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# TOLSTOY AND TAHRIR

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Erin Greer

I was reading *War and Peace* last February, as protestors gathered in Tahrir Square. Literature has a way of insinuating itself into one's perceptive apparatus, and Tolstoy's words blurred and mixed with the images of Cairo until it seemed to me that Tolstoy and Tahrir were meant to be read together.

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*War and Peace*, of course, is Count Tolstoy's hugely ambitious and rather unwieldy attempt to sketch the spiritual and political character of Russian society during the Napoleonic wars, while criticizing previous accounts of these years and casting about for a grand theory to explain, ultimately, all of human experience. "There are two sides to each man's life," the book observes: "his personal life, which is the more free the more abstract its interests, and his elemental, swarmlike life, where man inevitably fulfills the laws prescribed for him."<sup>1</sup> *War and Peace* tries to describe both sides of human life and to understand the nature of their incongruous alliance. The apparently free "personal life" moves according to "essential concerns of health, illness, work, rest, [...] of thought, learning, poetry, music, love, friendship, hatred, passions." Tolstoy describes this private side of life with a deep richness that strains against the abstract coldness of the idea that "man inevitably fulfills the laws prescribed for him," and the narrative voice splinters between these "two sides" of life, swinging from panoramic sketches of "swarmlike" historical movement to intimate portraits of the most personal details of human life. Periodically the voice of *War and Peace* abandons the narrative of both altogether, in order to reflect upon the abstract laws that shape human experience and to provide commentary about our futile attempts to discern these laws from our position within the swarm. The narrative oscillation helps make *War and Peace*, in Henry James's memorable appraisal, a "large loose baggy monster."<sup>2</sup> Its different voices contradict and often undo each other, and yet they strike a paradoxical, suitably unstable balance within the text. It is this unlikely harmony, or pleasing dissonance, of the voices of *War and Peace* that make this baggy monster an appropriate literary companion for the Egyptian revolt. In both theme and formal effect,

*War and Peace* demonstrates the necessity of supplementing theoretical and historical accounts of human experience with fiction as the only (fragmentary) way of approximating the unsteady relationship between the "two sides" of historical man.

Several of the theoretical chords of *War and Peace* immediately resonated with the revolt in Egypt. Consider the following observation made by one of the book's essayistic voices, which might have saved Hosni Mubarak an embarrassing week in mid-February when he seemed like the only person who had not yet accepted that he was no longer running Egypt:

As long as the historical sea is calm, it must seem to the ruler-administrator in his frail little bark, resting his pole against the ship of the people and moving along with it, that his efforts are moving the ship. But once a storm arises, the sea churns up, and the ship begins to move by itself, and then the delusion is no longer possible. The ship follows its own enormous, independent course, the pole does not reach the moving ship, and the ruler suddenly, from his position of power, from being a source of strength, becomes an insignificant, useless, and feeble human being.

Egypt's "historical sea," if we embrace the metaphor, was churning from the Tunisian revolution and from more local storms, such as men setting themselves on fire, rejuvenated labor and constitutional reform movements, and recollections of Khaled Said's suspicious death in Egyptian police custody the summer before. According to this essayistic voice in *War and Peace*, a "ruler-administrator" like Mubarak is never fully in command, and his authority depends upon a shared delusion of his

power. The delusion, already weakened by years of pressure from labor and political reform movements, finally lost its hold during the eighteen days that men, women, and children lived in Tahrir Square, and Mubarak appeared before the world in all his human feebleness.

The theorist-narrator of *War and Peace* argues against models of history favored by people he disdainfully calls “the historians,” who overestimate the power of “ruler-administrators” like Mubarak. “Historians,” according to *War and Peace*,

lay before us the deeds and speeches of several dozen men [...], calling these deeds and speeches by the name of *revolution*; then they give a detailed biography of Napoleon and of some persons sympathetic or hostile to him, tell of the influence of some of these persons on others, and say: here is the origin of this movement, and here are its laws.”

This account of history is false, Tolstoy writes, “because in this explanation a weaker phenomenon is taken as the cause of a stronger one.” Historians erroneously imagine that great men inspire, organize, and direct the “unconscious, swarmlike life of mankind,” when in reality, each of these so-called great men is adrift “in the middle of a shifting series of events, and in such a way that he is never able at any moment to ponder all the meaning of the ongoing event.” Because of their symbolic position at the center of historical events, great men ultimately have the least independent agency in Tolstoy’s schema: “Kings are the slaves of history.” Historical phenomena like revolutions do not unfold at their command, but emerge from the “sum of individual human wills” and the “uniform strivings of people.”

This idea that the true source of historical events is the “sum of individual wills” seems almost tailored to this year of revolution. We hear the same sentiment in the words of Wael Ghonim, the Google marketing executive who became one of the West’s favorite representatives of the Egyptian protests. In a *Newsweek* interview, Ghonim could almost be Tolstoy chaffing against “the historians”: “What you don’t understand, and it seems what you don’t want to understand, is that this protest doesn’t have real organizers. It’s a protest without a leader.”<sup>3</sup> His demurral gained him the title, in a *New York Times* headline, of a “reluctant hero.”<sup>4</sup> *War and Peace* helpfully observes that “the ancients left us examples of heroic poems in which heroes con-

stitute the entire interest of history, and we still cannot get used to the fact that, for our human time, history of this sort has no meaning.” The epic model of an independently striving hero was inadequate to the story of Russia during the Napoleonic wars, and it remains inadequate to the story of the strivings of the people in the Middle East and Northern Africa; in Madison, Wisconsin; and in Liberty Plaza, New York.

Western pundits who have outwardly accepted that there was no primary human leader in the Egyptian protests still contrived a digital-age redemption of the heroic model of history, substituting a personified “new media” figure for the human leadership that Ghonim and others disavowed. The real “heroes” of the Egyptian revolt became Facebook and Twitter, continuing a trend witnessed prominently in 2009 when one of Bush’s national security staffers, Mark Pfeifle, recommended Twitter for the Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of its “role” in the Iranian protests.<sup>5</sup> It seems like we (in the West, at least) will only accept that the revolt was the “sum of individual human wills,” if we can imagine funneling these individual wills through what *War and Peace* would call a “historical unit,” an “always arbitrary” figure that appears to concentrate and express diverse human wills. If there appears to be some trace of chauvinism in our appetite for the Western hero of social media, and some lingering Orientalist logic in our inclination to reduce the complexity of the Egyptian revolt, *War and Peace* offers possible consolation in the fact that we humans are by nature susceptible to traps of this sort:

The totality of causes of phenomena is inaccessible to the human mind. But the need to seek causes has been put into the soul of man. And the human mind, without grasping in their countlessness and complexity the conditions of phenomena, of which each separately may appear as a cause, takes hold of the first, most comprehensible approximation and says: here is the cause.

Facebook has become the most comprehensible cause to minds ill-equipped to understand the “totality of causes.” The error of our infatuation with the supposed role of social media in the Egyptian protests is the same error Tolstoy sees in “great man” theories of history: “A weaker phenomenon is taken as the cause of

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a stronger one. The sum of individual human wills produced the revolution and Napoleon, and only the sum of those wills endured them

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ITS DIFFERENT VOICES CONTRADICT AND OFTEN UNDO EACH OTHER,  
AND YET THEY STRIKE A PARADOXICAL, SUITABLY UNSTABLE BALANCE  
WITHIN THE TEXT.

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and then destroyed them.” In the case of Egypt, as in the case of the French Revolution, a greater phenomenon—the sum of individual sentiments of rage, defiance, enthusiasm, hope, horror, weariness, poetry, music, friendship, and love, and the unique personal modes of organizing and expressing these wills—has been presented as the child and instrument of social media. *War and Peace* suggests that our equation is inverted.

Positioning itself as a corrective, among other things, to the stories favored by “the historians,” *War and Peace* offers a theory of history and fate, several compelling romances, and shattering portraits of battle, self-doubt, existential angst, courage, and cowardice. Its central thesis is basically a theory of determinism, in which the laws that govern human action are fixed, but too complex to be grasped by human understanding. “Man lives consciously for himself,” the book’s narrator asserts, “but serves as an unconscious instrument for the achievement of historical, universal human goals.” Our ignorance preserves our illusion of freedom, and this illusion is equally necessary to our fulfillment of a predetermined historical design, to what Tolstoy calls the “concept” of humanity, and to morality. But the assured, professorial voice that makes such pronouncements throughout *War and Peace* splinters and evaporates at times, giving way to what we might call a novelistic voice, which relishes the shimmering content of personal lives, details that overflow the bounds of any predetermined design.

The text of *War and Peace* is itself a battleground hosting a conflict between narrative voices. One voice delineates the “swarmlike” movements of armies, the “monotonous living waves of soldiers,” “the monotonous tramp of thousands of feet,” while another voice moves through drawing rooms and battlefields, attentive to the sounds, smells, tastes, and colors of

private lives, the upheavals of love and faith, joy, sorrow, vanity, and shame. This second, “novelistic” voice fixates on tiny, radiant details

with no discernible relation to the plot or “general purposes” of the book, such as the thin line of hair that floats above a pretty woman’s upper lip, or a prisoner’s bare foot as it lifts to scratch an itch on his leg while he awaits execution. These two narrative voices are joined by a third voice, which attempts to construct a theoretical framework, an abstract system to account for the contrasting perspectives of the other two voices. This is the essayistic voice that condemns “the historians,” that reflects upon the “two sides” of human life, and that

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attempts to explain the capitulation of the individual, abstractly free side of man to the general, swarmlike side.

Virginia Woolf wonderfully rendered the effect of this narrative oscillation when she observed that Tolstoy’s work makes us “feel that we have been set on a mountain-top and had a telescope put into our hands.”<sup>6</sup> “Everything is astonishingly clear and absolutely sharp,” she writes. “Then, suddenly, just as we are exulting, breathing deep, feeling at once braced and purified, some detail—perhaps the head of a man—comes at us out of the picture in an alarming way, as if extruded by the very intensity of its life.” The fine details of a man’s head, or the feathery mustache hovering over a pretty woman’s lip, and a man’s relief of an itch in the final moments of his life, alarm us with the intensity of inner life that they seem to express, because this intensity strains against the literary medium in general, and especially because these details surge from the strict theoretical frame within which Tolstoy’s essayistic narrator has set his characters. Just as we feel we are beginning to understand the movement of the swarm, some intensity of life overwhelms

the picture, subverting its apparent coherence.

The irresolution of voices in *War and Peace* leaves us, the readers, with the difficult task of attempting to adjudicate its preoccupying contest between freedom and necessity, a historical question that finds a literary mirror in the book itself. The thematic question at the heart of *War and Peace* is a historical/philosophical variant of the question that twentieth-century theorists like György Lukács and Mikhail Bakhtin would identify as the central paradox of the literary form we call the novel. A novel is a tenuous dance between form and content, between the book’s soul and freedom on the one hand, and the material structure, or necessity, that gives presence and shape to this substance on the other. The result of this battle between form and content is what Lukács calls the “dissonance special to the novel,” and it makes *War and Peace* the literary inscription of the historical, political situation it attempts

to capture.

One definite accomplishment of the narrative fragmentation of *War and Peace* is that it makes the value—and necessity—of the novelistic approach more apparent than ever. In a world in which what Lukács calls “totality” eludes human comprehension and aesthetic representation, novelistic fiction hints at all that exceeds human grasp. Where the essayist’s vision of “necessity” falls short, the freedom of the novelist intervenes, to delightful, superfluous excess.

Reading *War and Peace* in February, I began wishing for a similarly large, loose, and baggy account of the protests in Egypt.

The “historians” had not yet had a chance to contort impressions of the “Arab Spring,” which has outstretched its seasonal branding, but the popular press had set a tone consistent with the chronicles of Napoleon that so exasperated the essayist in the pages of *War and Peace*. A large, loose, and baggy account of one part of the “Arab Spring,” the protest in Tahrir Square, would not neglect our search for a “differential of history,” a “great man” or technology to

assign responsibility for the fact that hundreds of thousands—perhaps millions—of human beings gathered over the course of eighteen days to demonstrate against Hosni Mubarak. These attempts to detect the design of “swarm-like” movements, to find a primary cause, are a crucial part of the story of Tahrir Square.

A Tolstoyan tale of Tahrir would flaunt its own limitations, though, and comment upon them, compounding them by ostentatiously performing its flawed attempt to tame abundant human content with narrative and theoretical form. A Tolstoyan Tahrir could address—without resolving—the challenge of describing “the movement of mankind, proceeding from a countless number of human wills,” while recognizing that this movement “occurs continuously.” The historical setting of *War and Peace* slid, as Tolstoy began the process of writing it, from 1856, to 1825, to 1812, and finally to the story that spans from 1805 to early 1813; similarly, a writer trying with futile determination to create a picture of the 2011 revolt in Egypt might feel the story pulling her backward in time, to Khaled Said’s death in 2010, then to the foundation of the April 6 Youth Movement in 2008, and then further back, to the mid 2000s and the foundation of Kefaya, the first major group that demonstrated for regime change. Or, perhaps 1981 would be a good year to begin the story, with President Sadat’s assassination, Mubarak’s ascension, and the reinstallation of emergency law. The story might really begin, though, in 1952, with the revolution that gave the square the name Tahrir, Arabic for “liberation.”

Now, a year after the “Arabic Spring,” a writer might feel the narrative tug of post-revolutionary military rule, continuing protests and sectarian division, and want—like Tolstoy—to tack an epilogue onto her story, desperately deferring the final page of an unconcluded history. The only thing for a feeble, limited, but determined writer to do in such a situation is to rely on the “intensity of life” to tell its own story, to suggest its inseparability from the continuous movement of mankind through indirect intimations, evoking the scents, sounds, doubts, and hopes of the human beings bringing the two sides of their lives into synchrony in Tahrir Square.

If a novelist, in the strong, Lukácsian and Bakhtinian sense of the word, were to attempt

## LEARNING TO DANCE ON AN UPTURNED BED

Phillip B. Williams

We believed the cadence of the bees.

They said *we carry out our dead from the hive  
and scatter their corpses like beads*. We believed,  
of each other, unfair things; that *I need you*  
was a hive we could raise. We failed  
and unpeeled its wax from our tongues.

Tomorrow, the hive will be empty and cold  
will flood its perfect chambers. The bees  
said *there is weight to every death: recognition,  
removal, procession, memory*. Which side  
of the bed won’t release your shape?

How many toothbrushes lifted from the cup?  
Sometimes it’s nothing that stings. Sometimes  
it’s empty rooms that remember your name.

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to give “truthful” representation to the eighteen days of the January 26 revolution, such a person might write about the efflorescent confluence of faith, ambition, vanity, desire, love, patriotism, selfishness, and mundane pa-

old, from a village near Tanta in the Nile Delta, who decides not to go to work on his father-in-law’s farm on January 28—who rides a bus for a couple of hours, standing stoically as a burning cramp creeps along the

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OUR IGNORANCE PRESERVES OUR ILLUSION OF FREEDOM, AND THIS ILLUSION IS EQUALLY NECESSARY TO OUR FULFILLMENT OF A PREDETERMINED HISTORICAL DESIGN, TO WHAT TOLSTOY CALLS THE “CONCEPT” OF HUMANITY, AND TO MORALITY.

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thos, in the souls of every one of the millions of protestors, and in the beleaguered soul of Mubarak, in his son, in the soldiers standing bewildered at the edge of the square with guns in their arms, in Omar Suleiman, in women spending days in their kitchens preparing food for the men and women in Tahrir Square and Alexandria and Mansoura. This loose-and-baggy-Frankenstein would scan the crowds of Tahrir Square like Tolstoy scanning the battlefield of Austerlitz, then dive into the “infinitesimal” elements of “arbitrarily chosen” individuals, and the narrative would linger at the scale of illusory freedom each of them feels, even as they are subsumed to the historical movement. Our novelist would note the flushed cheeks and shining eyes of a teenage boy shouting amidst strangers, enraptured, like young Nikolai Rostov awaiting the glance of the Tsar, by his first experience blending his personal life with the life of the swarm. She would describe the mixture of dawning adolescent political consciousness with the

right side of his body, from his lower back through his shoulder blades and up the arm that sleeps in the grasp of a leather strap hanging from the roof of the old bus. We might follow this young man as he arrives in Cairo in the evening, when the light is swallowing purple and tangerine shadows,

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JUST AS WE FEEL WE ARE BEGINNING TO UNDERSTAND THE MOVEMENT OF THE SWARM, SOME INTENSITY OF LIFE OVERWHELMS THE PICTURE, SUBVERTING ITS APPARENT COHERENCE.

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blurring into the smoggy haze of the big city, and lending the skyscrapers, the orchid trees, and the palm trees a misty and dreamlike unreality. We might learn how he suddenly feels faint and ill, as the bus draws to a stop, and imagines for an instant that there is something rotting in his gut, like a putrid onion, leaching fear and remorse about the suffering wife he has left behind, whom he is unsure if he still loves, who bore him a

And we might trail a seventeen-year-old girl whose wealthy family lives blocks from Tahrir Square, in a home filled with sunlight and houseplants and paintings purchased by her discerning mother during visits to her aunt in New York City—a girl whose youthful energy cannot focus, but sputters frenetically and ignites half-finished hobbies, projects, friendships and loves—a girl whose best friend since nursery school has recently discovered in herself a fervent faith in Allah, and with it, strong disapproval for our young woman’s frivolous and unfocused enthusiasms. The girl has perhaps been reading the novel *The Yacoubian Building*, and has heard a rumor that its author, Alaa Al Aswany, would be in Tahrir Square, and she feels certain, through her young bones and untested marrow, that she has been called like an epic heroine to take part in the revolution.

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A TOLSTOYAN TAHRIR COULD ADDRESS—WITHOUT RESOLVING—THE CHALLENGE OF DESCRIBING “THE MOVEMENT OF MANKIND, PROCEEDING FROM A COUNTLESS NUMBER OF HUMAN WILLS,” WHILE RECOGNIZING THAT THIS MOVEMENT “OCCURS CONTINUOUSLY.”

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boy’s inextinguishable awareness of the bodies of young women standing so close to him, so unknown to him, whose inner selves he can only imagine from the way that their muscles stretch and contract beneath thin clothing as they wave placards, and from the whiffs of jasmine, sandalwood, mint, and sweat that rise hazily above the fever of the crowd.

In the hands of our novelist, we might follow another young man, twenty-eight years

child too early, too small and weak, and who has turned vague and quiet toward him ever since their son died in an incubator. This young man perhaps does not know why he has come to Cairo, what he is hoping to find. Heroism? God? Himself? A purpose to affix to the days or decades that remain for him, of working, eating, sleeping, and living with a woman who seems unable, or unwilling, to reawaken to her life?

We might trail her as she sneaks from her home early one morning, while her family sleeps, and the cool gray light before dawn swells into the streets, and she lightly skips along the wide road in the direction of the square. She hears and feels the force of so many bodies before her eyes take them in. The first things she sees are the formidable tanks and soldiers, and the twisting razor wire, but she creeps quietly onward in the direction of the Qasr al-Nil Bridge. She lingers perhaps outside the barricades, her wide eyes attempting to see everything, and she listens to the quiet rustlings of those who have not slept that night, who sit in small circles of murmuring men and women, hugging chilly arms around chilly knees, as they discuss (she presumes, from her position outside the twisting razor wire) the future. We might note how the light changes in her eyes, as she sees a thin young man, a few years older than she, enviously watching a woman carry hot *fil* to a man and child not far from him. The novelist might tell us how her feet move, and how the soft, quick sound of her steps hurrying back to her awakening family seems to her like the sound of her heart, as she prepares the words with which she will tell her parents that they must start cooking, and they must spend the

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day cooking and taking food to the people in Tahrir Square.

We might be interested in Wael Ghonim, or perhaps, rather, a fictionally-conjured, middle-aged blogger, and the first thing our effusive narrator will tell us is whether this man has ever been in love, truly, bewilderingly. The novelist will wonder if this blogger likes himself, and if he values kindness, and whether he watches silly television shows after long and exhausting days at his tech job. Our novelist will tell us what this man feels when he listens to Beethoven, and what images fill his dispersing mind as he drifts into and out of sleep. Perhaps this middle-aged blogger sees metaphors in sunrises, and believes in some version of God, and perhaps that belief was once unexpectedly shaken by the gruff indifference of a stranger on public transportation. His faith is perhaps shaken again, much more dangerously, by the eight days in late January and early February that he spends in a dark cell in police custody. Our narrator will tell us about the dampness and the stench of the cell, and the dim and haunting sounds by which our dissident blogger fathoms the fates of unseen fellow prisoners. Our narrator will tell us about the young guard who brings our blogger some tea on the third morning of his imprisonment, a young man who has read the words of this older man under his watch, and who yearns to ask him questions, and to ask for forgiveness, but who reminds himself of his duty and simply passes the prisoner his tea with—the prisoner thinks—a quivering twitch in his right cheek, below the eye. The young guard perhaps frowns and glares at the prisoner, and then a light flickers in his eye, as he silently grants the humanity of the man held under his watch. The moment of their shared gaze distends and seems to suggest possibilities to both of them: about Egypt's future, about friendship, about movement outside the walls of Tora prison. But then the young man's eyes darken, and he turns with a grunt, disappears

down the corridor, and leaves the prisoner to watch the steam twisting ribbons above the cooling cup of tea, wondering if this young man with the quiver in his cheek will be present when he is interrogated, and perhaps tortured,

that has been mangled beyond recognition by despair and her obstinate commitment to her private sadness. And in this way, she will play her part in the protests of Tahrir Square and Mubarak's abdication.

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ALL OF THESE PEOPLE WHOSE "REAL LIVES" TAKE THEM—FOR COUNTLESS REASONS AND ACCORDING TO AN ENDLESS STRING OF CAUSES—TO TAHRIR SQUARE, PLAY A PART IN THE SWARM, AND ARE MOVED ALONG WITH THE FORCE THAT EXCEEDS THEM, BUT WHICH THEY HELP TO COMPOSE.

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with hot irons, electric wires, fists and boots and threats to his family.

Our novelist will also tell us about the wife of the twenty-eight-year-old man from the Nile Delta, who follows her husband to Cairo after a day of thinking angrily about the note that he left her. She arrives in Cairo on the Day of Rage, passes through the barricades near the Bridge, and is greeted by cheers and chants of strangers welcoming her to the "free," the "revolutionaries." Our novelist will tell us of the woman's anger, her very personal rage, first at these enthusiasts, and then at herself, for feeling a stirring of what Tolstoy would call "something that was best in her." Something deep within her has been hibernating since her child's death, and it reawakens as the strangers greet her with wide smiles and eyes alight with the special glow of exhaustion enflamed by inspiration; something inside her unfurls, stretching hesitant tendrils from her soul toward the hope and community of these strangers. She tells herself the feeling is foolish, narcotic, and false; she tells herself, with the stern inner voice that is always prepared to intervene with a lecture in such moments of possible surrender, that the whole protest movement is foolish and narcotic, selfish and vain; that men like her husband (how will she ever find him? she wonders) have protests in the same way that other men have affairs. And she will set about finding her husband with a heart full of love

All of these people whose "real lives" take them—for countless reasons and according to an endless string of causes—to Tahrir Square, play a part in the swarm, and are moved along with the force that exceeds them, but which they help to compose. And through sketching a teenage boy and girl, a struggling young couple, a middle-aged blogger, and, perhaps, a liberal grandmother whose son works in Mubarak's administration, we get as close as we ever will to sensing the momentum and purpose of the swarm.

*War and Peace* points to the way that a literary account, a tangle of form and content, might represent this movement, while also representing attempts to understand the movement. *War and Peace* improvises around our human inability to fully see the relationship between the two sides of man and our inability to understand the strange combination of all these individual people. If we agree with Tolstoy (and we don't have to), and we believe that the protesters in Tahrir Square act under illusions of distinction and agency, while merely fulfilling roles prescribed by the momentum of the swarm they unconsciously produce, we also sense, with Tolstoy, that the only way to begin to grasp the shifting force of history is to understand, as a novelist does, the "souls" of these men, women, and children who lived for eighteen days in Tahrir Square. ㊦

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1) All quotes are from the 2008 Pevear and Volokhonsky translation of *War and Peace*.

2) Henry James, "Preface" to *The Tragic Muse*.

3) Quoted in Mike Giglio, "The Facebook Freedom Fighter," *Newsweek*: 13 February 2011.

4) Fahim, Kareem, and Mona El-Naggar, "Emotions of a Reluctant Hero Galvanize Protesters," *The New York Times*: 8 February 2011.

5) See his op-ed to *The Christian Science Monitor*: "A Nobel Peace Prize for Twitter?" *The Christian Science Monitor*: 6 July 2009.

6) "The Russian Point of View," *The Common Reader: First Series* (New York: Harcourt, 1953).