

Reviews

Briggs, Anthony. *Brief Lives: Leo Tolstoy*.

London: Hesperus Press, 2010. 115 pages.

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From the time he was fifteen and discovered Rousseau's *Confessions*, Tolstoy was a miserable specimen: "Suddenly, he reads a text which tells him an awful truth: everyone else is just as bad as he is, probably worse. From this misanthropic assumption derives a dark impression of the world and its ways, one from which he will never recover, except during a few short periods irregularly punctuating his seven remaining decades" (19). Tolstoy's susceptibility to the devilish influence of Rousseau, Schopenhauer, and then Chertkov "suggests a need to preserve and keep renewing a deep-seated hatred of human life" (20). Tolstoy's longing for the Kingdom of Darkness, Briggs insinuates, never left him for long.

Professor Briggs concedes that Tolstoy did, after all, somehow write that novel Briggs translated for Penguin, *War and Peace*, the would-be misanthrope apparently having sneaked it in during one of those "few short periods" where his "hatred of human life" did not spoil everything. In another concession, Briggs thinks Tolstoy's Yasnaya Polyana school project was, on balance, *okay*: "The great qualities and serious defects of this remarkable man—his originality, self-certainty, altruism, expressiveness, love of language and literature, his all-round intellectual strength, ranged against his naivety, remoteness from reality, lack of common sense and flexibility, along with incorrigible extremism, and with doggedness thrown in on both sides of the equation—are nowhere better characterized than in his career as a pedagogue" (33). Tolstoy, here and throughout this peculiarly wretched biographical study, is a straw man Briggs flings words at. Most of them do not stick.

And let's not forget about Sofia: "It was obvious that she was equal to her husband in most things and much better than he in some that mattered." (Are we reading a book about an author? Was she a better *writer* than he?) He continues:

But her innate ability and strength of character held a corresponding disadvantage. If he was moody and unpredictable she could surpass him in the depth of her disappointment and the ferocity of her emotional outbursts. What this would lead to eventually is almost too painful to behold, even at a distance of thousands of miles and five or six generations: for all their early love and mutual dependence, this marriage turned out to be one of the most turbulent, antagonistic and hateful in cultural history. (36-37)

Damn me to graduate school in England if I ever willingly read another snotty remark about the Tolstoys' marriage. (Who was it that said all happy families are one thing and each unhappy family is something else?)

So here are the rules, future Tolstoy biographers: If you want to express your haughty disapproval or amazed condemnation of the Tolstoys' married life, I insist first upon full disclosure, complete details, of *every single one* of the arguments you and your wife, husband, or partner ever had. Until then, the Tolstoys' marriage is off-limits for second-guessing and opinionating: May the Divinities of Art forgive us our gossip-loving impertinence.

Back to our show: Briggs admires *The Cossacks*, *War and Peace*, *Ivan Ilyich*, and *Hadji Murad*. He argues, pointlessly in my opinion, that *War and Peace* is stupendous and original, but his inviting introductory commentary is good and interesting enough:

For those who want to remain convinced that this novel is formidably difficult it may come as a surprise, but the chapters of *War and Peace* average out at *four pages long* (about fifteen hundred words)[...] Gradually the little units build into a solid section, then the scene changes, another section forms itself and after three or four of them a whole volume is at an end. (45-46)

Toddling on thereafter, with no taste for the feast of compelling details about Tolstoy's life, loves, family, and character, Briggs discovers to his horror the post-*War and Peace* Tolstoy sinking into the intellectual morass of a nasty German philosopher: "It was in the newly poisoned soil that the seeds of his next big novel were planted" (60). Which big novel? Oh, about that woman... the one who left her husband and came to a bad end! (If Schopenhauer's fertilizer helped Tolstoy grow *Anna Karenina*, I'm going to order a truckload and grow me a whole crop of world's classics.)

Because he has argued *War and Peace* ("radiant with optimism" (54)) is better than *Anna Karenina*, Briggs has to prove it by saying so, and by making *Anna Karenina* sound as compelling as gruel: "The story marches towards its predestined conclusion with the inevitability of a Shakespeare sonnet proceeding to its final couplet" (62). Could Briggs have devised a more incongruous literary comparison?: An eight-hundred-page novel, composed in bursts of agony and labor over several years, marches just like 140 measured syllables (dashed off like lightning) by an Elizabethan poet Tolstoy learned to loathe! Then, courtesy of Briggs's shrink-wrapping, he dispenses *Anna Karenina* in a safe little pill: "Tolstoy's message is clear: life must be based on solid, permanent relationships, which cannot be created, let alone sustained by sexual passion" (68). But Briggs is not done; as if channeling the ghost of cranky Nikolai Andreevich Bolkonsky, he decides to sermonize on that clear message:

Six generations later, with the world a very different place, it is clear that his useful warning has gone unheeded. At least some of our modern ills, especially those of young people, derive from a collective reluctance to place a high value on keeping families together, which has been accompanied by increasing self-interest, immediate gratification, and greater irresponsibility in human relations. To this extent *Anna Karenina* remains a lesson for our times. (68)

The jig is up; this is no biography at all, but only a soapbox from which Briggs can mewl. He goes on to rue "a lost age when it was deemed useful to demonstrate to young people, if not in church then certainly at school, the need for selflessness and love" (82).

I, on the other hand, rue the age when the most interesting author who ever lived could get a modicum of deference from a British academic—but no, those days seem to have passed. Briggs is bigger (Brigger?) than his subject:

At some deep level [Tolstoy] must have known that his own thinking was flawed, because although he preached brotherly love as the one force for salvation, he could never discover it in himself (misanthropy being his deepest well-spring)[...]. (83)

Bristol University's Professor Emeritus of Sense (Common- and Non-) tells us (and the pitiful students he seems to imagine himself lecturing) that Tolstoy had a "lack of common sense" (91). Further sense-sensitivity: "The saddest thing about Nekhlyudov (as with Tolstoy) is the triumph in him of rage over good sense" (100). Briggs quotes his equally superior chum A. N. Wilson to keep himself company in his little senseless ball of confusion over Tolstoy's absolute transparency: "The more evidence we possess about Tolstoy, the less he makes sense" (110). What doesn't make sense to Briggs is that Tolstoy had a gigantic,

dynamic life independent of and beyond anybody else's idea of it. Instead of observation, appreciation, coherence, or even simple biographical retailing to do his one task, Briggs offers us bargain-basement psychoanalysis: "At the deepest level of his psyche Leo Tolstoy seems to have been an unhappy, unpleasant man attracted to other unhappy, unpleasant men through inescapable affinity" (110). Right back at you, Tony B.!

Briggs concludes while up to his chin in his theory of Tolstoy's

outright aggressive enmity. It is this *negative* principle, in his personality, thinking and writing that makes overall sense of Leo Tolstoy, consistently explaining the man, his life, his conduct and most of his work. (111)

That'll save students some reading—Tolstoy explained! *Bolshoe spasibo!* Any beginner would learn more about Tolstoy—his voice, his power, his genius—in the five minutes it takes to read the first chapter of *Childhood* or *Anna Karenina* than by reading the entire *Brief Lives: Leo Tolstoy*. I've quoted almost as many words by Briggs in this review as Briggs quotes Tolstoy.

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Ореханов, Георгий. *Жестокий суд России*: В. Г.

***Чертков в жизни Л. Н. Толстого*. Москва:**

Православный Свято-Тихоновский

Гуманитарный Университет, 2009. 192

страницы. Мягкая обложка. ISBN: 978-5-7429-0559-2.

Alexander Chertkov is probably one of the most controversial figures in the history of nineteenth century Russian literature. His supporters view him as Leo Tolstoy's favorite pupil and most devoted disciple who sacrificed his own well being in

pursuit of popularizing his teacher's ideas. His opponents, on the other hand, see him as an opportunist whose attempts to monopolize publishing rights to Tolstoy's literary heritage resulted in Tolstoy's final break up with his family. In his book *The Cruel Judgment of Russia: Vladimir Chertkov in Lev Tolstoy's Life* (*Жестокий суд России: В. Г. Чертков в жизни Л. Н. Толстого*) published in Moscow in 2009, Georgy Orekhanov adds his voice to those of Chertkov's opponents while also presenting the views of Chertkov's supporters.

In the introduction to his book Orekhanov gives credit to Chertkov not only for his monumental work of preserving of Tolstoy's writings, but also for editing and supervising the publication of the first Russian-language edition of the complete works of Tolstoy. He also notes, however, that the success of Chertkov's work for a long time made it impossible for critics

to ask 'unpleasant' questions, the most important of which would have been the following: how accurate is the picture of Tolstoy's relationship with Chertkov based mainly on memoirs of Chertkov and people who shared his views. (4, my translations throughout)

Orekhanov further explains that for a long time "the right to speak and write about Chertkov was monopolized by his students and followers" (5). He also notes that since Chertkov's archives have never been thoroughly analyzed or completely catalogued, "no serious study of Chertkov's personality has been conducted either in pre-Soviet or in Soviet [scholarly] literature" (5). In the remainder of the introduction, Orekhanov provides a comprehensive overview of existing works about Chertkov and his relationship with Tolstoy.

In the beginning of the first chapter Orekhanov provides his readers with information about Chertkov's family and his life prior to his