlying the Great Man Theory of history to broader societal institutions, emphasizing the universality of the claims Tolstoy makes about the correct relationship between free will and inevitability.

The most explicit description of H el ene's perspective comes from this divorce scheme and is also one such parallel between the socialite and the emperor. The narrator defines H el ene's perspective in comparison to Napoleon's, and both are characterized by a certainty of their ability to assert their will over reality. H el ene is said to be able to navigate the scandal she creates by seeking a divorce because she, "like a really great man who can do whatever he pleases, at once assumed her own position to be correct, as she sincerely believed it to be, and that everybody else was to blame" (Tolstoy 894-5). H el ene regards herself as infallible and believes she can accomplish anything she wants: In other words, she believes she can assert her will over reality. Regarding Napoleon, Jeff Love explains how this arrogance is really illusion, writing, "the Napoleonic figure is not great in any other sense than that he is greatly burdened by illusions, chief among which is that he has the power to determine events, a power that belongs ultimately to an absent god" (94). H el ene shares this illusion, evidence of her existence as an instantiation of the great man archetype. Like Napoleon, there is nothing she more sincerely believes in than her power over the world around her. She asks her princely suitor rhetorically, "The law, religion... What have they been invented for, if they can't arrange [my remarriage]?" (Tolstoy 895). In her mind, these overarching structures of society ought to serve to achieve her desires; they must exist only as tools for her to use to determine events. H el ene's burden of illusions is thus as immense as the emperor's, and it crushes her just as Napoleon's crushes him, leading to their respective downfalls.

Napoleon's undoing comes in the form of a eulogy, describing all the inevitable forces that led from his very inception to his retreat from Moscow (Tolstoy 647- 883), throughout which the text tears the great man apart, at first philosophically through essays embedded in the novel, then narratively through the emperor's unravelling as the story unfolds. In one essay

toward the beginning of the novel, the Philosopher Narrator of *War and Peace* mentions Napoleon by name while arriving at the conclusion: “great men are but labels giving names to events... Every act of theirs, which appears to them an act of their own will, is in a historical sense involuntary, and is related to the whole course of history” (Tolstoy 650). Thus, as the French army receives its death blow at the Battle of Borodino later in the novel, the reader is told, “Napoleon did not notice that in regard to his army he was playing the part of a doctor who hinders by his medicines—a role he so justly understood and condemned” (Tolstoy 861). He continues to play futilely with forces beyond his control as his army falls to pieces in its retreat, playing doctor to an army beginning its death rattle. The orders he continues to give until the very end (Tolstoy 1149)—his efforts to assert his will over history—are like a doctor “making the patient swallow substances for the most part harmful” (Tolstoy 703). Thus, Napoleon’s end fulfills the Philosopher Narrator’s theory; as much as he believes he can control events, he cannot. His illusion of greatness is revealed and thereby dismantled. Napoleon might still believe in his power, as would Great Man Theory historians, but the text displays his view as arrogant beyond the point of reason—a position that leads to his inevitable downfall. Napoleon was never able to assert his will; his actions were always “as little voluntary as the actions of any soldier” (Tolstoy 649). Thus, the reader cannot help but realize what the character Andrei realizes upon meeting Napoleon, that the great man is nothing but an “insignificant creature” (Tolstoy 310). His character might not necessarily die, but the idea of Napoleon, the genius, the great man, is thoroughly disgraced over the course of the novel.

Compare Napoleon’s treatment with Hélène’s death, a single paragraph. Through court gossip, it is revealed that Hélène was prescribed “small doses of a certain drug to produce a certain effect; but Hélène, tortured by the fact that the old count [her other suitor] suspected her

and that her husband to whom she had written... had not replied, had suddenly taken a very large dose of the drug, and had died in agony before assistance could be rendered her” (Tolstoy 1009-10). The “certain effect” is the termination of her pregnancy, and the “certain drug” is an abortifacient, although both are only alluded to by the text (Tolstoy 1006). The court gossip frames H el ene’s death as a suicide out of fear or guilt, however, H el ene always “[assumes] her own position to be correct... and that everybody else [is] to blame” (Tolstoy 894-5). Therefore, suicide would not have occurred to her, especially from guilt or fear from a lack of efficacy, not when a doctor was readily providing her with a solution. Instead of following the doctor’s order, though, the reader is left to assume that H el ene chose to take the medicine all at once instead of in increments, to hasten the realization of her plans. In doing this, she reveals a disregard of medicine similar to Napoleon’s (Tolstoy 1149). However, like Napoleon, she also acts as a doctor herself by trying to control her body through medicine. She does this in order to preserve her place in society, hide her pregnancy, hasten her plan to remarry, and continue to try to exert her will over events, and it kills her. Just like how Napoleon keeps giving order as his army crumbles around him, H el ene is scheming as she dies.

Unlike with Napoleon’s downfall, however, the narration gives no more details into H el ene’s situation beyond the already quoted gossip; as a result, the account of her death is even more distant than usual descriptions of the socialite. Most often, the narrator depicts H el ene from his perspective, with her thoughts and actions described from that external point of view. Her internal dialogue is only reported, such as H el ene “assumed her own position to be correct” (Tolstoy 894-5), never directly quoted like other characters, such as “[H el ene] would like to be married to all three [her husband and two suitors] at the same time,’ thought Bilibin” (Tolstoy 900). Her death, however, is twice as distant: first filtered through gossip, then through the

narrator. Censorship may play a role in this narrative distance, as social and institutional pressure would likely repress frank discussions of abortion (Choldin, 134). However, the narrative distance from H el ene could also be an intentional choice. Dr. Miller discusses a similar treatment of another failed mother in *War and Peace*: Liza Bolkonskaya, another society woman who, without the substance necessary for motherhood, dies in childbirth (Tolstoy 346-351). Miller writes that “Liza’s own perspective as a birthing mother is diminished, even erased” because she is reduced to external descriptions. Much more could be said about the treatment of these women within *War and Peace*, especially about how H el ene’s role as a great man interacts with her role as a woman, but that is beyond the scope of this essay. What can be said is that, whether due to an artistic choice to diminish H el ene’s perspective or necessary, H el ene’s idea and experience of medicine remain as subtext. Thus, H el ene’s demonstrated belief in the supremacy of her will, a belief shared by Napoleon, emerges despite the decision to distance H el ene from the narrative.

Fortunately, within the broader narrative of *War and Peace*, more parallels corroborate these characters’ shared belief and even build upon it. The assumptions about H el ene’s death gain credibility from their similarity to the great man’s archetypal attitude toward historical events (Tolstoy 861). Just as both characters believe they can assert their will over events, H el ene believes she can assert her will over the human body, which, according to Napoleon, “is like a perfect watch that should go on for some time... [the watchmaker] can adjust it by fumbling, and that blindfolded” (Tolstoy 844). The body here is an incomprehensible, untouchable force—similar to how history exists according to the novel. The Philosopher Narrator even uses a watch among many metaphors to explain the inscrutability of the laws of history, saying, “however much and however carefully I observe the hands of the watch, the valves and wheels of the engine, and the oak, I shall not discover the cause of bells ringing, the

engine moving, or of the winds of spring.” (Tolstoy 883). The body is as beyond human understanding and control as the forces of history, and it is onto this force that H el ene tries to apply the logic of medicine in order to bend it to her will, just as Napoleon tries to force the logic of his military theory onto the course of history to assert his own will. Thus emerges another pattern: Both examples of the great man attempt to control events by subjecting powers greater than them to systems of rules constructed by reason, reason ultimately supported by the premise of the supremacy of the human will over reality. These structures H el ene and Napoleon manipulate therefore exist to promote their own free will over the reality of life, and this is the premise underlying the idea of the great man the novel aims to uncover.

Like the various metaphors the Philosopher Narrator uses to explain the laws of history, yet another difference between the two characters’ endings further establishes the great man’s defining underlying premise: While Napoleon’s orders are continually ineffective, H el ene still appears to bend events to her will within St. Petersburg society. The quote that compares her mentality to that of a great man says that she is successful because of this mentality (Tolstoy 894-5), and the nobility accepts her plans for remarriage as legitimate (Tolstoy 898). When H el ene tells the prince how institutions ought to exist to serve the desires of people like her, he is “surprised that so simple an idea had not occurred to him” (Tolstoy 895) and immediately acts on her plan, helping her convert to Catholicism to get an annulment. The catholic priest they recruit easily agrees to her plan, too, in exchange for a sizeable donation (Tolstoy 897). Though she cannot control her body, H el ene can manipulate high society and the church like clay. She can spread rumors and host salons and feel as in control as Napoleon does when he gives his orders. Thus, like military theory and medicine, these institutions function as another structure forced on real life to give it rules by which the human will can feel in control. In all of these examples, the

use of reason to promote free will defines the way H el ene and Napoleon, as great men, interact with the world. This way of thinking is therefore broader than just Napoleon's military theory or even H el ene's social institutions. It is essential to the great man; it defines the great man as an archetype and as a philosophy of history. The Philosopher Narrator says that Great Man historians "understand [the force that moves nations, the laws of history] as a power inherent in heroes and rulers. In their narration events occur solely by the will of a Napoleon" (Tolstoy 1274). These historians make the same mistake as the great man they uphold: they impose a structure onto life that supports free will. In this case, the great man, or rather his will, is that structure. A great man is thus more than a Napoleon; a great man is a way of thinking, one that uses reason to promote free will both within and beyond *War and Peace*.

Now finally, at the very end of his novel, in the later of two epilogues, Tolstoy uses the Philosopher Narrator as his own voice to propose his philosophy as the correct alternative to the Great Man Theory of history that H el ene and Napoleon embody. To attempt a crude summary, Tolstoy begins in agreement with the great man, writing, "All knowledge is merely a bringing of this essence of life under the laws of reason" (1304), which "[give] expression to the laws of inevitability" (1304). The laws of inevitability are the forces behind historical events, the very events that Napoleon and H el ene want to believe they can control. With their mistaken premise of the supremacy of human will, the great men bend reason to create laws that promote their own will, rather than inevitability. Tolstoy proposes the opposite relationship between free will and the laws that reason creates: "So also in history what is known to us we call the laws of inevitability, what is unknown to us we call freewill. Freewill is for history only as expression for the unknown remainder of what we know about the laws of human life" (Tolstoy 1305). Reason is meant to march forward inevitability, encroaching further and further upon free will, and

Tolstoy intends for this principle to extend far further than Napoleon's battlefields, to all the metaphors the Philosopher Narrator uses and beyond. He expects his reader to see reason pushing back free will into inscrutable infinity in every aspect of his novel, thus the Great Man Theory must fail in every aspect, too. Yet without Hélène, the great man only tries to control history from the battlefield. Her existence expands the great man's reach to the opposite corner of the novel, connecting peace with war, social institutions with medicine and military theory. She is the other half of the great man in *War and Peace*, if only she was written as such.

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