Tolstoy Remembered

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Tolstoy Remembered

Review of Tatyana Tolstoy, *Tolstoy Remembered*, trans. Derek Coltman (London, 1977: Michael Joseph), *New Review* 5 no. 2 (Autumn 1978), 3–7

Tatyana Tolstoy with her father at Yasnaya Polyana, 1910, the year of his death, by Vladimir Grigor'evich Chertkov

NO WRITER'S LIFE – perhaps no life (unless it be Napoleon's) – is so amply documented as that of Leo Tolstoy. The primary material alone is vast: there is his own correspondence, which grew to enormous dimensions as he became a figure of world fame; there are his diaries, 'open' and 'secret', and his confessional and autobiographical writings; the diaries of his wife, the notes and

memoirs of his eldest daughter and of his assistant Bulgakov, the detailed memoirs of his five children, his physician, his secretaries, his immediate disciples, of Maxim Gorky; the reminiscences of Chekhov and other friends and fellow writers; and, finally, the detailed accounts of conversations and impressions left by the continuous stream of visitors and pilgrims, wanted and unwanted, none of whom – that is one's immediate impression – ever failed to record and publish their experiences.

'There are many men in the world,' he said when he was dying: 'why then all this attention to Leo Tolstoy?' He did, of course, know the answer to this question, or thought he knew it: the dramatic renunciation of his old life by a man of genius, the condemnation of an achievement acclaimed by the entire world, was designed to capture its attention, and succeeded. But the tensions and contradictions in his life and character played their own part in creating a tantalising problem for his critics and biographers. Dr Aileen Kelly rightly pointed out in a recent essay[1] that the usual account of his life is too simple a story – according to which during the first half of his creative life he was a liberal landowner and a writer of genius, intent upon his household, the education of peasants and his art, and then, for the remaining thirty years, burnt all that he had loved, became a fanatical moral preacher, a 'terrible simplifier',[2] calling on men to renounce the corrupt fruits of Western civilisation and mould their lives by the simple rules of the Gospel of Christ.

Tolstoy's scepticism about the West begins much earlier, in *The Cossacks*, in the attacks on Western schoolmasters and in the educational tracts of the 1860s; in the attitude to Napoleon, to the German military strategists and all the other masters of the vaunted wisdom of the West – science, materialism, rational planning – mocked so savagely in *War and Peace*. His erstwhile friend Turgenev is despised for his liberal Western inclinations, the radical critic Belinsky bores him stiff, he despises Lenin's hero, the socialist **[4]** Chernyshevsky, for his philistine and dreary propaganda (just as he later dismisses his admirer Shaw as a shallow rhetorician), one of his closest friends is the reactionary landowner, the lyrical poet Fet: to

[1] 'Tolstoy in Doubt', *New York Review of Books*, 29 June 1978, 22–6.

[2] 'Terribles simplificateurs' is a phrase coined by Jacob Burckhardt in a letter of 24 July 1889 to Friedrich von Preen.

his dying day he dislikes 'progressives' of all brands, and well after his conversion he expresses, again and again, his great admiration for the genius of Maupassant, recommended to him by Turgenev, despite disapproval for his 'dirty' and cynical stories – 'I am looking forward to an immense pleasure', he said a few weeks before his death to his secretary Bulgakov, 'I am going to read Maupassant.'

He loves Chekhov both as a man and as a writer (except for his plays, which he declares to be even worse than Shakespeare's),` despite his apparent failure to provide any moral message. While engaged on his didactic parables and stories, he writes *Hadji Murat*, an unconcealed celebration of nature, instinct, violent passion, a work of pure art which caused perplexity to those who asked the Master what lessons it was intended to convey, but received no satisfactory answer. It is the conflicts, the agonising contradictions between Tolstoy's instinctive feelings and desires, and his convictions, between his passions, gifts, needs, tastes, and his doctrines and ideals, between reality as he saw it with his unerring eye, and what he wished to believe it to be – it was these increasingly acute tensions which he experiences long before the 'conversion', the disciples, the open declaration of war on Church and state that troubled and fascinated his contemporaries, and does so still. It is because Tolstoy is so often bitterly at odds with the demands of his own genius, sometimes bending it painfully to his will, at other times overpowered by it and the strength of its incomparable vision, that every new fragment of information adds something to our understanding of a life and an unceasing inner conflict, both personal and artistic, which will never be caught in the butterfly nets of our critical categories, least of all those of Dr Leavis, whose major effort to improve on Arnold's essay on *Anna Karenina* ended in an equally honourable but far less interesting failure. Every piece of primary evidence throws new lights on some aspect of Tolstoy's mind and character. This collection of reminiscences is, therefore, to be welcomed warmly.

Tolstoy's children loved their father with a love which, according to Chekhov, approached fanaticism. Tatyana, his second child and eldest daughter, was born in 1864 and lived with her parents in Yasnaya Polyana and Moscow until she married a country neighbour, Michael Sukhotin, in 1899. She was devoted to her father and accepted uncritically his social and moral views; he loved and trusted her, and they remained close to each other until the end of

his life. Her husband died in 1914. In 1925 she and her daughter, also called Tatyana, Tolstoy's favourite grandchild, emigrated to France. The younger Tatyana married Leonardo Albertini, an eminent Italian liberal, and settled in Rome, where her mother died in 1950. A quarter of a century later Tatyana Albertini permitted her mother's hitherto unpublished memoirs of her childhood and adolescence, written in Russian and dedicated to her, to appear in a French translation. One year later, in 1976, the original text, well edited and annotated, came out in Moscow. These memoirs, translated from the French with some additional material mostly published earlier, are now available in English.

[5] Tatyana's account of her childhood in Yasnaya Polyana is an idyll. These are the years of *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, when despite occasional moments of mutual irritation between husband and wife, and the deep grief caused by children's illnesses and deaths, the entire household lived in a state of family happiness. The author's description of life in a small country house is vivid and filled with love for all that surrounded her: parents, brothers, sisters, aunts, cousins, dogs, horses, delightful neighbours, picnics, parties; but the centre of it all is the English nursery governess, kind, earnest Hannah Tracey (whom she calls Tersey), a girl in her early twenties whom she loves and obeys and idolises. There are the pleasures of the long journeys to Tolstoy's estate near Samara to drink fermented mare's milk and live in primitive huts among the Moslem nomads whose company delighted her father, the vivid descriptions of horse races, a savage Tatar child, the life of the steppes. Then Hannah leaves her for the Caucasus (where she ended up marrying a Georgian prince) and Tatyana suffers years of agonies of loneliness and self-lacerating misery which she commits to her diary (not, alas, translated yet).[3]

The scene is, of course, dominated by her father, omniscient, good, infinitely perceptive, undeceivable, kind, life-giving, often infectiously gay, fond of games, of acting, of every country sport, all in all a vision of perfection. There is her mother, perpetually occupied with domestic tasks, with childbearing and rearing (her first child was born when she was nineteen, the thirteenth twenty-five years later), with management of the servants, of the estate, with

[3] *The Tolstoy Home: Diaries of Tatiana Sukhotin-Tolstoy*, trans. Alec Brown (London, 1950: Harvill), stops in 1911.

constant hospitality to numerous relations, friends, neighbours, and the unending procession of visitors (wanted and unwanted) who wished to meet the great writer, as well as ‘holy’ wanderers and peasants seeking help; and every evening the daily task of copying and recopying her husband’s drafts in her clear, round hand, until her daughters took this task over.

Despite his unbending character and, at times, arbitrary and despotic behaviour, Tolstoy did not crush or distort the lives of his children as great and powerful men are often apt to do; his five sons and three daughters who reached adulthood developed in various directions naturally and freely. The great rift which opened between their parents found them on opposite sides. Tatyana, who loved both, suffered greatly. She tried to salve the wounds which they inflicted on each other; Bulgakov, one of Tolstoy’s last secretaries, says that she alone managed to lift the gloom created by her father’s mounting disgust and indignation with his own and his family’s form of life and by her mother’s feeling of humiliation, outrage and violent jealousy of Tolstoy’s new friends and disciples. Tatyana’s visits to Yasnaya brought relief: especially when she took her father off to her own neighbouring estate.

In her account of the final breach and Tolstoy’s flight and death (published in French in 1928 and again in 1960, and translated in this volume), she defends her mother from what seem to her unjustified and intemperate attacks by her brothers Andrew and Leo, by Tolstoy’s disciple Chertkov, the ruthless organiser of the Tolstoyan sect whom the Countess rightly saw as her worst enemy, and by others who regarded her as a narrow, stubborn and deeply conventional woman, bounded by the ideas and habits of her milieu, who did not begin to understand the man of moral genius to whom she was married, and caused him terrible, gratuitous suffering and despair. Her daughter describes her as a devoted, generous, open-hearted wife and mother, who, after failing to accept her husband’s new faith, as she herself and her **[6]** sister Alexandra had accepted it, ‘lost her way’, and inflicted untold pain on them all.

But there is a better case to be made for her. She fought desperately for sheer moral and mental survival; nor did she want her name to be unjustly blackened after her death, as she knew it would be by Chertkov and others. Tolstoy did not easily brook equals; of course Sofia Andreevna could have tried to turn herself into a dedicated worshipper and a Tolstoyan, and become a kind of

saint of the movement: she was merely too honest and too human to do this. Her daughter shows far more sympathy for her predicament than her children Leo or Alexandra, but even she will not allow that her mother's views were tenable by a rational human being: yet they were, after all, shared by the majority of Tolstoy's most distinguished and progressive contemporaries. The Countess sought only to defend the interests of her family against the fanatical egalitarians who wished, in the name of Christ's gospel, to give up Tolstoy's property and royalties, whatever the material consequences to her children and grandchildren; however this attitude is judged, it was not insane or criminal; the Countess felt pressed against a wall. To act in self-defence is a human right, even if it is not always intelligible to those who are intent on their own salvation and that of others by the one and only path which seems to them to lead to it. By a tragic psychological vicissitude, Tolstoy's growing feeling of misery and suffocation seems to have deprived him of that insight into the lives of others, their indestructible variety, and the nature and justification of the differences between men, which had once possessed and communicated as no one had done before him. 'I could not *simplify* myself,'[4] says the anti-hero of Turgenev's last novel before committing suicide. With increasing intensity and desperation Tolstoy tried to do precisely this during the last years of his life. A final debacle, it seems to me, was not avoidable.

His daughter Tatyana's account of her life with her parents, despite her wish to justify all that her father did and was, is the most objective and understanding that exists. The editor has added to it a collection of short anecdotal recollections of Tolstoy called 'Flashes of Memory', which she contributed to a French newspaper some years ago. They add little to what is already known: but one or two of them, even though they have all been recorded elsewhere, are perhaps worth quoting.

Tolstoy, while finishing *Resurrection*, wondered whether he might not marry Katyusha Maslova to Nekhlyudov, but 'discovered' that this could not be done. He told his friends that Pushkin one day told an acquaintance, who repeated it to Tolstoy, 'Did you know that my Tatyana rejected Onegin? I never expected that of her!' (the

[4] In *Virgin Soil* (1877), chapter 37, Aleksey Dmitrievich Nezhdanov writes this in a letter to his children. I. S. Turgenev, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem* (Moscow/Leningrad, 1960–8), *Sochineniya* xii 288. See also RT2 335, 341, B 421.

translation is my own). Or again: when during the Russo–Japanese war of 1904–5, Tolstoy learned that Port Arthur had been surrendered to the Japanese, he declared 'This would never have happened in my time.' 'What would have been done?' asked a disciple. 'They would have blown it up, not handed it to the enemy.' 'What, and killed the people inside?' 'If you are a soldier,' said Tolstoy, 'you have a job to do and you do it.' This is the voice of the author of 'Sevastopol in May', of the creator of Nikolay Rostov or Captain Tushin at Borodino, not of the author of 'What, Then, Shall We Do?' or the pacifist tracts. Finally, this: 'I cannot help wondering', said Tolstoy one day, 'whether it is not an inescapable law of nature that the things we most try to avoid are precisely those that attract us most'; this is surely autobiographical. These glimpses are accompanied by some excellent photographs of Tolstoy and his family and friends; none, however, [7] seems to be as moving or expressive as that of Tatyana Tolstoy in deep old age in Rome: the last illustration in the Soviet edition of her memories published in 1976.

To return to the memoirs. They were composed in exile, in France, half a century after the events which they record. The author

reinforces her memory with quotations from published letters and reminiscences, her own and her brothers', and they are in consequence less intimate than her diaries, published earlier and available in English. But she writes with such simplicity and natural dignity, and what I can only describe as moral charm, with so much heart and spontaneous feeling, so clearly and so beautifully, that to read her is pure pleasure. I am, I must own, speaking of the Russian original where it is available. The English version – a retranslation from the French translation – is, in every sense, a different story. The writing is too often clumsy or stilted or lifeless; marred by solecisms and vulgarisms which go ill with the author's deeply civilised, pure and vivid prose; sometimes the rendering is simply incorrect. Since I have not seen the French version I cannot tell whether or how far it is itself at fault.

The result is depressing. Let me illustrate: 'Loable and dear Sonya' (214) is typical translator's jargon for 'Dear, sweet Sonya': 'Chertkov, magpie that he is' (236) is not the same as Tolstoy's own 'Chertkov is a collector', nor is 'manorial estate' (234) identical with a 'royal domain', nor is the description of Chertkov as 'kingpin of my father's life' (218) a satisfactory equivalent of 'mainspring of my father's work'; nor does 'there was no leaving without a scene' mean the same as the translator's 'scene, hysterical attack – and then no leaving' (238); and there is a good deal of this kind of thing. This is mostly familiar translator's English; but 'She had searched for [peace] everywhere that it was not to be found' (228) is not English at all.[5] The additions of a final vowel in 'tulupa' (184) and *sarafanas* (217) are small errors: but if a writer on Scotland referred to 'kiltas' and 'tartanas' it would undermine confidence; *tyubeteikas*, which Tatars wore, might have been 'baggy trousers' (107), but they do not happen to be; they are their habitual round skullcaps.

There is plenty more of this, but worse is still to come. Tolstoy's daughter ends her memoir with the famous last sentence of *Sevastopol in May*, in which the author says that the only hero of his book is the truth; the translation substitutes 'idol' for 'hero' (242), which distorts the sense in a peculiarly hideous fashion. Worst of all, in the celebrated and terrible letter in which his wife tells Tolstoy 'If you go, since I cannot live without you, I shall kill myself', the translation says, 'I shall kill you' (211). This may be a mere slip in

[5] [Seems OK to the webmaster.]

the French or English version: but so much abuse has been poured upon the unfortunate Countess that the unwary reader may all too easily believe that she openly threatened to murder her husband rather than commit suicide (which, indeed, she attempted to do).

In dealing with Russian topics, knowledge of French is clearly not enough. The charming and distinguished Signora Albertini, to whom all students of Tolstoy must be grateful, has not been well served by her English publisher, a poor return for her own touching and beautifully written memoir of her mother, or, indeed, Professor Bayley's characteristically perceptive, sensitive and exhilarating introduction. Still, in spite of the shortcomings of the translation (and the wicked absence of an index),[6] anyone for whom Tolstoy's life and personality, or, for that matter, the life of civilised Russian gentry in the later nineteenth century, are a source of fascination or even curiosity, will find this book authentic, informative, fresh, touching, and, for the most part, enjoyable.

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[6] [The US edition (New York etc., 1977: McGraw-Hill) does have an index, but the pagination is different and the contents are in a different order.]