

*Russkie mysliteli o Tolstom* [*Russian Thinkers on Tolstoy*]. Edited by Sergei Romanov. Tula: "Iasnaia Poliana" Publishers, 2002. 672 pp.

*Russian Thinkers on Lev Tolstoy*, released on the eve of the 175-year Tolstoy jubilee, is an extraordinary collection of articles by twenty-eight authors beginning with archimandrite Antonii Khrapovitskii—his "Conversations" about Tolstoy appeared in *Tserkovnye vedomosti* in 1888—and ending with Fedor Stepun's "The Religious Tragedy of Lev Tolstoy" first published in Munich, 1961. The pieces are primarily by Russian philosopher-émigrés whom we have never known well, being somewhat wary of them.

The impression they make is powerful and overall very fine. Sergei Romanov prepared and annotated the book extremely well, but did not provide an introductory essay. This gives us the right (having credited the modesty of the compiler) to speak a little of some general questions connected with the materials.

In the first place we note that the strongest, most penetrating and brightest minds of Russia found it imperative to check their thoughts against those of Lev Tolstoy, and to write about him. Occasions arose to do this: the eightieth birthday of the writer, his "departure" and death, the hundred year anniversary of his birth, and fifty years after his death. What is most striking and gratifying about these essays is the reverence, the almost boundless love for the light, radiant spirit of Tolstoy. The words *genius* and *great* are used often all throughout the pages of the book, but not to the exclusion, of course, of polemics, for the authors are not only Orthodox believers but also defenders of the Church.

They remark upon the contradictions in Tolstoy—logical and historical—and try to explain them. But since when are we so afraid of contradictions? As Lev Shestov justly notes (one of his early works from 1909 appears in the book, titled paradoxically "The Destroyer and Creator of Worlds"): "... Tolstoyan contradictions, like the contradictions of any broad and restless soul, are not subject to any ultimate resolution" (175).

Digressing from the book, I recall that V. I. Lenin wrote on Tolstoy's contradictions more than anyone. As has come to light in the lapse of almost 100 years, the noted contradictions in his acutely political, Party articles are to a much larger degree contradictions of the Russian Revolution itself, its ideology, than in any real sense of the worldview and creations of Tolstoy.

The Russian thinkers in the current volume faced the unavoidable question of the relationship between Tolstoy as artist and thinker. To the authors' credit I might add that they were not prone to philosophical condescension. One of them, Pitirim Sorokin, in the article "L. N. Tolstoy as Philosopher," even says that Tolstoy is the brightest representative of Russian philosophy itself, as Heracles or Plato to the Greeks, Hegel or Kant to the Germans, Mill or Spencer to the English, and Auguste Comte to the French. There is no doubt, as the authors frequently assert, that Tolstoy is a *Russian* writer embodying our character, customs and language. But philosophy? Sorokin says the following, calling Tolstoy and his philosophy typically Russian: "Looking at our past and history, and in particular at the history of the Russian intelligentsia we see that all of it is a continuous self-sacrifice, a forever and unceasing 'laying down of the soul for one's friend,' a bright continuous love stopping short of no sacrifices." "Besides that," Sorokin continues, "where else could you find such a rejection of the limitations imposed by nation and classes than in Russia? It is not without reason that the Slavophiles dreamed of a role for Russia as conciliator among all peoples, as a Great Love to make all of them brothers; nor without cause did Dostoevsky speak of this, or Soloviev, who accepted it with some reservations. Nowhere in any philosophical system is God seen so sharply and clearly in 'the essence of things,' the founding attribute of which is *love* that knows no limits or borders, love not of the mind, but direct, living love" (148-149). All of these characteristics belong of course to Tolstoy's philosophy, which we now, fortunately, are seriously beginning to investigate. And at the same time we understand that without the tracts and the discourses there wouldn't have been any novels, tales, short stories, plays—at least not in the form we have them now.

The work of Sorokin was published (by *Posrednik*, by the way) in 1914. Much time has passed since then, and now at the start of the twenty-first century, it is clear that Tolstoy was destined to become an outstanding Russian philosopher. The highest achievements of our philosophical thought were still to come and were realized in the creations of thinkers who in 1922 were either exiled from Russia or, staying, continued to write under unbelievably difficult conditions: Ivan Il'in, Semyon Frank, Pyotr Struve, Sergei Bulgakov, Nikolai Lossky, Nikolai Berdiaev, Pavel Florensky, and others. It is also very characteristic for Russia that it is impossible to name only one. Call it whatever you will, a school, an artel, an assembly. Pitirim Sorokin himself, who narrowly avoided being shot in revolutionary Russia, found himself in 1922 on the famous "ferry of philosophers." Russian philosophy flourished in emigration, and now we are overjoyed and grateful to read its works, and have even dedicated an exhibition in the Historical Museum to the great ferry of Russian philosophy.

None of the articles, of course, compares the young with the later Tolstoy. At least this one fault is common to almost all of them. The writer himself is to blame, because he denounced all his former glorious works of art so passionately in his *Confession*. Turgenev was guilty of the same error when, in 1883, literally at death's door, he sincerely and movingly implored Tolstoy to return to literature—for art is also from God. The quotation from Turgenev is often repeated in articles and compilations despite the erroneous presumption it makes. Tolstoy never really rejected literature, and he understood very soon that if he were to do so, he would be throwing out the baby with the bath water. At the end of the 1870s, his work included a number of historical novels; in 1881 he published *What People Live By*; in 1882 he started *The Death of Ivan Il'ich*; in 1885-86 he produced a flood of folk stories; in 1886 he created a work of genius in *The Power of Darkness*; and in 1889 he began the novel *Resurrection*. There was no rejection of literature, but a reformulation of his convictions. His objectives and his views on art changed in fundamental ways, and new problems arose—

albeit not altogether new. One can understand Lev Shestov's puzzlement when throughout his short article he poses the question, pertaining mostly to *The Cossacks*, *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*: could Tolstoy really have written such things for fame and money as he alleges in *A Confession*? Our contemporary, the American specialist on Tolstoy Richard Gustafson, whose book not long ago appeared in Russian translation in St. Petersburg, begins it with the words, "In Russia art is a religious matter because it is the heart of Russian religiosity."

Of course until 1911-1912 and the three-volume edition of collected works compiled at his death, works unpublished by Tolstoy during his lifetime, including fully completed ones, were unknown. It was also not known, moreover, that even close to death Tolstoy entered ideas for fiction in his personal notebook. But there was enough published even in his lifetime to preclude any rejection by Tolstoy of artistic literature. Evidently, the present writers, who were not merely religious but defenders of the Church, found the anti-clerical stance of the later Tolstoy so unacceptable that they preferred to reject his literary works of these years. *Resurrection*, published in 1899, goes practically unmentioned; in one instance it is called a "weak novel," which of course is unjust. After all, it contains the divine Easter morning scene!

In *Solitaria* and *Fallen Leaves*, Vasiliï Rozanov, with characteristic acuity, explains the "transformation" of Tolstoy when he had reached the highest summit of literary fame this way: Russia loved him with all its heart and soul for his novels, but he says, "That's not enough! I want to be a Schopenhauer or a Buddha." This might seem funny, but it is no laughing matter. Another Russian thinker, N. N. Strakhov, well acquainted with Tolstoy and close to him, in an article of 1893 writes completely seriously of Buddha: "One automatically makes the comparison with the Prince who founded Buddhism. Tolstoy's very despair is for us a kind of religious credo, and without a doubt it has convinced many that nothing earthly can satisfy the soul of man, and that he must turn heavenward, to religion" (72). It is not a matter of vainglory, or of Buddha, or even of salvation from personal de-

spair. It is about the awakening of conscience within the soul and a total arousal of conscious awareness of one's personal accountability for evil in the world. So even *more important* than art—which of course can also indirectly serve the good—is preaching, reaching the people directly.

Tolstoy has not been alone in this sense, especially in Russia where a poet has always been "more than a poet." Penetrating to the very heart of the matter, Tolstoy understood of the spiritual achievement of Gogol, whom he dubbed the Russian Pascal. His contemporaries could not help but notice that, to a significant extent, Tolstoy followed in the path of Gogol. Sergei Bulgakov writes of this in a magnificent article (1910-1911) which is printed in the collection. A comparison between the two is found in the third subsection, called "Man and Artist." In contrast to Gogol, in Tolstoy there is the strength if not to overcome, then to endure crisis, to combine art and instruction. One notes that Tolstoy never burned his manuscripts—but for one exception—a part of the chapter-discussion "On Prayer" in *Childhood* (in connection with the Holy Fool Grisha). Why he burned it is unknown, but it is known that when a very young Sofya Andreevna began doing his copying at Iasnaia Poliana and suggested they could throw out his rough copies, Tolstoy said no, to leave them.

I recommend to those who have not done so to read Bulgakov's article. He gives valuable and truthful insight on Tolstoy's typically Russian outlook, on his evolution, and on the idea that the pursuit of personal perfection *per se* does not separate one from the Church. Moreover, he discusses the fact that Tolstoy is not a prophet or a saint but a "great seeker" (292), that worldwide fame and all it brought did not save him from isolation, and finally that Tolstoy was not and could not have been a "Tolstoyan." With full sympathy, Bulgakov writes of the demands of "life by faith," with the emphasis on *life* meaning active faith—not simply words.

Not one of the authors raises any doubts over Tolstoy's religiosity, his faith in God, based on ethics, goodness, love; it is a one-sided view of religion, perhaps, but very important *for life*. And how is it now that we can say, when the world has

grown so cruel, that ethics have only a secondary importance, that they are not the most important aspect of faith! The question was vital for Tolstoy: "Who am I and how shall I live?"—and it still stands.

In the rationalistic religious conceptions of Tolstoy, feeling came before thought. As Lao-Tse said: "The wise are never learned, and the learned are never wise." God is not known through reason, but through religious feeling. Tolstoy in this connection can be compared with Kant, or in the newest philosophy with the Frenchman Henri Bergson and his theory of intuitivism. Our authors make just such comparisons.

All his life Tolstoy valued the "mind of the heart"; as regards religion, it is the feeling of kinship to God, the consciousness of being part of Him, sent to the world to fulfill His will. Here arose the conflict—under Russian conditions often a very difficult one—with the Church. It turned out to be (at least in its contemporary manifestation) dispensable, superfluous, and even harmful. Russian philosophers looked at it differently, yet they sympathized with the great elder when he estranged himself from the Church, and never attacked him.

To the external, ritualistic forms of the Church, Tolstoy preferred faith, the faith that a person carries in his or her heart. He loved the dictum of St. Augustine: "If paradise does not lie within you, it can never be found."

The Russian thinkers in this volume recount scenes of the Holy Fool Grisha, of Natasha Rostova praying together with the people in church, of the confession and wedding of Levin, and of course they critique Tolstoy's criticism of the Church. Many of those writing after 1910 harboured a deep-seated hope that before his death Tolstoy wished to repent and reconcile with the Church, and that evildoers prevented him from doing so. But for this version of the story, there is (alas!) no foundation.

They write about Tolstoy's repudiation of other institutions of the "unjust" social order, in particular—the government. Of course they do not advocate "anarchy," or total rejection of government. They credit the Russian government for not punishing Tolstoy. Both Alexander III and Nicholas II acted more wisely than the Holy Synod. One

of the authors, Vasilii Maklakov, in a speech given in Prague 75 years ago, at the 100-year anniversary of Tolstoy's birth, even compared the fate of Tolstoy to the history of Christ. It wasn't the Roman procurator Pontius Pilate who sent the founder of the new religion to crucifixion. This is wonderfully depicted by Mikhail Bulgakov in *The Master and Margarita*. Maklakov, a well known lawyer, a political activist, an intelligent man, and, though Orthodox, not a fervent defender of the Church, allowed himself to speak the truth of the matter. "*The Church* excommunicated Tolstoy, denied him a proper burial, forbade prayers for him; but the *government*, mired much deeper in human weakness, while not following Tolstoy as it did not follow Christ, also did not judge Tolstoy, and in fact bowed reverently to him" (482).

Tolstoy's departure and his death are important themes of the book. In my view, the most penetrating assessment belongs to Andrei Bely "The Tragedy of Creation. Dostoevsky and Tolstoy" (1911). A writer himself, Bely understood perfectly that the creations of genius are inevitably intertwined with tragedy (crises, sharp breaks with the past, etc.). I must emphasize that Bely, like other contemporaries (few though they may be), saw in Tolstoy's departure a kind of *creative act*. I gave a lecture on this topic in Iasnaia Poliana in 2000 and am greatly indebted to Professor Donna Orwin for printing it (in English) in *Tolstoy Studies Journal*. I will not repeat it, but will reiterate its main point, of which I am still convinced: Tolstoy, *by the way his life ended and his death*, "in transit" as it were, completed his "personal" drama, *And a Light Shines in the Darkness*, which was so dear to him but for so such a long and wearying time would not come from his pen. The play was printed in his *Posthumous Works*.

The philosopher Stepun, who wrote of Tolstoy's departure fifty years after Bely, precisely underlined the contradictions between this striking act of will and the theory of "nonresistance to evil by force." As Bunin wrote, "the departure was no flight of liberation. On the contrary, it was the last instance of Tolstoy's enslavement to the unresolved contradiction between his teachings on truth in life and his unwillingness to subordinate life to this

truth" (613). For Stepun, the key to Tolstoy's tragedy of religious consciousness was that the search for the answer to the question "What should I do?" took the form, not of prayer to God, but of "a moralizing understanding of the Gospels" (616).

In the course of their analyses, the thinkers provide profound formulations of Tolstoy's worldview. Examples are to be found in Il'in, Berdiaev and Frank.

The collection contains a 1942 lecture by Ivan Il'in translated from the German. He has other no less outstanding work, on *War and Peace* for instance ("Lev Tolstoy as Interpreter of the Russian Soul"). For the religious-philosophical focus of this collection, however, "The Worldview of Lev Tolstoy" was more suitable. It is a gracious article, reverent but at the same time polemical. It is precise and convincing: "At the center of his philosophical interests is the problem of the *moral perfection* of the individual. For him moral experience discloses the meaning of life as such, his whole Christian view is predicated on moral feeling—a morality that now is highest of all, claiming the right to judgment over everything: over religious experience, over impulses toward knowledge, over art and love for nation" (558). Il'in is prepared to reprove Tolstoy for religious and other forms of nihilism. In his opinion, Tolstoy's positive teaching "is distinguished by depth and clarity; in his 'No,' there is shortsightedness and maybe even blindness" (553). But Tolstoy was always upright and good, and in this proved himself to be a truly outstanding Russian man. In Il'in's view, the primacy of feeling in Tolstoy leads to sentimentality, and his ethics of total love is overly rationalized. Tolstoy articulates deep reflections on suffering and compassion—suffering as the price of spirituality—but here begins a serious discrepancy between him and Il'in. True Christianity, as Il'in understands it, requires an admixture of love and the values of Orthodox spiritual culture. Tolstoy called only for love and nothing more, and this "nothing more" rejected spiritual culture and Orthodoxy. According to its precepts, the upward path is through suffering (recall Dostoevsky!). But Tolstoy loved life too much—the joys of life and happiness (of course, not egotistical but humanitarian happi-

ness that floods over others)—to accept this doctrine. It has been said that if unhappiness is a good school, then happiness is the best university.

Nikolai Berdiaev was of course correct when he numbered Tolstoy among the “spirits of Russian revolution” (in the collection *From the Depths*, 1918). An article of 1912 contained in the collection addresses another question: “The Old and New Testaments in the Religious Thought of L. Tolstoy.” Comparing Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, Berdiaev notices that Tolstoy cares little for the *individual personality* of Christ (and hence does not believe in atonement), but rather he esteems the teachings of Christ and is therefore more Buddhist than Christian. Berdiaev sensed the Old Testament, pagan aspect of Tolstoy’s perception of the world, with its rejection of evil as a first principle fundamental to human nature. Christianity, by contrast, admits the “fathomless and irrational enigma of evil, connected with the fathomless and irrational enigma of freedom” (369). Berdiaev formulates Tolstoyan religion this way: believe in yourself, rely on yourself, and you will reach God and change the world. Such a faith is too hubristic, without need for “the grace and assistance of God for the fulfillment of His will” (377).

The end of Berdiaev’s article, however, is an apotheosis of Tolstoy: “

We love Tolstoy as we do our native soil. [...] The life of L. Tolstoy is a moment of genius in the life of Russia. And all that is genius stems from Providence. Just recently his “departure” troubled Russia and the entire world. That “departure” was an act of genius. It was the conclusion of Tolstoy’s anarchistic revolt. Before his death, Tolstoy became a wandering pilgrim, tearing himself away from the earth to which he had been tethered by all the weight of material being. At the end of his life, the great elder turned to mysticism, and the mystical notes rang louder, drowning out his rationalism. He was preparing himself for the final transformation. (382)

The last phrases, however—and it bears repeating—are no more than a dream. Tolstoy was as far from mysticism at the end of his life as he was at the beginning of his religious and other

quests. His religion is indifferent to any esoteric metaphysics. His rejection of mysticism also gave him the right to declare that the essence of *all* religions is the same, based on love as a unifying path for all people. This allows us to call Tolstoy a Christian of the world—of the entire world. In 1890, writing about Tolstoy’s moral philosophy, at which time it was already sufficiently familiar to Tolstoy’s readers in Russia and abroad, Akim Volynskii (*Flekser*) justly remarked that religions differentiate amongst themselves not in a moral, but in a metaphysical sense. The philosopher and literary critic, then still young, made an important point: the foundation of Russian philosophy is the idea of “sobornost’.” Comparing *A Confession* and the tract *On Life*, he emphasizes that Tolstoy’s religious-philosophical and moral search was motivated not by the fear of death but by the business of living and its meaning. As known, Tolstoy crossed out the word *death* from the title of the tract. True, to his last days he repeated in articles, diaries, letters, and conversation the French expression, “One must die alone.” Yes, alone, fully giving oneself over to Him who sent one to the world. Here, incidentally, arises another of Tolstoy’s favourite French sayings: “Do what you must, and what will be will be”—which, incompletely rendered by his weakened hand—is the last phrase written in his diary!

When earthly existence comes to an end in a genius, especially in a genius of “living life” such as Tolstoy always was, his isolation is all the more striking—in contrast, perhaps, to the immortal realm to which he was departing.

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