Death & Transformation:
A Reflection on Human Mortality

by

Isaiah Boise

Using Leo Tolstoy’s epic novel, War and Peace, this paper examines the life and death of Prince Andrew Bolkonski, with the hope of gaining a better, deeper, understanding of our own mortality and the effects of death on the human psyche.

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Advisor: _______________________________________________________

David J Smith
Our life is a journey with but one universal end. King or Tyrant, Hero or Villain, Wealthy or poor, everyone experiences death. Because death is truly a mysterious and final end, we, as a society, have built rigid customs about when it is an acceptable topic to discuss. Instead, we express our mortality mainly through our media, be it be poetry or prose. In many things we read and see, the characters are faced with death, either their own or suffering through someone else’s. As this happens the characters go through drastic transformations. Through close examination of these shifts in personality, we gain a deeper and more thorough understanding of the characters; and through them a better grasp of our own human nature when faced with the prospect of death.

In Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, almost all the characters are faced by death in some way. The character this paper will scrutinize is Prince Andrew Bolkonski, by himself and as Pierre Bezukhov, Natasha Rostova, and his wife Lise interact with the young Prince. While each character experiences different types of metamorphoses, Prince Andrew's is by far the most drastic. This is logical because Prince Andrew suffers the most transformative situations: his near-death at Austerlitz, the subsequent death of his wife upon his return home, his battle with depression at Bogucharovo, Pierre’s surprise visit and their discussion at the ferry, his mental conversation with the ancient oak, and finally his slow, excruciating death after the battle of Borodino.
Beginning the novel as a cold, analytical young man, Prince Andrew Bolkonski has difficulty connecting or forming close personal relationships. We see this aspect of his personality early on when Andrew has a conversation with his father and sister about the condition of his marriage.

"Know this Masha: I can't reproach, have not reproached, and never shall reproach my wife with anything, and I cannot reproach myself with anything in regard to her; and that always will be so in whatever circumstances I may be placed. But if you want to know the truth… if you want to know whether I am happy? No! Is she happy? No! But why this is so I don't know…" (book I, chapter 16, page 91)

This passage clearly demonstrates Prince Andrew's trouble of empathy. He is not disappointed or disapproving of his wife and does blame himself for his failing relationship, but yet he cannot understand why they are not happy. Prince Andrew is not completely without feeling however, he can sense something is wrong between him and Lise but is unable to figure out what it is; he attempts to understand their relationship as he would a math problem, where physical actions add and subtract from the sum of their marriage. For Andrew if there are more positives than negatives in their relationship it should be a happy one, but even though he can find no faults with her and see no fault in himself they are still not happy. As such, our first impression of Prince Andrew is one of an emotionally stunted, almost stoic, young man who seeks out the war not for glory or political advancement, but out of duty.

One of Prince Andrew's first near death experiences comes during the battle of Austerlitz. In the midst of the battle, the standard bearer of his battalion is shot causing him to drop the flag and the Russian soldiers break rank turning
the fighting into disordered chaos. This conjures emotions of shame and anger in Andrew and he rallies his troops by seizing the flag and charging the enemy. As the troops surged ahead of him attempting to defend a Russian cannon battery, Andrew becomes ensnared watching an unarmed Russian gunner and a French soldier have a tug-of-war over a cannon mop. Prince Andrew is enraptured by this scene, despite the battle raging around him, and cannot fathom the reason why the unarmed gunner does not flee from the armed French soldiers. Before Prince Andrew sees the conclusion of the struggle for the mop however an enemy soldier bashes him in the head and Andrew is knocked to the ground. Lying on his back, staring up at the sky, Prince Andrew has a revelation.

He opened his eyes, hoping to see how the struggle of the Frenchmen with the gunners ended, whether the red-haired gunner had been killed or not and whether the cannon had been captured or saved. But he saw nothing. Above him there was now nothing but the sky – the lofty sky, not clear yet still immeasurably lofty, with gray clouds gliding slowly across it. “How quiet, peaceful, and solemn, not at all as I ran,” thought Prince Andrew – “not as we ran, shouting and fighting, not at all as the gunner and the Frenchman with the frightened and angry faces struggled for the mop: how differently do those clouds glide across that lofty infinite sky! How was it I did not see that lofty sky before? And how happy I am to have found it at last! Yes! All is vanity, all falsehood, except that infinite sky. There is nothing, nothing, but that. But even it does not exist, there is nothing but quiet and peace. Thank God! …” (book III, chapter 13, page 244)

Here Prince Andrew, through a near fatal blow to the head, achieves a state of total serenity, comparing the chaos of war around him to the remote infiniteness of the sky, and realizes an aspect of humanity and mortality that he had previously lacked. The progression of his thoughts, from the earthly realm up into the tranquility of the everlasting sky, shows the transcendental nature of his
experience; when he first opens his eyes he is still thinking about worldly affairs and the outcome of the battle he was engaged in. Instead of the conflict however he is confronted with the emptiness of the sky, how it remains untainted by the struggle and death around him, and he begins to understand the insignificance of humanities machinations. All human action, especially war, he realizes is vanity and falsehood in the face of the infinite and immutable. These thoughts take the form of a spiritual awakening, releasing him from his strictly analytical mindset by showing him a perspective beyond his own finite senses.

Prince Andrew’s injury at Austerlitz causes a distinct personality shift in the character; he is forced, by facing his own mortality, to reevaluate his beliefs and actions, which in turn changing his perspective of the world. As he regains consciousness, Andrew is aware of three things: that he is dying, that he does not wish to die, and that life is beautiful. He is rescued from certain death by Napoleon, Prince Andrew’s hero, who, with the battle conclude, is walking the field observing the dead and dying.

“That’s a fine death!” said Napoleon as he gazed at Bolkonski. Prince Andrew understood that this was said of him and that it was Napoleon who said it. He heard the speaker addressed as Sire. But he heard the words as he might have heard the buzzing of a fly. Not only did they not interest him, but he took no notice of them and at once forgot them. His head was burning, he felt himself bleeding to death, and he saw above him the remote, lofty, and everlasting sky. He knew it was Napoleon – his hero – but at that moment Napoleon seemed to him such a small, insignificant creature compared with what was passing now between himself and that lofty infinite sky with the clouds flying over it. At that moment it meant nothing to him who might be standing over him, or what was said of him; he was only glad that people were standing near him and only wished that they would help him and bring him back to life,
which seemed to him so beautiful now that he had today learned to understand it so differently. (book III, chapter 13, page 253)

This scene creates a juxtaposition between the dying Prince Andrew and his once-hero Napoleon; on the one hand, the great Napoleon, with all his lofty ambition, is surveying the carnage and waste of life he is primarily responsible for, proclaiming them to be “fine” deaths. While, Prince Andrew, one the other hand, having suffered the barbarism of war, finds Napoleon to be insignificant in the scope of his new understanding and wishes for nothing more than to remain alive. A comparison that is further strengthened when the French soldiers, upon discovering Prince Andrew’s identity as an officer, deem him an important enough captive to present him personally to the ambitious Emperor.

Napoleon apparently remembered seeing him on the battlefield and, addressing him, again used the epithet “young man” that was connected in his memory with Prince Andrew.

“Well, and you, young man,” said he, “How do you feel, mon brave?”

Though five minutes before, Prince Andrew had been able to say a few words to the soldier who were carrying him, now with his eyes fixed straight on Napoleon, he was silent. … So insignificant at that moment seemed to him all the interests that engrossed Napoleon, so mean did his hero himself with his paltry vanity and joy in victory appear, compared to the lofty, equitable, and kindly sky which he had seen and understood, that he could not answer him. (book III, chapter 13, page 254)

Prince Andrew, from his vantage point on the brink of death, has seen beyond the limitations of human egotism and in this revelatory mental state is stunned into silence by Napoleon's pompous arrogance. The understanding imparted to Prince by the lofty and everlasting sky is the miniscule scope of human life and deeds when compared with the infinity that is nature and his rewards: self-
awareness, by introspection of his own existence, and a greater knowledge of human nature, by examining the desires of those around him. In Napoleon, Prince Andrew’s awakening, both spiritually and intellectually, to the triviality of human endeavor is completed and he sees Napoleon as he really is, stripped of his titles and his cult of personality, a man.

Everything seemed so futile and insignificant in comparison with the stern and solemn train of thought that weakness from loss of blood, suffering, and the nearness of death aroused in him. Looking into Napoleon’s eyes Prince Andrew thought of the insignificance of greatness, the unimportance of life, which no one could understand, and the still greater unimportance of death, the meaning of which no one alive could understand or explain. (book III, chapter 12, page 254)

Out of Austerlitz, Prince Andrew survives with the knowledge that nothing is certain, except for the unimportance of human understanding and the greatness of incomprehensible nature.

Unfortunately, Prince Andrew’s fate is not a happy one. Having miraculously persevered through his injury at Austerlitz, he returns to his home in the Bald Hills, where his father and sister believe him to be dead, to find his wife, Lise, in labor with their child. Here, once again, Prince Andrew is confronted with human mortality and the turmoil that comes with it.

Prince Andrew entered and paused facing her at the foot of the sofa on which she was laying. Her glittering eyes, filled with childlike fear and excitement, rested on him without changing their expression. “I love you all and have done no harm to anyone; why must I suffer so? Help me!” Her looked seemed to say. She saw her husband, but did not realizing the significance of his appearance before her now. Prince Andrew went round the sofa and kissed her forehead.

“My Darling!” he said – a word he had never used to her before, “God is merciful...”
She looked at him inquiringly and with childlike reproach.

“I expected help from you and I get none, none from you either!” said her eyes. She was not surprised at his having come; she did not realize that he had come. His coming had nothing to do with her sufferings or with their relief. (book IV, chapter 9, page 284)

Prince Andrew returns from the horrors of his experience on the fields of war, his beliefs challenged, his views changed, with a new appreciation for the beauty in life, to what should be one of the happiest moments in his life, the birth of his first child. Instead, when Prince Andrew expresses affection and tenderness like he never has before, Lise, perhaps in her delirium, never responds; she only gazes on him with what Prince Andrew interprets as disappointment and disapproval, as if blaming him for the suffering she is experiencing. The couple’s interaction gives poignant insight to the changes wrought in Prince Andrew by his injury at Austerlitz. Andrew, previously an atheist, now believes in a higher power. He cannot comprehend or define what the power is; nonetheless, he understands its importance and, in his newfound faith, believes it is merciful. He has survived his injury, returned to his home, and is now going to be a father. Although Prince Andrew has matured spiritually and emotionally, demonstrating this with his words to Lise, he has returned to a situation in which he must reap what he sowed.

Piteous, helpless, animal moans came through the door. Prince Andrew got up, went to the door, and tried to open it. Someone was holding it shut.

“You can’t come in! You can’t!” said a terrified voice from within.

He began pacing the room. The screaming ceased, and a few more seconds went by. Then suddenly a terrible shriek – it could not be hers, she could not scream like that – came from the
bedroom. Prince Andrew ran to the door; the scream ceased and he heard the wail of an infant.

“What have they taken a baby in there for?” thought Prince Andrew in the first second. “A baby? What baby…? Why is there a baby there? Or is the baby born?”

Then suddenly he realized the joyful significance of that wail; tears choked him, and leaning his elbows on the window sill he began to cry, sobbing like a child. (book IV, chapter 9, page 284)

Fear. Anxiety. Confusion. Joy. These are the emotions Prince Andrew struggles with as he waits outside Lise’s room. As opposed to the solemn clarity of thought with which Prince Andrew viewed the world at Austerlitz, here, overwhelmed by the force of his emotions, his composure vanishes and he is reduced to the actions of a mere child. Now, having already endured a brush with death, he experiences the other aspect of human mortality: that of birth, an event that is the very antithesis of death, and yet at the same time, inextricably entwined with it. For Prince Andrew, sadly, this is true in a more literal sense.

The door opened. The doctor with his shirt sleeves tucked up, without a coat, pale and with a trembling jaw, came out of the room. Prince Andrew turned to him, but the doctor gave him a bewildered look and passed by without a word. A woman rushed out and seeing Prince Andrew stopped, hesitating on the threshold. He went into his wife’s room. She was lying dead, in the same position he had seen her in five minutes before and, despite the fixed eyes and the pallor of the cheeks, the same expression was on her charming childlike face with its upper lip covered with tiny black hair.

“I love you all, and have done no harm to anyone; and what have you done to me?” – said her charming, pathetic, dead face. (book IV, chapter 9, page 285)

Seeing the reaction of Lise’s attendants to his presence, Prince Andrew must realize there is something horribly wrong. Upon entering the room he is confronted by the sight of his dead wife, lying in the same position, with the same
expression of blame and accusation he had last seen in her living eyes still
present. Prince Andrew only feels guilt.

Two hours later Prince Andrew, stepping softly, went into his father’s room. The old man already knew everything. He was standing close to the door and as soon as it opened his rough old arms closed like a vise round his son’s neck, and without a word he began to sob like a child.

Three days later the little princess was buried, and Prince Andrew went up the steps to where the coffin stood, to give her the farewell kiss. And there in the coffin was the same face, though with closed eyes. “Ah, what have you done to me?” it still seemed to say, and Prince Andrew felt that something gave way in his soul and that he was guilty of a sin he could neither remedy nor forget. He could not weep. (book IV, chapter 9, page 285)

To Prince Andrew, Lise, the little princess often described as charming and childlike, represents youth and innocence. Before he is aware of her death, Prince Andrew cries, sobbing like a child, with the joy of his son’s birth, but with Lise’s death so dies what remained of Prince Andrew’s innocence; whether it is two hours after or three days he is unable to weep. This reaction to Lise’s death reveals the emotional maelstrom hiding inside him. He feels deep within that he is responsible for the destruction of something pure and beautiful, and this guilt, empowered by the memory of her charming, pathetic, dead face, sears itself onto his soul.

At Austerlitz we experience Prince Andrew’s stream of consciousness, as he lies dying on the plain of battle, and see his intensely introspective analysis of the world, his mortality, and the value of human life. This omniscience, in regards to Prince Andrew’s thoughts, gives us a unique perspective with which to view the world around us. Prince Andrew’s candid introspection becomes our
own, and we are compelled to reflect on our own mortality. With the death of Lise, however, we share in Prince Andrew’s struggle as he deals with the emotions, the confusion, pain, sorrow, and guilt, of losing someone close to us; again we are confronted with mortality, but rather than introspection, this situation causes us to reflect on how we are affected by those around us and what our own reaction would be to their death.

Through happiness and sorrow, health and sickness, life moves on, our heart beating out a steady pace: the metronome for the symphony of our lives. Our wounds heal into scars; our emotions fade to memories of bygone days. Or they should. But on occasion an injury, psychic or bodily, will not heal without external intervention, and every move or thought seems to tear it open once again. This is the position of Prince Andrew, for although a year has passed since the death of Lise, the affect it had on him was a lasting one. In the aftermath of his tragic return from Austerlitz, Prince Andrew firmly resolves not to return to military service. Instead, with the aim of assuaging the depressing memories associated with his home, Bald Hills, Prince Andrew’s father grants him the estate of Bogucharovo, where he is able to live, losing himself in the day-to-day tasks of making improvements and managing the land, without the daily remainder of Lise’s death. This decision is of utmost importance to our understanding of Prince Andrew’s state of internal strife. For Prince Andrew, initially, joined the war out of a sense of duty: that he must. But now, after he has seen war and suffered his traumas, he seeks out the opposite, a quiet, modest, and mundane existence managing his estate. As if Fate were testing this
resolution, when the war begins anew, strengthen by the break in fighting, the refreshing of blood lust, and the promise of vengeance, every able bodied man is required to enlist, Prince Andrew takes a post, under his father, as a recruiter so as to avoid active service. Even as he does this, Prince Andrew is plagued by the secret regret of not taking part in the war, and as such drives his already frayed mind into a state of conflict. Thus Prince Andrew whiles away the time, healthy but unhappy and wreathed in dark thoughts but unable to escape. This is exemplified when Pierre Bezukhov surprises Prince Andrew with a visit to Bogucharovo.

Pierre went with rapid steps to the door and suddenly came face to face with Prince Andrew, who came out frowning and looking old. …

“Well, I did not expect you, I am very glad,” said Prince Andrew.

Pierre said nothing; he looked fixedly at his friend with surprise. He was struck by the changes in him. His words were kindly and there was a smile on his lips and face, but his eyes were dull and lifeless and in spite of his evident wish to do so he could not give them a joyous and glad sparkle. Prince Andrew had grown thinner, paler, and more manly-looking, but what amazed and estranged Pierre till he got used to it were his inertia and a wrinkle on his brow indicating prolonged concentration on some one thought. (book V, chapter 9, page 333)

On the outside Prince Andrew appears normal, he can go through the motions of expressing happiness, “I am very glad”, and can even smile genuinely with his whole face; but internally he is consumed, as they say: eyes are the window to the soul, and his soul has been made dull and lifeless. The grief from Lise’s death, along with his self-imposed guilt over the death of innocence and his understanding about the uncertainty of human life, combine within Prince Andrew to create a single thought, a paralytic malaise of the mind, from which he cannot
break free. As there interaction continues, Pierre notices more inconsistencies between his friend’s outward demeanor and mental state.

The preoccupation and despondency which Pierre had noticed in his friend’s look was now still more clearly expressed in the smile with which he listened to Pierre, especially when he spoke with joyful animation of the past or future. It was as if Prince Andrew would have liked to sympathize with what Pierre was saying, but could not. The latter began to feel that it was in bad taste to speak of his enthusiasms, dreams, and hopes of happiness or goodness, in Prince Andrew’s presence. (book V, chapter 9, page 333)

At this point in Prince Andrew’s life he can take no pleasure from his past, as his memories are still shrouded by the death of his wife, nor the future, for he knows there can be no certainty in human actions. Only the immediate present can offer anything of value to Prince Andrew but this still does not bring happiness. Prince Andrew has lost hope, not in just one aspect or another but entirely, in himself and in humanity. Caught in the midst of this gloom, Prince Andrew’s reflections are infected by it and his conclusions become tainted. Thus, when he proclaims his new philosophy of life to Pierre over dinner, he also reveals part of his inner struggle.

“What does harm to another is wrong,” said Pierre, feeling with pleasure that for the first time since his arrival Prince Andrew was roused, had begun to talk and wanted to express what had brought him to his present state.

“And who has told you what is bad for another man?” he asked.

“Bad! Bad!” exclaimed Pierre. “We all know what is bad for ourselves.”

“Yes, we can know that, but the harm I am conscious of in myself is something that I cannot inflict on others,” said Prince Andrew, growing more and more animated and evidently wishing to express his new outlook to Pierre. He spoke in French. “I only know two very real evils in life: remorse and illness. The only good is the
absence of those evils. To live for myself avoiding those two evils is my whole philosophy now.” (book V, chapter 9, 335)

Prince Andrew’s new guiding doctrine is a reaction to his existing state of consciousness. In an effort to scab over his mental pain, Prince Andrew resolves to avoid those evils that would further inflame his wound. But that is all he can do, for one cannot lift oneself out of despair unless they see a light, because all Prince Andrew sees is darkness. Depression, a malady of the soul brought about by an overabundance and persistence of negative emotions, while not directly related to mortality is closely linked with it, as they are mutually likely to cause the other. As Prince Andrew experiences, depression is such a state that, almost in accordance with Newtonian physics, once entered perpetuates itself indefinitely unless acted upon by a force capable of overcoming it. Whether that force is innately internal, by the process of reflection and acceptance, or it draws its impetus from an external source, the intervention of a friend, or even a combination of the two is dependant on the individual; for Prince Andrew, Pierre’s visit acts as the external force, and their discussion helps energize his state of mind so that it might overcome the inertia of his depression.

Prince Andrew begins to repair his soul through Pierre’s visit to his estate, but he does not truly reveal the demons that plague him until the next day. While traveling with Pierre from Bogucharovo to the Bald Hills, their coach must board a ferry, so as to safely traverse a flooded river. After disembarking from the carriage and boarding the raft, Pierre asks Prince Andrew if he believes in a future life, or life after death, and assuming his companion holds the same atheistic views he had the last time they met, prior to Prince Andrew’s military
service and thus Austerlitz, gives his own opinion before the young prince can reply. Prince Andrew’s response, however, is not one that Pierre could anticipate, stemming not from any teleological philosophy or erudite theologian, but rather from personal experience.

“Yes, that is Herder’s theory,” said Prince Andrew, “but it is not that which can convince me, dear friend – life and death are what convince. What convinces is when one sees a being dear to one, bound up with one’s own life, before whom one was to blame and had hoped to make it right” (Prince Andrew’s voice trembled as he turned away), “and suddenly that being is seized with pain, suffers, and ceases to exist … Why? It cannot be that there is no answer. And I believe there is … that’s what convinces, that is what has convinced me,” said Prince Andrew.

“Yes, yes, of course,” said Pierre, “isn’t that what I’m saying?”

“No. All I say is that it is not argument that convinces me of the necessity of a future life, but this: when you go hand in hand with someone and all at once that person vanishes there, into nowhere, and you yourself are left facing that abyss, and look in. And I have looked in…” (book V, chapter 10, pages 339-340)

Prince Andrew is not one to accept dogma about metaphysical principles. He is firm in his beliefs and will only alter them if faced with empirical evidence. We see this in his atheistic attitude toward religion before his spiritual communion with that high, everlasting sky at Austerlitz. And we see this now as he struggles to express his thoughts on the afterlife, acquired from suffering Lise’s death. In this discussion, Prince Andrew seems to get to the root of his depression; the dissonance in his mind between his empirical reality, that his wife is gone forever and he will never be able to make right the guilt he feels, and the mystery of death: that a person can be, and moments later, cease to be, their soul disappearing into the void, leaving behind only an empty husk to hint at their life and deeds. He can see no physical evidence for an after life, only the yawning
abyss where his loved one used to be, but nevertheless he still believes. Unable to synthesize his conflicting views, Prince Andrew's intellect has been divided into a state of constant civil war. Only through the amalgamation, rationalization, or elimination of his dissonant beliefs can Prince Andrew restore his internal peace. Exorcising his mind of this mental fiend, through the vocalization of his thoughts to Pierre, allows Prince Andrew to rationalize the discord present within himself and grants him the serenity to accept the things he cannot change, the courage to change the things he can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

Stepping off the raft, he looked up at the sky to which Pierre had pointed, and for the first time since Austerlitz saw that high, everlasting sky he had seen while lying on that battlefield; and something that had long been slumbering, something that was best within him, suddenly awoke, joyful and youthful, in his soul. It vanished as soon as he returned to the customary conditions of his life, but he knew that this feeling which he did not know how to develop existed within him. His meeting with Pierre formed an epoch in Prince Andrew's life. Though outwardly he continued to live in the same old way, inwardly he began a new life. (book V, chapter 10, page 340)

When Pierre first sees Prince Andrew at Bogucharovo, the Prince exits his house frowning and haggard; the tribulations he has experienced weigh so heavily on his psyche that it has been overpowered with cynical thoughts and the love for life he became aware of at Austerlitz has become suppressed. Most importantly, however, is that his soul has been lifted out of its depression through his conversations with Pierre, and that part of him thought lost at the burial of Lise is rediscovered. Although Prince Andrew is aware of the revival in his soul, this beneficent emotion is ephemeral and fades back into the ether as soon as he returns to his daily life; he remains conscious of its effect on his life, and even
though he does not know how to cultivate it or reestablish its dominance, its very existence restores his hope.

Continuing his life country, Prince Andrew implements revolutionary changes on his estates, improving the lives of his serfs and peasants, without spectacle and seemingly without strain; he avidly follows both domestic and foreign affairs, having more knowledge of world events than even those who visit from the city; in his free time not spent with his father and young son at Bald Hills, he busies himself reviewing the past two failed military campaigns and creates proposals to reform the army. All of these things he does, living his external life in the same fashion he always did, but since his conversation at the ferry Prince Andrew has reawakened his hope, shifting his internal state from one of war to a condition of tenuous peace and is now able to gain some measure of satisfaction from the actions he performs. This is unsustainable however, for although Andrew has corrected the issues within himself, until he brings his internal and external lives into alignment he is unable to attain true meaning in his life. This synthesis occurs for Prince Andrew in the form of personified nature, a conversation, as it were, between himself and an ancient oak tree.

At the edge of the road stood an oak. Probably ten times the age of the birches that formed the forest, it was ten times as thick and twice as tall as they. It was an enormous tree, its girth twice as great as a man could embrace, and evidently long ago some of its branches had been broken off and its bark scarred. With its huge ungainly limbs sprawling unsymmetrically, and its gnarled hands and fingers, it stood an aged, stern, and scornful monster among the smiling birch trees. Only the dead-looking evergreen firs dotted about in the forest, and this oak, refused to yield to the charm of spring or notice either the spring or the sunshine.
Prince Andrew sees in this oak, its very appearance radiating contempt for the transformations happening all around it, a part of himself also too ancient, stubborn, and gnarled to change. It is from this part of Andrew that the oak gains its voice and from this part that it speaks.

“Spring, love, happiness!” this oak seemed to say. “Are you not weary of that stupid, meaningless, constantly repeated fraud? Always the same and always a fraud! There is no spring, no sun, no happiness! Look at those cramped dead firs, ever the same, and at me too, sticking out my broken and barked fingers just where they have grown, whether from my back or my sides: as they have grown so I stand, and I do not believe in your hopes and your lies.” (Book VI, chapter 1, page 372)

Scorning the very idea of change as an endlessly repeating hoax and having complete and utter disbelief in hope, giving it the same amount of credence as a lie, the oak’s words are the shadows of despair that linger in Prince Andrew’s mind. Considering what the oak has said and finding himself in agreement, the young Prince allows the grim and dismal thoughts to rise within him once again.

“Yes, the oak is right, a thousand times right,” thought Prince Andrew. “Let others – the young – yield afresh to that fraud, but we know life, our life is finished!”

A whole sequence of new thoughts, hopeless but mournfully pleasant, rose in his soul in connection with that tree. During this journey he, as it were, considered his life afresh and arrived at his old conclusion, restful in its hopelessness: that it was not for him to begin anything anew – but that he must live out his life, content to do no harm, and not disturbing himself or desiring anything.

Although Prince Andrew’s first interaction with the oak only leads to an emotional relapse of hopelessness, he is not paralyzed by it. Having walked with that shadow hanging over him many times in the past two years he takes solace in
always reaching the same conclusion and, treating it like an old friend, finds the belief that his life is finished and that it is beyond him to begin anew brings him a sense of untroubled ease, melancholy yet tranquil. Here then is Andrew’s problem: even though his life involves many actions and activities, his internal philosophy is entirely passive. In early June, on his return trip through the forest, Prince Andrew learns to rectify this issue. He again sees the oak, but it is not the same.

“Yes, here in this forest was that oak with which I agreed.” Thought Prince Andrew. “But where is it?” he again wondered, gazing at the left side of the road, and without recognizing it he looked with admiration at the very oak he sought. The old oak, quite transfigured, spreading out a canopy of sappy dark-green foliage, stood rapt and slightly trembling in the rays of the evening sun. Neither gnarled fingers nor old scars nor old doubts and sorrows were any of them in evidence now. Through the hard century-old bark, even where there were no twigs, leaves had sprouted such as one could hardly believe the old veteran could have produced.

“Yes, it is the same oak,” thought Prince Andrew, and all at once he was seized by an unreasoning springtime feeling of joy and renewal. All the best moments of his life suddenly rose to his memory. Austerlitz with the lofty heavens, his wife’s dead reproachful face, Pierre at the ferry, that girl thrilled by the beauty of the night, and that night itself and the moon, and … all this rushed suddenly to his mind.

The transformation of the ancient oak, from a barren, grizzled veteran to become teeming with life and vitality, resonates with Prince Andrew’s soul and the process begun by Pierre’s visit and their discussion on the ferry is completed.

The memories that the oak brings up in Prince Andrew’s mind are all the best moments of his life, not because they were pleasant or happy, but because they were the times of greatest change. The oak inspires him in a way that rejuvenates his soul; Prince Andrew then reconciles his philosophy and actions,
allowing him to come to terms with his sufferings and looking back on them without remorse, move forward with a new, definitively more active philosophy for life.

“No, life is not over at thirty-one!” Prince Andrew suddenly decided finally and decisively. “it is not enough for me to know what I have in me – everyone must know it: Pierre, and that young girl who wanted to fly away into the sky, everyone must know me, so that my life may not be lived for myself alone while others live so apart from it, but so that it may be reflected in them all, and they and I may live in harmony!”

Now that Prince Andrew has brought his values and actions into alignment, his desire to live harmoniously with others reflects the peace he feels within himself. This process, although it has taken him years and required the aid of Pierre and the ancient oak, has allowed Prince Andrew to finally put to rest the guilt he has felt since the death of Lise. No longer tormented by his wife’s death, his logic is able to wrest control from his emotions and gives him a different perspective of his life and sufferings.

It now seemed clear to him that all his experience of life must be senselessly wasted unless he applied it to some kind of work and again played an active part in life. He did not even remember how formerly, on the strength of similar wretched logical arguments, it had seemed obvious that he would be degrading himself if he now, after the lessons he had had in life, allowed himself to believe in the possibility of being useful and in the possibility of happiness or love. Now reason suggested quite the opposite. After that journey to Ryazan he found the country dull; his former pursuits no longer interested him, and often when sitting alone in his study he got up, went to the mirror, and gazed a long time at his own face. Then he would turn away to the portrait of his dead Lise, who with hair curled à la grecque looked tenderly and gaily at him out of the gilt frame. She did not say those former terrible words to him, but looked simply, merrily, and inquisitively at him.
For Prince Andrew, finally at peace after his long suffering, the world has a new clarity and he is ready to engage in an active life. This process is not the same for everyone however, the affect that the death of a person has on their survivors is truly unique to each individual. As such, only through the close examination of our own personal bonds can we attempt to understand how the death of our friends and family might affect us. But, despite our best efforts, there is no real way to anticipate the emotional reaction we will have to the death of a loved one or close friend, and even less of a chance to know how long it will effect us.

Revived, Prince Andrew once again takes an active part in all that life has to offer; he finds true love, and true heartbreak, in a young woman named Natasha Rostov and he reenlists in the military, taking a position as an officer in the cabinet of Commander in Chief General Kutuzov. Shortly after his return to service, on June 24, 1812, Napoleon and his army cross the Niemen and officially invade Russia; by August 17 Napoleon’s army had pushed the Russian army back six hundred kilometers, reaching Smolensk and burning Prince Andrew’s home, Bald Hills, to the ground. Retreating with the main Russian army, Prince Andrew passes his old residence and, seeing the destruction wrought on his childhood home, gains a new resolve focused by the intense anger he feels for the French troops. Retreating until they could not retreat further without endangering Moscow, the Russian army was finally forced to give battle on September 7th outside of the town of Borodino. Prince Andrew,
on the eve of battle for the first time since his injury at Austerlitz, reflects on life, death, and his own mortality.

He had received and given the orders for next day’s battle and had nothing more to do. But his thoughts – the simplest, clearest, and therefore most terrible thoughts – would give him no peace. He knew that tomorrow’s battle would be the most terrible of all he had taken part in, and for the first time in his life the possibility of death presented itself to him – not in relation to any worldly matter or with reference to its effects on others, but simply in relation to himself, to his own soul – vividly, plainly, terribly, and almost as a certainty. (book X, chapter 24, page 685)

Prince Andrew when injured at Austerlitz and on brink of oblivion was keenly aware of his love of life, his desire to remain alive, and what he would lose should he pass over. Now, he has help create the plans, schemes, and strategies for the battle, given and received his orders, and knows the danger he will face tomorrow on the fields of war; here, with a healthy mind and body, Prince Andrew sees Death, simply, clearly. He knows the possibility that his entire being, all his thoughts and sufferings and hopes and dreams, could terminate in the mud, blood, and chaos of the coming engagement. He knows that when the sun sets on the carrion-covered arena of war and the generals, sitting safely ensconced in camp, surrounded by the sycophants they call advisors, after a day condemning entire generations of young men to death with little more than a move of their brow, their awful power over life and death rivaling even the vengeful pagan gods of old, receive those well-ordered tomes composed with the names of those sacrificed to the void, all that may remain of him is an empty shell and the amount of ink required to write his name.
And from the height of this perception all that had previously tormented and preoccupied him suddenly became illumined by a cold white light without shadows, without perspective, and without distinction of outline. All life appeared to him like magic-lantern pictures at which he had long been gazing by artificial light through a glass. Now he suddenly saw those badly daubed pictures in clear daylight and without a glass. “Yes, yes! There they are, those false images that agitate, enraptured, and tormented me,” said he to himself, passing in review the principal pictures of the magic lantern of life and regarding them now in the cold white daylight of his clear perception of death. “there they are, those rudely painted figures that once seemed splendid and mysterious. Glory, the good of society, love of a woman, the Fatherland itself – how important these pictures appeared to me, with what profound meaning they seemed to be filled! And it is all so simple, pale, and crude in the cold white light of this morning which I feel is dawning for me.” The three great sorrows of his life held his attention in particular; his love for a woman, his father’s death, and the French invasion which had overrun half of Russia. (book X, chapter 24, page 685-686)

Uncertainty clouding his immediate future and facing his prospective death untainted by material concerns or emotional connections, Prince Andrew sees his past and present with a simple and terrible clarity. Those intangible ideals: patriotism, the search for glory, doing ones duty, and romantic love, that had at one time so captivated his mind, now seemed crude and meaningless, stripped of their enigmatic value by his plain awareness of death. Prince Andrew, his life illuminated by a clear perception of mortality, reflects on the three greatest tribulations that cause him grief: his heartbreak over Natasha, the death of his father, and the destruction wrought on all he holds dear by the French invasion.

“Love! ... that little girl who seemed to me brimming over with mystic forces! Yes, indeed, I loved her. I made romantic plans of love and happiness with her! Oh, what a boy I was!” he said aloud bitterly, “ Ah me! I believed in some ideal love which was to keep her faithful to me for the whole year of my absence! Like the gentle dove in the fable she was to pine apart from me … but it was much simpler really … It was all very simple and horrible.” (book X, chapter 24, page 686)
After overcoming the depression afflicting him since the death of Lise, Prince Andrew fell in love with and eventually proposed to Natasha Rostov; but, during the engagement, while he was away for a year on military duty, serving in General Kutuzov's cabinet, Natasha had an affair with a young cavalry officer named Anatole Kuragin. Devastated by her infidelity, Prince Andrew is deeply resentful of the situation and is disillusioned with love. But, even after much time passing it still weighs heavily on his mind. Too bitter to continue his tirade against romantic love, Prince Andrew changes its focus to his other great sorrows: the death of his father and the destruction of the Fatherland.

“When my father built Bald Hills he thought the place was his: his land, his air, his peasants. But Napoleon came and swept him aside, unconscious of his existence, as he might brush a chip from his path, and his Bald Hills and his whole life fell to pieces. Princess Mary says it is a trial sent from above. What is the trial for, when he is not here and never will return? He is not here! For whom then is the trial intended? The Fatherland, the destruction of Moscow! And tomorrow I shall be killed, perhaps not even by a Frenchman but by one of our own men, by a soldier discharging a musket close to my ear as one of them did yesterday, and the French will come and take me by head and heels and fling me into a hole that I may not stink under their noses, and new conditions of life will arise, which will seem quite ordinary to others and about which I shall know nothing. I shall not exist…” (book X, chapter 24, page 686)

Prince Andrew, in his reflections, clearly sees all the vanities of human life and what they amount to. Dominion is a vanity, for what good is it for something to be yours when it can be taken in an instant by someone stronger; Glory is a vanity, for what is it but the fickle adoration and false pride of small men; Patriotism is a vanity, for what is it but pride in a drawing, written in sand, that will be redrawn by the next tide; War is a vanity: for what other aspect of existence
squanders human life so easily for so little; but most of all, Life is a vanity, for what use are our triumphs and sufferings when the only thing that remains is a slowly decomposing shell. In this way, examining his life in the harsh light of his own mortality, Prince Andrew knows that he will die.

On the morning of the battle of Borodino, Prince Andrew and his regiment were stationed among the reserves, which were to stand idle, well behind the active combat zones, until called upon to reinforce a weakened area. Although they were not in the actual fighting, by two o’clock, when Prince Andrew’s unit was ordered to fill a hole on the front lines, they had already lost over two hundred men to concentrated enemy artillery fire. Taking their positions to fill in the gap, Prince Andrew and his men stood anxious and gloomy, without moving or firing a shot, as the enemy’s gun battery rained destruction on their very heads. An artificial fog, the furious breathe of hundreds of bellowing guns, blanketed the field, now soaked with the blood of thousands. Out of this fog, foretold with a roaring boom, came whistling, hissing, death. In this hellish place Prince Andrew lost a third of his remaining men. As the battle raged on and hours passed, the guns ceaselessly fired their deadly ammunition, their bloodlust seemingly unquenchable. For every shell that found its mark among Prince Andrew’s troops, a smaller and smaller chance of survival remained for those who had yet to be slain.

Hungry, with nothing to be done, and no safety to be found, Prince Andrew’s men were restless and dispirited, trying to find any little distraction to occupy their minds, so as to keep them from thinking about the nightmare they
currently resided in. In an effort to slow the steady and inevitable decline in his regiments moral, Prince Andrew set to walking about the ranks. He soon realized that it was pointless and that there was nothing that could be done to invigorate his men. But just as his men found distraction whatever way they could, Prince Andrew distracted himself walking along field, looking at this and that plant, rustling the grass, and wearily listening for the booming report of a cannon before trying to trace the sound of the whistling balls of death. While issuing a command to his adjutant, Prince Andrew heard a soldier shout.

“Look out!” came a frightened cry from a soldier and, like a bird whirling in rapid flight and alighting on the ground, a shell dropped with little noise within two steps of Prince Andrew and close to the battalion commander’s horse. The horse first, regardless of whether it was right or wrong to show fear, snorted, reared almost throwing the major, and galloped aside. The horse’s terror infected the men.

“Lie down!” cried the adjutant, throwing himself flat on the ground.

Prince Andrew hesitated. The smoking shell spun like a top between him and the prostrate adjutant, near a wormwood plant between the field and the meadow.

“Can this be death?” thought Prince Andrew, looking with a quite new, envious glance at the grass, the wormwood, and the streamlet of smoke that curled up from the rotating black ball. “I cannot, I do not wish to die. I love life – I love this grass, this earth, this air …” He thought this, and at the same time remembered that people were looking at him.

“It’s shameful, sir!” he said to the adjutant. “What…”

He did not finish speaking. At one and the same moment came the sound of an explosion, a whistle of splinters as from a breaking window frame, a suffocating smell of powder, and Prince Andrew started to one side, raising his arm, and fell on his chest. … From the right side of his abdomen, blood was welling out making a large stain on the grass. (book X, chapter 36, pages 722-723)
Although Prince Andrew recognizes that death is unavoidable and understood the constant threat of death present in the battle, in the moments before the shell explodes he has a similar realization as his insight at Austerlitz: that he does not wish to die and that he loves life. At Austerlitz, Prince Andrew had already been injured and was at the edge of his life when he had his revelation, before being found by Napoleon’s men. Here Prince Andrew, with his clear perspective of mortality, sees his death, knows he is not ready, and, controlling even his most basic, animalistic instinct, does not hide from it. After the explosion, Prince Andrew’s unconscious, limp, and battered body was placed on a stretcher and hurriedly raced to the operating tent.

Prince Andrew regained awareness outside of the tent, because he was an officer and a prince he was given priority treatment and was brought to an operating table almost immediately. As the doctor began to treat Prince Andrew’s wounds, the pain overwhelmed him and he once again lost consciousness. When he awoke again, the procedure had been completed: the shattered portion of his thighbone had been removed, the flayed skin cut off, and the wound cleaned and bandaged. As Prince Andrew lay on the table, he became aware of the man being operated on next to him. This man, who was having his leg amputated, brought a connection to Prince Andrew’s mind, which recognized him as Anatole Kuragin. If Prince Andrew had come into contact with Anatole prior to the battle of Borodino he would have demanded a duel. But, in his current condition seeing Anatole for the first time after learning of Natasha’s infidelity with him, Prince Andrew’s love for Natasha is rekindled in his soul, more
tender and stronger than before. Remembering everything, Prince Andrew is
overcome with feelings pity and love for Anatole and finally breaking down weeps
for humanity, for himself, and for their errors. Here, lying on the operating table,
overcome with love for his fellow man, Prince Andrew understands what he was
missing in his life.

"Compassion, love of our brothers, for those who love us and for
those who hate us, love of our enemies, yes, that love which God
preached on earth and which Princess Mary taught me and I did
not understand – that is what made me sorry to part with life, that is
what remained for me had I lived. But now it is too late. I know it!"
(book X, chapter 38, page 726)

In some cruel twist of fate, Prince Andrew only learns why he was not ready to
die until it is too late, and knowing he is slowly perishing, he is aware of what his
life would have been, were he not to die. Understanding this, all of Prince
Andrew’s hatred, for Anatole and for the French, is melted away and replaced
with compassion and peace.

Hatred is one of the driving motivators of war, and it hung like a shroud
over the battle of Borodino. The fighting continued throughout the day, paying no
heed to Prince Andrew’s revelation, and into the evening; the continuous cycle of
man slaughtering man wearing heavily on the psyche of all the participants. In
the bloody aftermath of the inevitable battle, the Russian army had held its
ground and blocked the way to Moscow, but at the steep cost of having lost half
of their total army. The French had the numerical advantage, losing a quarter of
their standing force in the battle, but they had been fought to a stand still by a
Russian army that refused to yield ground despite suffering horrific casualties;
deep in hostile territory, their supply lines stretched thin, the French morale was broken. With the Russian army crippled and disorganized, Napoleon and his troops easily broke through and pushed to Moscow, but despite this small victory, the French army, at Borodino, had been dealt a fatal blow that would ultimately lead to collapse of Napoleon’s empire.

With his wound stabilized, Prince Andrew was evacuated just ahead of the advancing French army. As the enemy approached within a day’s marching distance of Moscow, the remnants of the Russian army evacuated the city and gave the order to burn it to the ground. Passing through Moscow, Prince Andrew’s caravan, by chance, sheltered for the night at the home of the Rostov’s. Forced to flee Moscow the next day, the Rostov’s opt to travel with Prince Andrew’s caravan. A week after his injury at Borodino, Prince Andrew’s fever broke and he regained consciousness.

His mind was not in a normal state. A healthy man usually thinks of, feels, and remembers innumerable things simultaneously, but has the power and will to select one sequence of thoughts or events on which to fix his whole attention. A healthy man can tear himself away from the deepest reflections to say a civil word to someone who comes in and can then return again to his own thoughts. But Prince Andrew’s mind was not in a normal state in that respect. All the powers of his mind were more active and clearer than ever, but they acted apart from his will. Most diverse thoughts and images occupied him simultaneously. At times his brain suddenly began to work with a vigor, clearness, and depth it had never reached when he was in health, but suddenly in the midst of its work it would turn to some unexpected idea and he had not the strength to turn it back again. (book XI, chapter 15, page 816)

When Natasha learns of Prince Andrew’s presence in the caravan, she sneaks in to see him in the middle of the night. Seeing her again, Prince Andrew tells her
of his love for her, forgivers her for transgressions, and their romance is rekindled, albeit in a different manner. From then on Natasha takes care of Prince Andrew and tries to ease his suffering as he slowly succumbs to gangrene and fever. Roughly a month after sustaining his mortal wound, Prince Andrew preoccupied with life and death, has a peculiar dream.

He dreamed that he was lying in the room he was really in, but that he was quite well and unwounded. Many various, indifferent, and insignificant people appeared before him. He talked to them and discussed something trivial. They were preparing to go away somewhere. Prince Andrew dimly realized that all this was trivial and that he had more important cares, but he continued to speak, surprising them by empty witticisms. Gradually, unnoticed, all these persons began to disappear and a single question, that of the closed door, superseded all else. He rose and went to the door to bolt and lock it. Everything depended on whether he was, or was not, in time to lock it. He went, and tried to hurry, but his legs refused to move and he knew he would not be in time to lock the door though he painfully strained all his powers. He was seized by an agonizing fear. And that fear was the fear of death. It stood behind the door, that dreadful something on the other side was already pressing against it and forcing its way in. Something not human – death – was breaking in through that door, and had to be kept out. He seized the door, making a final effort to hold it back – to lock it was no longer possible – but his best efforts were weak and clumsy and the door, pushed from behind in by that terror, opened and closed again.

Once again it pushed from outside. His last superhuman efforts were vain and both halves of the door noiselessly opened. It entered, and it was death, and Prince Andrew died.

But at the instant he died, Prince Andrew remembered that he was asleep, and at the very instant he died, having made an effort, he awoke.

“Yes, it was death! I died – and woke up. Yes, death is an awakening!” And all at once it grew light in his soul and the veil that had till then concealed the unknown was lifted from his spiritual vision. He felt as if powers till then confined within him had been liberated, and that strange lightness did not leave him. (book XII, chapter 4, pages 870-871)
Through this dream Prince Andrew accepts his imminent death and he discovers that it is nothing to be feared. Although he initially struggles against the otherworldly force, all his efforts could not stop the inescapable and in the end he succumbs, stricken with terror at the true face of death: the empty yawning void. Upon awakening from this dream, however, he understands that death is not something to be feared like that horrid phantasm in his mind, gliding silently through a broken door, but is like waking from a deep and restful sleep. Accepting his death, Prince Andrew’s soul is in a state of spiritual tranquility, allowing him to pass his last days in peace.

His last days and hours passed in an ordinary and simple way.

When the last convulsions of the body, which the spirit was leaving, occurred, Princess Mary and Natasha were present.

“Is it over?” said Princess Mary when his body had for a few minutes lain motionless, growing cold before them. Natasha went up, looked at the dead eyes, and hastened to close them. She closed them but did not kiss them, but clung to that which reminded her most nearly of him – his body. (book XII, chapter 4, page 871)

Is it over? Prince Andrew’s essence is clearly gone, and the only thing is an empty shell. But the question, the answer of which is known only by those who have passed beyond the veil of death, remains, and always will remain…

“Where has he gone? Where is he now?...” (book XI, chapter 4, page 871)
Bibliography

Death, more than life, would become the constant in our lives. The dissection of the human body had fascinated me since I was seven years old. I had some idea back then that I might want to become a doctor. At the time my Agong had just been diagnosed with a brain tumor, and my mother took my younger sister and me back to Taiwan for the summer to be with him. She is also a fine writer as FINAL EXAM - A SURGEON’S REFLECTIONS ON MORTALITY proves so well. She writes with both passion and humility about the contradiction she sees in the field of medicine: that doctors, who witness death so often that it should almost become routine essentially are no better at dealing with the end of life than their patients are. Originally published: New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007. Includes bibliographical references (pages 223-268). A brilliant young transplant surgeon brings moral intensity and narrative drama to the most powerful and vexing questions of medicine and the human condition. When Chen began medical school, she dreamed of saving lives--what she did not count on was how much death would be a part of her work. Almost immediately, Chen found herself wrestling with medicine's most profound paradox, that a profession premised on caring for the ill also systematically depersonalizes dying. Theological Reflection on Death - Free download as Word Doc (.doc / .docx), PDF File (.pdf), Text File (.txt) or read online for free. Franciscan Theological Essay/Reflections. The TRANSFORMATION FROM FEAR TO HOPE in the life of Francis of Assisi as he approached death provides us with a MODEL FOR CHRISTIAN LIVING in an increasingly secular, violent, and pessimistic world. In welcoming death as our sister, we might serve as beacons of the Christian hope of new life and live the prophetic call of the Gospel.