



COMPOSING A SYMPHONY OF PHILOSOPHY AND LITERATURE: DOMINIC SCOTT ON TOLSTOY AND PLATONIC INSPIRATION

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Abstract

This review examines Dominic Scott's *Leo Tolstoy and Platonic Inspiration*, a concise interdisciplinary study of the affinities between Platonic philosophy and Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*. Distinguishing philosophical affinity from causal influence, Scott traces three recurrent Platonic themes—ascend from the mundane toward the eternal, moral catharsis, and recollection—and shows how these themes acquire experiential and literary form in the spiritual journeys of Andrei Bolkonsky, Pierre Bezukhov, and Konstantin Levin. Particular attention is given to Andrei's oscillation between this-worldly and other-worldly orientations, Pierre's transformation in captivity, and the resonances between Levin's epiphany and Plato's *Phaedrus*. Scott's methodological restraint enables a reciprocal illumination of ancient philosophy and literary experience: Platonic concepts disclose structures of spiritual transformation in Tolstoy, while Tolstoy gives experiential depth to dimensions of Platonism that philosophical argument alone can leave abstract. The questions that emerge—concerning Tolstoy's anti-intellectualism, Christian mediation, his later works, and the relation between Platonic purification and other accounts of catharsis—are signs of the richness of the field his study has opened and invitations to further inquiry. Ultimately, Scott brings Plato and Tolstoy into a rare and illuminating conversation about the difficulty of turning a human life toward truth, goodness, and beauty.

Keywords

Dominic Scott; Leo Tolstoy; Plato; Platonic reception; philosophy and literature; catharsis; recollection

1. Introduction

The question of how philosophical ideas migrate into literary practice is notoriously difficult to answer with precision. Influence—that elusive causal relation—can be direct or indirect, conscious or unconscious, mediated by a hundred intervening authors or refracted through an author's own life experience. In *Leo Tolstoy and Platonic Inspiration*, Dominic Scott (Professor of Philosophy at Oxford) approaches this difficult terrain with admirable clarity, care, and intellectual honesty. His aim is not to settle the historical question of exactly which Platonic passages Tolstoy read and how he incorporated them, but rather to exhibit “the points where there are important affinities or parallels between Tolstoy and Plato” (p. 2) in two of the novelist's greatest works, *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*.

Scott is explicit about this methodological circumscription. He distinguishes sharply between affinity (similarity of theme or idea) and influence (a causal relation requiring direct textual incorporation). While acknowledging that Tolstoy's deep and sustained engagement with Plato makes coincidence highly unlikely, Scott wisely refrains from the “formidable task” (p. 2) of tracing the exact channels of transmission. Instead, he offers a philosophically rigorous demonstration that certain pivotal scenes in Tolstoy's fiction function as Platonic episodes, regardless of whether Tolstoy consciously intended them as such.

The result is a concise yet richly textured study that will reward readers from both camps: those interested in the Platonic tradition will find a vivid literary instantiation of themes they know in abstract form; those interested

in Tolstoy will gain a fresh interpretive lens for understanding the spiritual journeys of Andrei Bolkonsky, Pierre Bezukhov, and Konstantin Levin.

1.1 The Argumentative Architecture

Scott organises his study around three central Platonic themes: the ascent from the mundane to the eternal (represented most famously by the cave allegory), the catharsis or purification of the soul from bodily passions and worldly ambitions, and the theory of recollection (anamnēsis). His contention is that these themes, while present in numerous Platonic dialogues (*Republic*, *Phaedo*, *Symposium*, *Phaedrus*), find their most potent literary expression in specific epiphanic moments in Tolstoy's major novels.

After a brief introduction (Section 1) and a survey of Tolstoy's lifelong engagement with Plato (Section 2)—from his youthful reading of the *Symposium* and *Phaedo*, through his 1870 decision to learn Greek, to his late abridged translation of the *Phaedo*—Scott provides a lucid overview of the Platonic background (Section 3). This section is exemplary in its accessibility, distilling complex doctrines into clear prose without sacrificing philosophical precision. Scott devotes particular attention to catharsis, which he notes is more dispersed across Plato's texts and less conspicuous than the other two themes (p. 6), and traces its intellectual and moral dimensions across the four dialogues.

The heart of the study consists of detailed readings of the Platonic affinities in *War and Peace* (Section 4) and *Anna Karenina* (Section 5), culminating in a brief envoi (Section 6) that reflects on Tolstoy's own "madness" for Greek and the enduring power of his engagement with the ancient world.

1.2 War and Peace: Andrei and Pierre

Scott's treatment of Prince Andrei Bolkonsky is one of the book's most sustained analyses, tracing a sequence of epiphanic moments and the different Platonic resonances they acquire across his narrative.

The Austerlitz Sky (I iii 16). Andrei's wounding and subsequent vision of the "lofty, infinite sky" is read against *Republic* VI 486a–b, where Socrates describes the philosopher's megaloprepeia—"high-mindedness" that makes human life and death seem unimportant. Scott carefully notes that Andrei's response oscillates between two poles: a life-affirming impulse (he wishes to be saved, to re-enter the world) and an other-worldly transcendence (only the sky matters; everything else is deception). This oscillation, Scott argues, tracks a well-known interpretive distinction within Platonism itself—between the "this-worldly" reading (where the Forms illuminate mundane reality) and the "other-worldly" reading (where the physical world is essentially "trash"). Scott argues that this oscillation persists through Andrei's narrative until it is resolved at his death in favour of the other-worldly orientation.

The Borodino Vision (III ii 24, 769). Here Scott finds a strong allusion to the cave allegory. Andrei sees his former preoccupations—glory, love, patriotism—as "crudely daubed figures" in a magic lantern, now exposed in cold, white light. Yet Scott shrewdly observes that this is a parody of Plato's allegory rather than a tribute: Andrei exits the cave only to confront death and nothingness, not the Forms. There is no compensating vision of beauty to offset the nihilism (pp. 30–31).

Andrei's Death (IV i 14–16). The final phase returns to the other-worldly Platonism of Austerlitz, but now with explicit echoes of the *Phaedo*. Scott notes the striking parallels: Andrei's indifference to his son, wife, and sister (reminiscent of Socrates dismissing Xanthippe); his calm and dignified death; the physical convulsion; the open eyes; and the final closing of the eyes by a loved one. The cumulative evidence leads Scott to conclude that "there seems little doubt" that Tolstoy modelled Andrei's death on the closing pages of the *Phaedo* (p. 34).

Pierre and Platon Karataev. Pierre's transformation during captivity is interpreted through the lens of catharsis. Scott is cautious about treating Karataev as a straightforwardly Platonic figure: the name alone need not signal the philosopher, and other religious and intellectual associations remain in play. The Platonic dimension becomes clearer, he argues, in the wider context of Karataev's effect on Pierre. The most striking moment comes when Pierre, confronted by a French sentry, laughs at the thought that his "immortal soul" could be imprisoned: "Ha, ha, ha! ... They've caught me and locked me up. Who? Me? Me—my immortal soul!" (IV ii 14, 1020). Scott compares this to Socrates' rare laughter in the *Phaedo* (84d, 115c) at the thought that his body could be mistaken for his soul.

Pierre's eventual transformation—learning to see "the great, the eternal, and the infinite in everything" (IV iv 12, 1104)—represents a this-worldly Platonism that contrasts sharply with Andrei's other-worldly resolution.

1.3 Anna Karenina: Levin and the Phaedrus

Scott's analysis of the end of *Anna Karenina* is among the study's most illuminating contributions. Levin's crisis and resolution in Part VIII are read as a sustained engagement with the *Phaedrus*—not only in doctrine but in literary detail.

The doctrinal centre is a Christianised version of Platonic recollection. When Levin hears the peasant Theodore speak of a virtuous elder named Platon, he experiences an epiphany in which truths that had been "locked

up” in his soul suddenly break loose (VIII 11, 936). Levin realises: “I have discovered nothing. I have only perceived what it is that I know” (VIII 12, 938). Scott connects this to Augustine’s adaptation of anamnēsis in the

Confessions, where truths lie “scattered and neglected” in the mind and must be “gathered from their dispersed state” (p. 54).

Even more striking are Scott’s nine points of contact between Levin’s epiphany and the *Phaedrus*: the name “Platon”; the theme of inspiration or epiphany; the connection between the human and the divine; recollection or learning from within; the heat of the day; the shade of a tree; reclining on lush grass; attention to local insect life; and the reference to “the good horse” (echoing the better horse of the chariot allegory). Scott notes that any one parallel might be coincidental, but argues that, taken as an ensemble, they make a strong case for Tolstoy’s deliberate use of the dialogue.

This reading also resolves a potential paradox: why does Levin find Plato’s own works unhelpful (VIII 9, 928) if his epiphany is so thoroughly Platonic? Scott’s answer turns on Tolstoy’s contrast between faith and reason: the *Phaedrus*, with its account of philosophical madness and divine inspiration, is especially well suited to the way Tolstoy presents Levin’s epiphany. The passage is not an argument for Platonism but an experience of Platonic inspiration, which is precisely what the *Phaedrus* describes but rarely enacts.

2. Critical Assessment

2.1 Methodological Strengths

Scott’s methodological humility is a notable strength. By focusing on affinities rather than influence, he avoids the pitfalls of source-hunting that plague so much reception scholarship. He does not claim to have found the “key” to Tolstoy’s spiritual vision; rather, he illuminates a persistent and significant strand within it. This approach allows him to include parallels that might otherwise be dismissed as coincidental (e.g., the literary echoes of the *Phaedrus* setting) and to explore them with appropriate tentativeness.

The decision to interpret Tolstoy’s epiphanies through the lens of the emotional dimension of Platonism is also astute. Scott notes that Plato tells us about the powerful effects of the ascent but rarely shows us what it would feel like (p. 3). Tolstoy, by contrast, is a master of rendering psychological transformation from the inside. The study thus offers a genuine reciprocal illumination: Plato provides the conceptual framework; Tolstoy provides the experiential content.

2.2 The “Two Platonisms” Distinction

One of the most suggestive frameworks in Scott’s discussion is the distinction between two ways of understanding the relation between the mundane and the divine in Plato: a this-worldly orientation, in which the mundane world can be valued as approximating the ideal, and an other-worldly orientation, in which the physical world is radically devalued in favour of escape to the divine order. This distinction, which Scott traces to Lovejoy’s *The Great Chain of Being*, proves remarkably productive.

In Scott’s reading, Andrei’s long oscillation is finally resolved in an other-worldly direction: his death is read through the *Phaedo*, with its image of release from the body and its detachment from mortal concerns. Pierre, by contrast, reaches a this-worldly resolution: he learns to see “the great, the eternal, and the infinite in everything”, and returns to familiar human relationships with a transformed vision. Levin likewise comes down from the heightened moment of his epiphany and returns to ordinary family life, while retaining the meaning that has released him from existential despair.

However, Scott’s presentation of this distinction raises a question: is this a genuine feature of Plato’s thought, or a feature of the reception tradition that Tolstoy inherited (including the Christian Platonism mediated by Augustine and the mystics)? Scott himself presents the distinction as a longstanding interpretive tension within Plato, associating its poles especially with the *Phaedo* and the *Timaeus* and finding the *Republic* capable of reflecting both. Yet the prominence of this distinction in Scott’s readings also invites a further question about its explanatory scope. One might ask whether Andrei’s oscillating moods—his love for Natasha, his fear of death—are best understood not by choosing between philosophical structure and psychological realism, but by attending to the difficulty of living through both. Scott’s philosophical framing is highly illuminating; precisely for that reason, it opens a larger question central to Tolstoy: how an orientation toward transcendence is borne, resisted, and transformed within the fragile texture of human attachment and mortality.

2.3 The “Anti-Intellectualism” Puzzle

One of the most intriguing questions to emerge from Scott’s discussion concerns a deeper tension in Tolstoy’s relationship to Plato: the puzzle of Tolstoy’s anti-intellectualism. Tolstoy repeatedly expressed an antipathy to intellectualism and “professors”, praising Plato precisely because his philosophy did not “adhere to the scientific method” and, as Scott puts it, held fast to our “primitive and simplest concepts” (pp. 4–5). The tension is striking: Tolstoy’s reverence for Plato seems to coexist with a profound unease about the very forms of intellectual mastery with which philosophy is so often associated. Scott’s discussion allows this difficulty to remain visible rather than reducing it to a simple opposition between reason and faith.

Scott's resolution of the apparent Levin paradox—Plato proves unhelpful when Levin seeks an intellectual solution, yet the eventual epiphany bears striking Platonic affinities—is illuminating and, in its very success, brings

a further question into view. If the *Phaedrus* is especially important to Tolstoy because it gives literary and philosophical form to “divine madness” and inspiration rather than to discursive proof alone, how should we understand Tolstoy's relation to the rest of Plato's corpus? Might Tolstoy have been especially receptive to those dialogues that resonated with his suspicion of rationalistic intellectualism? This, in turn, invites us to ask whether Tolstoy's “Plato” might be understood as a distinctive reception—a Plato encountered through Schopenhauer, Rousseau, Christianity, and Tolstoy's own spiritual struggles, rather than simply as a direct engagement with the historical Plato. Scott's discussion points toward this possibility with admirable restraint, leaving open a particularly fruitful direction for further exploration.

2.4 What About Resurrection and the Later Works?

Scott explicitly limits his study to *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, noting that the epiphanies in later works (e.g., *Resurrection*, the late novellas) are “more overtly Christian, more like Paul's experience on the road to Damascus than a Platonic ascent” (p. 1). This carefully judged delimitation leaves open a moving and difficult question: whether the Platonic strand diminishes in Tolstoy's later thought, or whether it survives within an increasingly explicit Christian vocabulary. Given Tolstoy's continued engagement with Plato into his final years—he published an abridged translation of the *Phaedo* in the last decade of his life—the relation between these strands invites further study not merely as a problem of intellectual influence, but as part of Tolstoy's lifelong struggle to give form to questions of suffering, faith, death, and the good life. Scott's deliberately focused account makes this further horizon visible without pretending to close it.

3. Contribution to the Field

3.1 Interdisciplinary Bridge-Building

One of Scott's most important achievements is to build a bridge between ancient philosophy and literary studies that is genuinely two-way. For Plato scholars, the study offers a vivid demonstration of the emotional power of Platonism—a dimension that is often obscured by the analytic focus on arguments and doctrines. For Tolstoy scholars, it provides a new interpretive framework for understanding the spiritual journeys of his major characters, one that is grounded in textual evidence and philosophical sophistication rather than vague generalities about “Platonic love” or “soul-making”.

The study also contributes to the growing literature on Platonic reception in literature. While much work has been done on Dante, Milton, and the Romantics, the nineteenth-century Russian novel remains underexplored in this context. Scott's careful readings open up new avenues for research: what other Platonic motifs appear in Tolstoy's work? Are there parallels in Dostoevsky or Turgenev? The study is a model of how such research might proceed—with attention to both philosophical content and literary form.

3.2 The Educational and Aesthetic Dimension

These scenes invite an understanding of education as *periagogê*: the turning of the soul is triggered not by abstract argument alone, but by encounters that disrupt settled habits and awaken what is already latent within the soul.

Scott's analysis of Levin's epiphany is particularly valuable here because it shows how Tolstoy uses the literary device of recollection to dramatise the Platonic conviction that genuine knowledge comes from within. The peasant's mention of “Platon” is not a source of new information but a catalyst for gathering truths that are already “locked up” in Levin's soul. This is a literary enactment of the Augustinian-Platonic idea that education is the “gathering” of what is scattered—an idea that has profound implications for how we think about teaching and learning.

3.3 Open Questions and Future Possibilities

The very clarity of Scott's methodological focus also brings into view a number of questions that may reward further exploration. His decision to eschew detailed source criticism naturally leaves open historical questions about which translations of Plato Tolstoy read, how he read them, and what his annotations or marginalia might reveal. These questions lie beyond the study's deliberately defined scope. Yet precisely because Scott has shown how much can be learned from affinities treated with philosophical care, the historical channels of transmission emerge as another path by which future scholarship might deepen the conversation he has begun.

Scott's selection of Platonic themes also suggests how much further this line of inquiry might eventually extend. Scott himself notes a possible connection between Karataev's circularity and the *Timaeus*, while also stressing that the parallel cannot be certain; elsewhere, his discussion of Plato's religious thought points naturally toward the *Laws* and other dialogues in which the relation between the soul and the divine is central. Such possibilities do not detract from Scott's carefully defined focus. Rather, they testify to the generative power of a

study that, by attending closely to a few themes, allows a wider landscape of philosophical and literary questions to come into view.

Scott's treatment of catharsis opens another particularly suggestive avenue for comparison with the Aristotelian tradition. In Scott's account of the *Phaedrus*, recollection and moral purification are closely intertwined: as knowledge re-emerges, the soul's wings begin to regrow, while the cathartic struggle against harmful desire is protracted, conflict-ridden, and painful. Scott's discussion of such moments in Tolstoy—Andrei's tears at Natasha's singing, for example, or Levin's sobbing—invites us to dwell on the cost as well as the illumination of spiritual transformation. A future dialogue between Platonic purification, Aristotelian catharsis, and Tolstoyan psychological transformation might therefore ask not only how the soul turns, but what such turning asks a human being to endure. Here, perhaps, philosophy and literature come especially close: philosophy gives form to the movement of the soul, while literature preserves the tears, attachments, losses, and hopes through which that movement is lived.

Dominic Scott's *Leo Tolstoy and Platonic Inspiration* is a model of what interdisciplinary philosophical criticism can achieve. It is concise, lucid, and meticulously argued, yet alive to the literary textures of the works it discusses. Its particular grace lies in the care with which Scott allows Plato and Tolstoy to illuminate one another without reducing either to the other. He shows how the Platonic themes of ascent, recollection, and catharsis resonate with Tolstoy's portrayal of human transformation—not as a rigid allegory but as a living, breathing dimension of his art.

The study will be of interest to a wide readership. For Plato scholars, it offers a fresh perspective on the emotional and experiential dimensions of Platonic philosophy. For Tolstoy scholars, it provides a rigorous philosophical framework for understanding the spiritual journeys that are central to his fiction. For students of philosophy and literature, it exemplifies how the two disciplines can illuminate each other without sacrificing the integrity of either.

The questions that emerge—concerning the historical channels of influence, other dimensions of the Platonic tradition, and the possible dialogue between Platonic and Aristotelian accounts of catharsis—are signs of the richness of the field Scott's study has opened and invitations to further inquiry. They invite further work precisely because Scott accomplishes his own task with such elegance and insight. Perhaps the finest tribute to such a study is to remain patiently with the difficulties it has made newly visible, resisting the temptation to make easy what Plato and Tolstoy themselves found so difficult to understand and to live.

The ultimate effect of the book is to remind us that philosophy is not only an abstract pursuit but a way of life—a way of turning the soul toward what is true, good, and beautiful. Scott's readings allow us to feel something of the difficulty, patience, and courage such a turning may require. In Tolstoy, illumination does not abolish suffering, attachment, uncertainty, or the ordinary burdens of life; it must somehow be lived through them. And Plato, in Tolstoy's hands, comes to life not as a dusty relic of antiquity but as a demanding and enduring companion in the search for how one ought to live.

This is a study that invites us to read both Tolstoy and Plato anew. More quietly, it also reminds us why they remain so difficult to leave behind: each asks, in a different voice, how a human life might become answerable to truth, goodness, and beauty without ceasing to be fully human. Scott has brought those voices into a rare and illuminating conversation, and his study deserves a wide and appreciative audience.

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