Considered by Harold Bloom to be Tolstoy’s greatest work, and by John Bayley to be a “parable without a point,” Hadji-Murat has aroused a conspicuously small, yet highly divergent, range of critical responses.¹ One point on which most critics agree is that the novella is an unexpected departure in both form and content from the later Tolstoy’s moralistic fiction and essays. There is, in one scholar’s words, a “reassertion” of the “intuitive morality of the great artist over the systematic morality of the teacher and prophet.”²

In this “summary epic” the writer in his seventies resurrects the epic spirit of his other great historical novel, War and Peace. The free-flowing exuberance of the earlier work is absent, but its broad, life-affirming vision is there, now compressed into fewer than two hundred pages and communicated through the so-called “peepshow” technique. In March 1898 Tolstoy wrote: “There is an English toy called the ‘peepshow.’ One thing and then another thing is shown beneath a glass. That’s how I’d like to show Hadji-Murat: as a husband, a fanatic, etc.”³ Tolstoy was essentially returning to the narrative technique of War and Peace, in which the narrator, standing godlike above the fray, depicts events from multiple perspectives, allowing the reader to sense both the variety and the overarching unity of life. In Hadji-Murat the focus is on the complexity of the hero in his manifold interactions with the world. Appearing as he does in all but a few
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chapters, Hadji-Murat becomes a central presence. Continually changing yet consistently vital, he concentrates in his very being the philosophical gravitas and epic spirit of the entire work.

Yet, the author was not entirely comfortable with his new endeavor. In his correspondence, we can hear Tolstoy the moralist arguing with Tolstoy the artist. With Russia in the throes of revolution and repression, and the brutal grip of imperialism widening, Tolstoy felt ashamed to be spending his time on a work that seemed to him an artistic indulgence. “This is indulgence and foolishness, but it is begun and I’d like to finish it.”

In September 1902 Alexei Petrovich Sergeenko, the secretary of Tolstoy’s close friend and confidant Vladimir Chertkov, asked Tolstoy about the novella. “Of course you are trying to say something through it?” Tolstoy responded: ‘No, just imagine, I’ve been carried away by the purely artistic side.’ Yet it is precisely by focusing on “the purely artistic side” that Tolstoy, in spite of himself, made a powerful statement about the dehumanizing effects of ideology and the corrosiveness of political power. “If art, in Tolstoy’s concept, was to serve moral and spiritual regeneration,” writes one critic, “then this is illustrated in Hadji-Murat, for here the underlying moral idea is precisely to arouse horror and indignation at man’s behavior.”

At first glance, Hadji-Murat, written between 1896 and 1904 and published posthumously in 1912, appears to have little in common with Tolstoy’s other, more philosophically oriented novels. Man’s search for truth is not in the foreground of this work as it is in The Cossacks, War and Peace, Anna Karenina, The Death of Ivan Ilyich, and Resurrection. Of all the characters, only one, Butler, bears any resemblance to the earlier seekers. For, in Hadji-Murat, perhaps more than in any other work, the author himself becomes a character in the existential drama he has described throughout his artistic career. Self-critical but never self-mocking, Hadji-Murat is Tolstoy’s personal swan song, revisiting the past and subsuming it into a wholly new vision. Like many of his characters, Tolstoy searches for a unifying order, combining elements from his earlier novels, his own biography, and the strong moral positions of his later years to create a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. The artist and the moralist are equally present, neither one trying to overcome the other. From the pages of this work of tendentious realism Tolstoy’s beloved hero, Truth, radiates in all its dark beauty.

The gestation period for Hadji-Murat was roughly fifty years, longer than that of any other work by Tolstoy. His interest in the eponymous Chechen warrior goes back to his youthful days as a volunteer in the
Caucasus, where he spent two years fighting with the Russians in the war against the native mountain tribes. As early as 1851 Tolstoy announced in a letter to his brother that “Shamil’s number two, a certain Hadji-Murat, went over to the Russian government the other day. He was the leading dzhigit (horseman) and brave in all of Chechnya, but it was a base thing to do.” Tolstoy’s original intention in the novella was to focus on this betrayal. But the figure of Hadji-Murat expanded in his imagination and eventually came to embody an idea both more personal to Tolstoy and more universal: man’s struggle for survival in a hostile world. In July 1896, Tolstoy would recall Hadji-Murat again while returning to Yasnaya Polyana through a ploughed field:

Yesterday I walked through a black-earth, fallow field which had been ploughed up again. As far as the eye could see there was nothing but black earth—not one green blade of grass. And there on the edge of the dusty grey road was a Tatar thistle (burdock) with three shoots: one was broken, and a dirty white flower hung from it; the second was also broken and spattered with mud, black and with a cracked and dirty stem; the third shoot stuck out to the side, also black, but still alive and red in the middle. It reminded me of Hadji-Murat. I’d like to write about it. It fights for life till the end, alone in the middle of the whole field, somehow manages to win the fight.

After months of chronic illness and creative lethargy, the sixty-nine-year-old author was inspired to return to work. Within a day he wrote a rough draft of the prologue. Its mood was positive and defiant, and the connection between the thistle and Hadji-Murat was explicit: “‘Good for him!’ I thought. And a certain feeling of buoyancy, energy, and strength seized me: ‘That’s the way! That’s the way!’ And I remembered a Caucasian story, the situation of a man was the same as that of the thistle, and that man was also a Tartar. This man was Hadji-Murat.”

During the next eight years Tolstoy would labor in fits and starts over the novella, returning to the image of the struggling thistle as one of his main inspirations. In the final version of the prologue, the connection between the thistle and Hadji-Murat is only implied, and the author removes the personal exclamation “‘Good for him!’” The tone becomes more objective, transforming Tolstoy’s personal reminiscences into a universal statement. The three interconnected themes from the diary entry—the beautiful wholeness of nature, the destructiveness of man, and the battle for life until the end—would remain at the core of his creative
vision through all ten drafts. Here is how the final version of the prologue opens:

I was returning home by the fields. It was midsummer, the hay harvest was over and they were just beginning to reap the rye. At that season of the year there is a delightful variety of flowers—red, white, and pink scented tufty clover; milk-white ox-eye daisies with their bright yellow centers and pleasant spicy smell; yellow honey-scented rape blossoms; tall campanulas with white and lilac bells, tulip-shaped; creeping vetch; yellow, red, and pink scabiosas; faintly scented, neatly arranged purple plantains with blossoms slightly tinged with pink; cornflowers, the newly opened blossoms bright blue in the sunshine but growing paler and redder towards evening or when growing old; and delicate almond-scented dodder flowers that withered quickly. (549, 1)

In this vision, nature’s beauty exists regardless of human perception or participation. Beauty simply is. But man is a selfish creature, incapable of enjoying what is without seeking to alter and destroy it for his own ends: “I gathered myself a large nosegay and was going home when I noticed in a ditch, in full bloom, a beautiful thistle plant” (549, 1). Tolstoy wants to include the thistle in the bouquet, but it proves difficult to uproot. After realizing that the thistle doesn’t seem right among “the delicate blossoms,” he throws it away, “feeling sorry to have vainly destroyed a flower that looked beautiful in its proper place” (550, 1).

The author returns home through a nobleman’s black, ploughed field, where he discovers another Tatar thistle, this one mauled by a cartwheel, but still standing upright. Suddenly, his innocent uprooting of the thistle moments earlier takes on more universal implications: “‘Ah, what a destructive creature is man. . . . How many different plant-lives he destroys to support his own existence! . . . What vitality!’ I thought. ‘Man has conquered everything and destroyed millions of plants, yet this one won’t submit’” (550, 1). What began as a simple walk through the fields has grown into an allegory of Man, in which Tolstoy himself participates.

THE DEATH OF HADJI-MURAT

“How good it would be,” Tolstoy wrote in 1898, “to write a work of art in which one could clearly express the shifting nature of man; the fact that one and the same man is now a villain, now an angel, now a wise man,
now an idiot, now a strong man, now the most impotent of creatures.”

Despite his tendency in later years to create one-dimensional characters who would illustrate his rigid moral ideals, the artist in Tolstoy never lost sight of man’s fluid and multifaceted nature.

The genuinely pious Hadji-Murat, who respects the variety of life as instinctively as the Russian commanders defile it, will kill without a moment’s thought, if his or his family’s survival depends on it. This self-possessed man with “Oriental Mohammedan dignity” (594, 10) slaps Councilor Kirillov on his bald pate when the “fat, unarmed little man dressed as a civilian” insults him (651, 22), demonstrating that even dignified Oriental indifference has its limits. Hadji-Murat, who wisely utters, “its own customs seem good to each nation” (642, 20), will not brook the custom of arrogance, routinely practiced by the Russian officials. When his pride is at stake, he strikes. And we admire him for it. He is proud, and has in abundance what most of the other characters—particularly all those in positions of power in the novella—have lost: a strong sense of innate worth, vitality, and individualism.

We first meet Hadji-Murat on a cold November evening. He has come to the village of Makhmet in preparation for his surrender to the Russians. Through messengers he informs Russian regiment commander, Prince Vorontsov, that he will help the Russians defeat the imam Shamil, Hadji-Murat’s bitter enemy and now the de facto leader of the Caucasian resistance movement. In exchange, he asks for assistance in rescuing his mother, grandmother, and son, who are being held hostage by the imam.

Hadji-Murat’s surrender becomes a cause célèbre in Russian circles. He is seen as a kind of exotic animal—something akin to how nineteenth-century Americans viewed the famous American Indian warrior Sitting Bull. The savage they must tame, Hadji-Murat is no ordinary rogue. Marya Dmitrievna, the major’s wife, who takes a liking to Hadji-Murat during his stay with them, voices the author’s admiration for him: “It’s a pity there aren’t more Russian rogues of such a kind! . . . He has lived a week with us and we have seen nothing but good from him. He is courteous, wise, and just” (645, 20).

Like Sitting Bull, who, after his surrender, toured with Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show, Hadji-Murat is paraded about Tiflis by his Russian hosts, who are certain he “could not help being pleased at what he saw” (595, 10). When the senior Vorontsov, Commander in Chief of the Russian forces and Hadji-Murat’s primary host, asks him how he likes the brilliant evening party with “men in bright uniforms” and “half-naked” women (594–95, 10), he responds with indifference. He has other things
on his mind. He wants to talk to the commander about his family, but "Vorontsov, pretending that he had not heard him, walked away, and Loris-Melikov [Vorontsov's young aide-de-camp] afterwards told Hadji-Murat that this was not the place to talk about business" (595, 10). Since this "business" is a matter of life and death to Hadji-Murat, he leaves.

News reaches him of Shamil's intentions to harm his family. What is he to do? Return to "that red liar?" Remain and "'conquer Caucasia for the Russian Tsar and earn renown, titles, riches? . . . That could be done,' thought he, recalling his interviews with Vorontsov and the flattering things the prince had said; 'but I must decide at once, or Shamil will destroy my family'” (652, 22). And he decides. Momentary temptation has passed, and questions of cultural loyalty vanish before the imperative to survive. Hadji-Murat is all action: "All he knew was that first of all he must escape from the Russians into the mountains; and he at once began to carry out his plan" (652, 23).

As he flees, Hadji-Murat is subsumed into the symphony of nature: "As soon as he entered the hall, the outer door of which stood open, he was at once enveloped by the dewy freshness of the moonlit night and his ears were filled by the whistling and trilling of several nightingales in the garden by the house” (652–53, 23). In the hours of preparation for flight his world becomes enmeshed with that of the nightingales. Their singing and the sound of impending battle are intertwined. When he enters the hall,

[the songs of nightingales that had burst into ecstasy at dawn were now even louder and more incessant, while from his henchman’s room, where the daggers were being sharpened, came the regular screech and rasp of iron against stone. . . . Then all was quiet again, except for the \textit{tchuk}, \textit{tchuk}, \textit{tchuk}, \textit{tchuk}, and whistling of the nightingales from the garden, and from behind the door the even grinding, and now and then the whiz, of iron sliding quickly along the whetstone. (653–54, 23)]

In these musical flights Hadji-Murat’s inner world is distancing itself from the here-and-now. His sense of time is compressing. Images of his youth flit though his mind. He remembers his grandfather, his son, and his mother, “not wrinkled, gray-haired, with gaps between her teeth, as he had lately left her, but young and handsome, and strong enough to carry him in a basket on her back across the mountains to her father’s when he was a heavy five-year-old boy” (655, 23). Thoughts of his family and what Shamil will do to them agitate him. "He jumped up and went limp-
ing quickly to the door” (655, 23). He opens it. It is dawn and the nightingales are still singing. Hadji-Murat is on the brink of night and day, life and death.

Metaphorically, he remains there for the rest of the tale. The reader almost misses the fact that in a few pages nearly a full day goes by from the moment of Hadji-Murat’s escape with his *murids* (disciples) in the morning until his entrapment by the militiamen and last stand the next morning. This compression contrasts sharply with the sense of time created in the beginning of the novella, in which the events of a single day are spread out over the first eight chapters. Now time accelerates, heightening both the reader’s sense of anticipation and our feeling that historical time is being replaced by epic time.

After trekking across a flooded rice field to dry ground, Hadji-Murat and his men decide to spend the night. Hadji-Murat stays awake, listening to the trilling of the nightingales, which remind him of Khanefi’s prophetic song of the previous night. The song told of how the brave Hamzad and his men fought the Russians until the bitter end, and how, just before he died, Hamzad cried out to the flying birds to carry home the news of their impending death:

“Fly on, ye winged ones, fly to our homes!
Tell ye our mothers, tell ye our sisters,
Tell the white maidens, that fighting we died
For Ghazavat! Tell them our bodies
Never will lie and rest in a tomb!
Wolves will devour and tear them to pieces,
Ravens and vultures will pluck out our eyes.” (654, 23)

Believing that he might at any moment find himself in Hamzad’s position, Hadji-Murat’s “soul became serious” (664, 25). He prays, and then, hearing the sounds of horses’ feet splashing in the bog, knows that the enemy has surrounded him and that his fate is sealed. He entrenches himself in a ditch just as Hamzad had done in the song. Night turns to day, the commander of the militia troop tells Hadji-Murat to surrender, and “[i]n reply came the report of a rifle . . .” (665, 25). Sporadic shooting ensues for an hour. Two hundred mountaineers, who have come to join the Russian militia, charge the entrenchment. While managing to shoot down several with his carefully aimed bullets, Hadji-Murat is hit in the shoulder and plugs up the wound with cotton wool from the lining of his *beshmet*. In desperation, Hadji-Murat’s *murid*, the young Eldar, charges the enemy.
After being struck with a bullet, he reels backwards onto Hadji-Murat’s leg, his beautiful, ramlike eyes gazing up at his leader. “Hadji-Murat drew his leg away from under him and continued firing” (666, 25).

Another bullet hits Hadji-Murat, and he plugs it with more cotton. He knows that this wound is fatal and that he is dying. His mind is flooded with snapshots of his past. “All these images passed through his mind without evoking any feeling within him: neither pity nor anger nor any kind of desire; everything seemed so insignificant in comparison with what was beginning, or had already begun, within him” (667, 25). What is beginning within him is death. But “[l]ife asserts itself to the very end,” Tolstoy wrote in 1896, referring to the stubborn thistle that reminded him of Hadji-Murat. That metaphor is now being realized.

The hero’s last stand has a stoic, terrifying grandeur—a fitting end to his life of daring and battle. There are many unforgettable deaths in the works of Tolstoy, who was obsessed with the subject from the very first; yet this depiction is unique. There is no ecstatic illumination, as in the deaths of Prince Andrei and Ivan Ilyich, no extinguished “bright light,” such as Anna Karenina experiences. Hadji-Murat’s death is just one more battle in a lifetime of struggle. The passage describing it is worth quoting in full:

Gathering together his last strength, [Hadji-Murat] rose from behind the bank, fired his pistol at a man who was just running towards him, and hit him. The man fell. Then Hadji-Murat got out of the ditch, and limping heavily went dagger in hand straight at the foe.

Some shots cracked and he reeled and fell. Several militiamen with triumphant shrieks rushed towards the fallen body. But the body that seemed to be dead suddenly moved. First the uncovered, bleeding, shaven head rose; then the body with hands holding to the trunk of a tree. He seemed so terrible, that those who were running towards him stopped short. But suddenly a shudder passed through him, he staggered away from the tree and fell on his face, stretched out at full length, like a thistle that had been mown down, and he moved no more.

He did not move, but still he felt.

When Hadji Aga, who was the first to reach him, struck him on the head with a large dagger, it seemed to Hadji-Murat that someone was striking him with a hammer and he could not understand who was doing it or why. That was his last consciousness of any connection with his body. He felt nothing more and his enemies kicked and hacked at what had no longer anything in common with him.
Hadji Aga placed his foot on the back of the corpse and with two blows cut off the head, and carefully—not to soil his shoes with blood—rolled it away with his foot. Crimson blood spurted from the arteries of the neck, and black blood flowed from the head, soaking the grass. (667, 25)

In contrast to the death of nearly every other major Tolstoyan hero, Hadji-Murat’s death is shown to us almost exclusively from the outside, in terms of horrific physical events. His experience of dying is depersonalized and reduced primarily to the physical sensations of the body. Yet, Tolstoy describes that body as “what had no longer anything in common with him,” implying that his soul endures. When he falls to the ground on his face—the physical embodiment of one’s spiritual essence in the Russian Orthodox tradition—and waters the soil with his blood, his spirit symbolically merges with nature. His face, belonging to the head which will be brought to the Russian fort in a bag, will bear “a kindly childlike expression” even in death (658, 24). That kindly countenance, which the major eerily kisses when the severed head is presented to him, becomes an iconic representation of Hadji-Murat’s essential spiritual goodness, which transcends his bodily existence. Tolstoy thus shows us the meaning of death, which the officers who lightheartedly discuss the death of the general in Chapter Five, could not see. The narrator calls it “that most important moment of a life, its termination and return to the source from whence it sprung” (570–71, 5).

Hadji-Murat’s heroic death becomes the event toward which the plot has been leading. Tolstoy creates a sense of its inevitability by showing us the hero’s severed head in Chapter Twenty-Four before his final flight and death in Chapter Twenty-Five. The question then becomes not whether he will die but how. Like the mowed-down thistle from the prologue, the hero fights for life until the end. “‘Man has conquered everything and destroyed millions of plants, yet this one won’t submit.’” Both Hadji-Murat and the thistle will, of course, succumb to their “wounds.” But they also both exhibit a stubborn, admirable life force. And Hadji-Murat exhibits something more. As he is dying, his thoughts are minimal and reflect a general incomprehension of what is happening. “[I]t seemed to Hadji-Murat that someone was striking him with a hammer and he could not understand who was doing it or why.” Hadji-Murat is losing touch with his immediate, physical reality, but his confusion may also reflect an ethical inquiry, a budding moral consciousness. Indeed, we wonder with him, why is his head being torn off? Why this senseless destruction of human life, this
bestiality of man towards man? Today, over a century after Tolstoy wrote *Hadji-Murat*, foreign journalists are beheaded by radical Islamic militants, Muslim women are stoned to death by their communities for committing adultery, a Russian man is beaten to death by teenage hoodlums and thrown into the flame of a World War II Memorial, Georgian girls are raped by the soldiers of an invading Russian army, entire families and villages are being slaughtered in Darfur. Why? Hadji-Murat’s incomprehension becomes a moral challenge to all of us.

Despite the hero’s gruesome death, the novella, like all of Tolstoy’s art, leaves the reader with a glimpse of a transcendent ideal. His conquerors see Hadji-Murat’s death as nothing more than a military victory to be celebrated. But the nightingales, who have the penultimate word in the novella, sing of another truth. “The nightingales, that had hushed their songs while the firing lasted, now started their trills once more: first one quite close, then others in the distance” (668, 25). Just as the nightingales in Hamzad’s prophetic song carry home the news of his violent death, so the nightingales at the end of *Hadji-Murat* carry to future generations of readers Tolstoy’s tragic yet ennobling truth about the world. Military and natural “music” intertwine once again, as they did in the moments leading up to Hadji-Murat’s flight, and we are reminded that bestiality, beauty, and the battle for survival always have been and will be inseparable aspects of human existence. Hadji-Murat’s heroic life and tragic death are the very personification of this truth. His destiny becomes the destiny of Man.

The voices of the nightingales offer an unsentimental, yet life-affirming commentary on the meaning of Hadji-Murat’s death. Yet theirs is not the final note; beyond them, in the novella’s final sentence, we return to the world of the prologue: “It was of this death that I was reminded by the crushed thistle in the midst of the ploughed field” (668, 25). The work ends with an event, not in Hadji-Murat’s story, but in that of Tolstoy, for whom the hero’s death is a symbol of some higher truth: a celebration of the eternal cycles of life and death, of the indomitable life force, which continues despite the death of the individual. Even in one of Tolstoy’s most pessimistic works, the possibility for creative self-assertion still exists.

However we understand the hero’s death, what is clear is that Tolstoy identified with Hadji-Murat’s embattled life. In the final decade and a half of his life, he strove to remain strong in the face of increased illness and to hold to his high principles despite his inner conflict and hypocrisies. In the 1890s and early 1900s he fought actively—through stories, parables, essays, and political tracts—for the spiritual survival of a Russian society headed for revolution and self-annihilation. Yet, like his hero, Tolstoy painfully straddled two worlds. No longer the indulgent aristocrat who
once insisted that “he who is happy is right!” he was not yet at home in his role of self-denying spiritual prophet. He had pledged himself to a life of abstinence and vegetarianism, yet he dined in luxury at Yasnaya Polyana at the large table set with European silverware and porcelain dishes. Tolstoy asked Sofya Andreevna to join him in willfully renouncing their property, but she found his idealism both insufferable and dangerous. Not only would such a decision confuse the children, she lamented, but “how could I, with my eight children . . . give up my usual life for the sake of an ideal, created not by me but forced upon me? . . . And so, the painful discord has ensued.” A distraught Sofya Andreevna tried unsuccessfully to commit suicide on multiple occasions in the final years of their marriage. She was a nagging reminder to Tolstoy of his family responsibilities, which often conflicted with his spiritual ideals.

On the night before his escape, as he lay awake, thinking, Hadji-Murat recalled a Tavlinian fable about a falcon. After living in captivity among humans, who put silver bells and jesses on him, the falcon returns home. But he is told to go back to where he came from. “‘We have no bells and jesses,’” they tell him (652, 22). “The falcon did not want to leave his home and remained, but the other falcons . . . pecked him to death. ‘And they would peck me to death in the same way,’ thought Hadji-Murat” (652, 22). The image of the trapped falcon must have hit close to home for Tolstoy, as well. He and his character are pecked to death by their own—Hadji-Murat physically, Tolstoy spiritually and psychologically. In a desperate final quest for salvation, Tolstoy will abandon his home. Hadji-Murat will try to return to his. Both fighters die alone, Hadji-Murat in battle, Tolstoy in a train station.

“RETURN” TO A DIFFERENT CAUCASUS

If, in Hadji-Marat, Tolstoy embodies the dilemmas of his last years, he also returns to his literary beginnings, taking us back to the Caucasus of his youth—to that “wild land” with its thick forests and precipice-filled landscapes and native mountaineers, who work and celebrate and suffer and kill with Homeric vitality. Some passages in Hadji-Murat arouse feelings of déjà vu, recalling his first novel, The Cossacks. Here is the description of the Chechen aoul at the beginning of Hadji-Murat:

On a cold November evening Hadji-Murat rode into Makhmet, a hostile Chechen aoul that lay some fifteen miles from the Russian territory and was filled with the scented smoke of burning kizyak. The strained
The calm, orderly hum of nature and the melancholic drone of villagers going about their evening tasks is a bleak echo of the description of the Cossack village at the beginning of *The Cossacks*:

> It was one of those wonderful evenings that occur only in the Caucasus. The sun had sunk behind the mountains but it was still light... Talking merrily, the women who have been tying up the vines hurry away from the gardens before sunset. The vineyards, like all the surrounding district, are deserted, but the villages become very animated at that time of the evening. From all sides, walking, riding, or driving in their creaking carts, people move towards the village. Girls with their smocks tucked up and twigs in their hands run chatting merrily to the village gates to meet the cattle that are crowding together in a cloud of dust and mosquitoes which they bring with them from the steppe.\(^{17}\)

In both works the village community, whether Cossack or Chechen, is a place where civilization and nature seem to merge. A sense of order reigns, shaped by the fierce communal loyalty forged in the struggles of everyday life. Despite these common elements, however, the joyfulness of the “wonderful evening” is totally lacking in the later description, which is dominated by cold, smoke, crowding, and disputation.

Tolstoy’s vision has deepened. The tragic-comedic view of the young author of *The Cossacks* has expanded into the sublimely tragic vision of an author in his waning years. His emphasis is not on the rarefied philosophical search of a young Russian aristocrat but on the grim, immediate challenges of a Chechen brave, whose fate and that of his family depend on his ability to choose decisively among repugnant options. To Olenin the Caucasus represents the possibility of a brave, new world. To Hadji-Murat and the inhabitants of Makhmet, which the Russians have senselessly destroyed in a raid, the Caucasus is a physical home. The old men who set about restoring their razed village do not aspire à la Olenin to create something new and exciting for themselves. They try to recreate an actual world that once existed and that has been taken from them.
If, in *The Cossacks*, we see the Caucasus from the perspective of a Russian outsider living in a Cossack village on “this” side of the Terek, then in *Hadji-Murat* we experience the region from within. Just as the author of *The Cossacks* penetrated the inner landscape of the literary Caucasus as few Russian writers before him had done, so the author of *Hadji-Murat* tells the story of those who live on the other side of the river in a way it had not yet been told. He illuminates the drama of the conquered rather than that of the conquerors.

In *The Cossacks*, the Caucasus was still a place of refuge from the corrupting influence of modern society. In *Hadji-Murat* the region has become infiltrated by that very world: luxurious Russian forts now litter the Caucasian countryside. Through its pernicious blend of cultural sophistication, moral shallowness, and military force, the Russian empire has spread like a cancer, attempting to crush the “delightful variety” of life in the Caucasus into a black, uniform emptiness, as mangled as the ploughed field of the prologue. *The Cossacks*, originally subtitled “A Tale of 1852,” and *Hadji-Murat*, which takes place from 1851 to 1852, offer two totally different visions of the almost identical era.

There are historical reasons for Tolstoy’s shift in perspective. He worked on the novella at the turn of the century when impending revolution and violent government repression were in the air. After the author of the Great Reforms, Alexander II, was assassinated in 1881, his son, Alexander III, came to power, initiating the second most repressive regime in nineteenth-century Russia after that of his grandfather, Nicholas I. Believing that his father’s death at the hands of a revolutionary terrorist was the result of too much liberalization, Alexander III was determined to stamp out revolution at its roots. He strengthened the long-standing principle of Autocracy-Orthodoxy-Nationality, which decreed that Russia was to be guided by one language, one nationality, one religion, and one government. To that end Alexander persecuted the Jews; destroyed Polish, Swedish, and German institutions in the provinces; and forcefully Russified and Christianized the non-Russian peoples in the Caucasus, a region the country had been trying to subjugate for over a century.

Alexander III must have reminded Tolstoy of the century’s other notoriously repressive regime, that of Tsar Nicholas I, under whom Tolstoy grew up. In *Hadji-Murat*, set during the reign of Nicholas in the early 1850s, the tsar orders the execution of a Polish Roman Catholic student who, in a paroxysm of rage after failing his examinations, has attacked a professor with a penknife. The tsar’s extreme punishment is motivated by his visceral hatred of all things Polish as well as his wish to set a terrify-
ing example for the revolutionaries, whom he also despises. In Nicholas’s threat, “I will abolish this revolutionary spirit and will tear it up by the roots!” Tolstoy’s readers would have heard the voice of Alexander III, who tore up entire Russian and non-Russian communities in the name of Autocracy-Orthodoxy-Nationality (621, 15).

All forms of imperial aggression incensed Tolstoy. In his polemical writings and correspondence during the 1890s and early 1900s he spoke out against imperialism: Great Britain’s subjugation of Egypt in 1882 and the Sudan in 1898, and its war on the Boers from 1899 to 1902, as well as Italian imperial ambitions in the Middle East. In his voluminous correspondence with Americans, documented in the recently published book *L. N. Tolstoi i S.Sh.A.: Perepiska* [L. N. Tolstoy and the U.S.A.: Correspondence], Tolstoy urged American artists and intellectuals to stand up to the forces of American jingoism under Theodore Roosevelt, and he decried the American aggression in the Spanish–American war over Cuba. In his “Letter to the Italians” in 1896, Tolstoy diagnoses the disease of his era: “People from childhood are convinced that the best . . . nation is the Italian, the French, the German, the Austrian, the English, or the Russian. This deception is so stupid, that . . . you can only be surprised at how people fall for it. This can be explained only by the fact that this is instilled from earliest childhood, and in those conditions in which people are most susceptible to hypnotism—that is, en masse.”

Twentieth-century dictators—Stalin, Hitler, Mussolini, and Pol Pot—whose violent nationalistic agendas killed millions, confirm the prescience of Tolstoy’s words. Have things changed in the twenty-first century? We have seen a brutal Russian invasion of Georgia, blood feuds in Chechnya and other regions of the Caucasus, genocide in Darfur, ethnic warfare in Iraq, and the ravaging of natural frontiers from Alaska to Lake Baikal for the sake of corporate profits. A worldwide financial crisis has made us all aware of the real and present dangers of unbridled economic ambition. The forces of militarism, nationalism, religious extremism, not to mention plain greed, continue to make a mockery of universal human values.

In *Hadji-Murat*, the specific political and social reality of Russian imperialism also becomes a microcosm of all those forces in the modern world that pervert humane values and desecrate the “delightful variety” of life, through killing, cant, ideology, or sheer egoism. Russian absolutism poisons the lives of almost every human being it touches, from the tsar and his circle of yes-men to the peasant soldier Avdeev, who dies in an unnecessary battle arranged by his company commander, Poltoratsky, so that his friend, Baron Freeze, may win a promotion. As we climb higher
up the social ladder in the novella, moving from the simple soldiers in Chapter Two, to the regiment commander Vorontsov in Chapter Three, to his father, the Commander in Chief, in Chapter Nine, and finally to Tsar Nicholas in Chapter Fifteen, we descend deeper into human depravity.

Tolstoy’s artistic restraint almost gives way in Chapter Fifteen: his repulsion for the fat, philandering tsar with an inflated sense of his own importance is the closest thing to a polemical tract we find in Hadji-Murat. The author “struggled” with that chapter, which he feared might be “disproportional” in tone and length. But he considered the depiction of Nicholas “very important, serving as the illustration of my understanding of power.” Moreover, Nicholas is depicted with such satirical sumptuousness that we almost feel sorry for this cruel, lifeless blob, whose entire existence is defined by deception and self-deception:

Nicholas sat at the table in a black coat with shoulder-straps but no epaulets, his enormous body—with his overgrown stomach tightly laced in—was thrown back, and he gazed at the newcomers with fixed, lifeless eyes. His long pale face, with its enormous receding forehead between the tufts of hair which were brushed forward and skillfully joined to the wig that covered his bald patch, was specially cold and stony that day. His eyes, always dim, looked duller than usual, the compressed lips under his upturned moustaches, the high collar which supported his chin, and his fat freshly shaven cheeks on which the symmetrical sausages-shaped bits of whiskers had been left, gave his face a dissatisfied and even irate expression. (615, 15)

The higher a man stands on the political ladder in this novella, the more he is enslaved to his own power and the system from which it derives. Noble, humane instincts are superseded by political ones, which ultimately amount to blind submission to the will of Nicholas. Here is General Bibikov’s reaction to the tsar’s command to ruthlessly punish the mutinous peasants who would not accept the government-imposed Orthodox faith: “Not to agree with Nicholas’s decisions would have meant the loss of that brilliant position which it had cost Bibikov forty years to attain and which he now enjoyed; and he therefore submissively bowed his dark head (already touched with grey) to indicate his submission and his readiness to fulfill the cruel, insensate, and dishonest supreme will” (622, 15). Submission has become a way of life for Bibikov, whose character is as flabby as Nicholas’s waist. Bibikov is the norm, not the exception, among those in power. Like Prince Chernyshev, the Minister of War, and
the Tsar’s aide-de-camp, who in their manner and look are carbon copies of the lifeless Nicholas, Bibikov is a puppet of power, who lacks moral will and genuine individualism.

Russians are not the only guilty ones in Hadji-Murat. In 1903 Tolstoy told a friend that he was “concerned not only with Hadji-Murat and his tragic fate, but also with the extremely interesting parallelism between the two main adversaries of the period—Shamil and Nicholas—who represent together the two poles, as it were, of powerful absolutism—the Asiatic and the European.” If Russian autocracy creates flabby half-humans, then Asiatic absolutism, no less toxic, produces a different kind of beast. Hadji-Murat’s disciple, Gamzalo, who wants “to slay and stab as many Russians as possible,” is hardly a model of cultural tolerance (653, 23). But Shamil is the most terrifying example of violent religious extremism, as recognizable today as a century ago. When he calmly dictates a letter to Hadji-Murat through his son, who dutifully relays the intentions of his captor to put out his eyes or kill him if Hadji-Murat doesn’t return, video images come to mind of the “last testament” read by Western hostages in the presence of their masked executors, or of Osama bin Laden explaining to the camera with an almost childlike innocence why his religious beliefs oblige him to eradicate us.

Against the spiritual bankruptcy of two forms of absolutism—Russian and Asiatic—Hadji-Murat’s innate sense of right and wrong, as well as his personal daring, stand out in sharp relief. Even Shamil, for all his dreadful impressiveness, is something of a charlatan and a showman. The power he has over others stems more from calculated effect than from inner substance. By contrast, Hadji-Murat, the last of Tolstoy’s “noble” heroes, is all substance and action, free of artifice and the trappings of ideology. He is one of the few fully alive characters in the novella.

AN ARTIST’S JOURNEY

In his encounters with two different Tartar thistles in the prologue, Tolstoy is retelling in miniature the story of his own personal and artistic journey. The narrator who innocently picks flowers for his bouquet is emblematic of the Tolstoy of the 1850s. This is the young author of The Cossacks, as well as the stories “The Raid” and “The Wood-felling,” for whom the Russian South is a place of physical and spiritual plenitude and artistic exploration. The Tolstoy who encounters the second Tartar thistle is the later ideologue—the moralist, pacifist, and preacher—who is pain-
fully aware of the world’s moral evils and of his participation in them. The depth of the prologue and of the entire work lies in the union of these two voices: the artist’s joie de vivre in the midst of rich, sensuous nature and the moralist’s pangs of guilt.

This is a more nuanced vision of the relationship between art and morality than the one Tolstoy develops in his treatise “What is Art?” published in 1897 and written while he was working on Hadji-Murat. In that essay the author makes a rigid distinction between two different kinds of art. “True” art happens when the artist achieves total communion with his surroundings, unconsciously infecting his audience with the same feelings of universal love that he carries within himself. “False” art is produced by the artist who strives for a titillating effect, who creates from the selfish needs of the ego rather than from the Christian ideal of purity, compassion, and love.

If, as Tolstoy claimed, the art of Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Michelangelo, and Beethoven, as well as his own War and Peace and Anna Karenina, fail to qualify as “true” art, then so would Tolstoy’s bouquet of flowers, which he creates out of an impulse to gather up the world and rearrange it according to his selfish designs. The author of “What is Art?” denounces this sort of “false” artist, but the author of Hadji-Murat asks us merely to reflect on the implications of his actions, for to denounce him would be to repudiate the egoism that is an inevitable part of our nature, and without which Tolstoy’s greatest works would never have been written. The selfish artist and the guilt-ridden moralist are both fully present, subsumed into a unifying vision that celebrates what is vital in human nature, censures what is destructive, and embraces life in its totality.

Vitality and destruction go hand in hand in Hadji-Murat. Take, for example, the description of the burnt bees and beehives and the destroyed apiary in the razed Chechen village, which recalls a small but significant detail from the prologue: “I climbed down into the ditch, and after driving away a velvety humble-bee that had penetrated deep into one of the flowers and had there fallen sweetly asleep, I set to work to pluck the flower” (549, 1). Tolstoy’s tiny, innocent disruption of nature becomes a microcosm of what the Russian imperial system does to a Chechen village, a region of the world, on a grand, tragic scale. In both cases natural processes are disturbed, organic relationships (in both the human and natural worlds) are severed, and life itself is defiled and destroyed. Suddenly Tolstoy’s moment of innocent ebullience is complicit in the pernicious forces of imperialism. When, in the prologue, Tolstoy writes that he felt “sorry to have vainly destroyed a flower that looked beautiful in its proper place,”
he is metaphorically expressing the deeper regret of a privileged aristocrat and artist, whose lifelong creativity and vitality, he now knows, have been purchased at such high cost.

These confessional overtones can be heard even more distinctly in the figure of Butler, the young, handsome officer of the guards who has come to the Caucasus with the same romantic hopes that Olenin once had. Significantly, Butler, who “forgot that he was ruined, and forgot his unpaid debts” (628, 16), is the Olenin of the very earliest drafts of *The Cossacks*—a ne’er-do-well who goes south to escape his failed career and gambling debts. The Olenin of the final version is a seeker. Butler is no searcher, and he has none of Olenin’s expansive inner life. If Olenin strives, albeit unsuccessfully, to penetrate the mysteries of Cossack life, Butler willfully hides behind his romantic illusions, with sinister consequences: “War presented itself to him as consisting only in exposing himself to danger and to possible death, thereby gaining the respect of his comrades here, as well as of his friends in Russia. Strange to say, his imagination never pictured the other aspect of war: the death and wounds of the soldiers, officers, and mountaineers” (627, 16).

The “other aspect of war,” which Butler cannot—will not—see is depicted with such revolting specificity in the next chapter that the censors eliminated almost all of it from the first Russian publication in 1912. We watch, horror-stricken, as the “handsome bright-eyed boy who had gazed with such ecstasy at Hadji-Murat, was brought dead to the mosque on a horse covered with a *burka* [felt cape]: he had been stabbed in the back with a bayonet” (629, 17). His mother, in a torn smock that exposes her withered breasts, stands wailing over her son’s dead body, digging her nails into her face until it bleeds, while the boy’s father digs his son’s grave with a pickaxe. We are told of the destroyed apiary and of the burnt bees and beehives, the broken and scorched apricot and cherry trees. We hear

> [The wailing of the women and the little children, who cried with their mothers, mingled with the lowing of the hungry cattle for whom there was no food. The bigger children, instead of playing, followed their elders with frightened eyes. The fountain was polluted, evidently on purpose, so that the water could not be used. The mosque was polluted in the same way, and the Mullah and his assistants were cleaning it out. (629, 17)]

Nowhere else in Tolstoy’s fiction is war presented in such gruesome detail. Nowhere are the romance of adventure and the innocence of youth
so directly complicit in the treachery of Russian imperial power. In the paragraph immediately following the description of the razed village, Butler looks at the majestic mountains, “inhaling deep breaths and rejoicing that he was alive, that it was just he that was alive, and that he lived in this beautiful place” (630, 18). In an early draft of Hadji-Murat, subtitled “Reminiscences of an Old Soldier,” these exact words are spoken in first person by Tolstoy himself. By the time he completed the work, the sixty-nine-year-old author, unlike Butler, understands the ramifications of his actions.

Yet, despite the moral distances that separate them, both Butler, who kills with blithe innocence, and the narrator, who destroys the wildflowers for his bouquet, are as integral to life’s “labyrinth of linkages” as the thistle uprooted by Tolstoy, or Hadji-Murat, who fights for survival until the end. Every individual—from the peasant, Avdeev, who serves against his will and dies tragically, to Tsar Nicholas I, who guides the imperial engine with his predatory bestiality—plays his or her necessary role in the circle of life.

Why does the handsome, curly-headed Butler fall “into a sound, dreamless, and unbroken sleep” (629, 16) after the raid on the Chechen village, while the bright-eyed Chechen boy, whose name we never learn, is buried by his parents? Why does the humble peasant soldier, Avdeev, die tragically and unnecessarily? The narrator does not pretend to know the answers to these questions. Avdeev’s mother has perhaps the wisest response of all. When the news of her son’s death reaches her, she “wept for as long as she could spare time, and then set to work again” (585, 8). That is also Tolstoy’s answer: to keep working, keep fighting. “No matter how old or how sick you are, how much or little you have done,” the sixty-two-year-old Tolstoy wrote to his secretary, Vladimir Chertkov: “your business in life not only isn’t finished, but hasn’t yet received its final, decisive meaning until your very last breath. That’s happy, invigorating.” This “happy, invigorating” worldview is the hopeful undercurrent running through an otherwise disturbing portrait of the world. Tolstoy’s entire journey as a man and artist reflects this life-affirming spirit.

“I’m not afraid of objections,” he wrote in his diary in 1874. “I am a seeker. I don’t belong to any camp. And I ask my readers not to.” These words encapsulate the lifelong quest of an artist and thinker, who never settled for long into any single vision or paradigm. Tolstoy was that rare bird in nineteenth-century Russia: a free artist and independent thinker. He created at least one movement, Tolstoyism, and contributed to many
others: Christian anarchism, nonviolent resistance to evil, and Russian socialism. Yet he didn’t belong to any of them.

Just as his searching characters create, reject, and resurrect truths about themselves and their world, so, throughout his lifetime, Tolstoy continually creates and destroys and recreates his own artistic visions. His rejection of his artistic past, which begins with Confession and finds its fullest expression in “What is Art?” is a position that he would overcome when he created Hadji-Murat in the last decade of his life. Nothing repeats in Tolstoy’s fluid world. The oak tree has already changed when Prince Andrei sees it for the second time. Hadji-Murat is less a reassertion than a reimagining. In a final letter to his children, written while he lay dying in the train station at Astapovo, Tolstoy implored his son, Seryezha, to “think about your own life, who you are, what you are, what is the meaning of a man’s life and how every reasonable man should live it.” Tolstoy’s final diaries and correspondence reveal that he had enormous difficulty following his own advice. In his last hours he kept repeating the phrase “I do not understand what it is I am supposed to do.” Hadji-Murat had his moment of doubt, as well. Each one makes a courageous, irreversible decision. Hadji-Murat refuses to go down without a fight. Tolstoy refuses to go home. Both return to the source from which they came, and escape into eternity.