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## Critical Reflections on Kathryn B. Feuer's *Tolstoy and the Genesis of War and Peace*

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**Kathryn B. Feuer. *Tolstoy and the Genesis of War and Peace*. Edited by Robin Feuer Miller and Donna Tussing Orwin. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1996.**

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The task of understanding the origins of such a complex work as *War and Peace* is one that most researchers would find daunting. In addition to the roughly 5000 pages of drafts, corrected proofs and marginalia, there is a wealth of correspondence and notes in the author's hand, as well as dozens of memoirs about him, not to mention the books Tolstoy himself read while working on the novel. Then there is a vast secondary literature on Tolstoy, much of it dealing directly with this topic. What more can one do on this small plot that has been surveyed, resurveyed and landscaped by an army of obsessive researchers? One could hope to replant a corner of the garden or replace a few wilted flowers, perhaps, but short of bringing in bulldozers, one cannot completely redesign the terrain.

Kathryn Feuer chooses a strategy midway between these two extremes. She negotiates her own space amidst conflicting interpretations of the novel's genesis and does so with due respect for the work of her predecessors. Not constrained by their ideological and critical agendas, she creates from their beginnings a wholly original and psychologically subtle account of how Tolstoy conceived his novel. She locates herself above disagreements that developed for decades and very nearly reconciles them.

Evelina Zaidenshnur and Boris Eikhenbaum, leading authorities who preceded Feuer and established the dominant approaches to the novel's

origins, were constantly at loggerheads. In everything she wrote about, Zaidenshnur rejected Eikhenbaum's "legendary," ill-informed interpretation of the novel's beginnings. The novel was conceived, in her opinion, as an historical epic celebrating the courage of the Russian peasants and indirectly calling for their emancipation. Eikhenbaum, by contrast, argued in his seminal study of *War and Peace* (*Lev Tolstoy: The Sixties*, 1931) that Tolstoy began the novel from the ideological vantage point of the landed gentry, intending to polemicize with the new democrats who demanded emancipation. Though Eikhenbaum never attacked Zaidenshnur, he was troubled by the proprietorship over Tolstoy's manuscripts wielded by the official establishment, to which she belonged. Eikhenbaum prefaced his first book on Tolstoy (1922) with the complaint that he had been unable, "despite every effort, to make use of the manuscripts in the Tolstoy archive, which continue to be inaccessible to 'outsiders'." The fact that he used almost no manuscripts for his 1931 study suggests that this situation did not improve much during the next decade.

Much is unclear about Eikhenbaum's apparent ignorance of the manuscripts, but one can presume that the grim politics of the Stalinist era had something to do with it. Anyone who reads the fine print in the so-called "complete" edition of Tolstoy's works (1928-59) can find evidence that Tolstoy's manuscripts suffered a fate similar to that described by Ivan Kireevskii in 1855 apropos of literature under Nicholas I's regime: "Our books and journals made their way to the public like enemy ships passing through the straits of Finland, that is, between pincers and cliffs and always in full view of a fortress." Far from being a "full collection," the Jubilee edition reproduced only part of Tolstoy's work and required continual supplementation. Such is the case with the extant drafts of *War and Peace*, which began appearing piecemeal in 1949, and may still not be published

in their entirety. (The most recent one I know of came out in 1994.) The problem of archival research was compounded by the fact that quoting unpublished manuscripts was forbidden. Only those texts which had reached the public through approved channels were permissible to cite. Even Zaidenshnur, who led a team of archivists cataloguing the drafts, was unable to discuss them in detail until 1955, when most had been published.

Notwithstanding the politics of textology and publication (about which Feuer is diplomatically silent), Zaidenshnur and Eikhenbaum were fundamentally different kinds of scholars. Zaidenshnur was a gifted textologist, whose major contribution was to order and decipher the stacks of manuscripts that had been presented to her in utter disarray. This was very nearly a life's undertaking. Even such eminent Tolstoy scholars as Aleksei Gruzinskii and Nikolai Gusev, who knew the manuscripts well, had speculated in the 1920s that no one could ever piece together this puzzle with any degree of reliability. Zaidenshnur did, and thanks to her it became possible to reconstruct the initial stages of Tolstoy's writing. Eikhenbaum, by contrast, was a literary historian and theoretician. As Carol Any shows in her recent book on Eikhenbaum (1994), he wrote his major work on *War and Peace* when he was undergoing a radical transition, switching from literary analysis characteristic of the Formalist School to milieu criticism.

Perhaps because of the special way they defined their tasks, neither Zaidenshnur nor Eikhenbaum, in their books about *War and Peace*, are very perceptive when it comes to Tolstoy's psychology as a writer and the minute traces of his aesthetic intuition. Feuer, by contrast, reveals the mind of the artist at every step. Her gift lies in an extraordinary understanding of Tolstoy's creative psychology, which she uncovers between the lines and beyond the political agendas. Her book shows how Tolstoy's poetic instincts ultimately prevailed in the resolution of virtually every problem he encountered, both technical and ideological.

It is useful to compare Feuer's study with Zaidenshnur's book "*Voina i mir*" *L. N. Tolstogo: Sozdanie velikoi knigi* (1966). Zaidenshnur starts from the premise, which is justifiable if one considers only the actual drafts of the novel, that

Tolstoy began writing *War and Peace* in 1863. She rejects Eikhenbaum's thesis that Tolstoy began working on the novel in 1856. Zaidenshnur devotes, therefore, only a short chapter to Tolstoy prior to 1863, focusing on his interest in the Napoleonic Wars and giving little attention to the fiction he wrote before that date. When Zaidenshnur turns to Tolstoy's first year of work on the novel (February 1863 through the first months of 1864), during which he produced fifteen drafts of the beginning, her account is mainly descriptive. She summarizes the changes each version contains, without, as a rule, attributing to Tolstoy any motive for making them. Zaidenshnur explains Tolstoy's persistent efforts as the author's need to find the germ of a plot which could "bind the historical events together in a fictional work" (13). In sum, she offers a meticulous account of Tolstoy's work but does little to convey the spiritual or aesthetic relevance of his experience. By skipping over his early fiction and subordinating aesthetic aims to historical ones, Zaidenshnur gives no sense of the novel's connectedness to the artistry of his earlier works.

Without polemicizing with Zaidenshnur openly, Feuer breathes life into this rather drab material, giving it dramatic intimacy. She too describes the individual drafts, but gives more importance to the personal nuances that emerge at the interstices between them. We get the image of an author struggling with an intuited reality, shaping it, making unexpected discoveries in it, then redefining his artistic aims and groping for a means to convey a truth he himself does not yet know. Far from being someone who knows his path, he is a searcher who enters private dialogues with himself, savors them and postpones the final choice of direction. If, as I think is always the case, Tolstoy transubstantiated his own creative struggles into the thoughts and actions of his characters, there could be no better evidence of this than the drafts of *War and Peace*.

Since Feuer wants to understand the inception of the novel, she naturally looks to Tolstoy's earlier fiction for clues and does so not just for continuity's sake, but to ascertain where Tolstoy expands, modifies or discards his repertoire of familiar devices (interior monologue, swaths of perceptual and emotional details, the alternating

concealment and forefronting of a judgmental author). In performing this retrospective, Feuer makes a startling discovery that fixes the beginning of the novel in 1856, as Eikhenbaum had predicted. "The Distant Field," a fragment Tolstoy wrote in that year, clearly broaches the theme of Decembrism and establishes the pattern of binary character relationships that survives through the final version, most notably in the apposition of Pierre and Andrei.

Feuer's sustained attention to the evolution of characters—not only *who* they are but *how* they are presented—is one of the most engrossing features of her study. She makes clear why Tolstoy's year-long obsession with changing, renaming, splitting, introducing and eliminating *characters*—even before he knew the plot—was the passion that gave birth to *War and Peace*. The challenge was to embody real people and set them in motion. What they did afterward, whether they lived or died, when and to whom they got married was, at this initial stage, of little consequence. It was crucial to create characters who would seem, even to Tolstoy himself, to act and react on their own. The author of course, like the divine consciousness of the digressions, would still shape their fates when he needed to and regulate, if necessary, the intrusion of chance into their lives, but in the routines of daily life they would seem to exercise their own free will. The sixth chapter, in which Feuer finally gives her own insights free reign, brilliantly explains how Tolstoy, in the last revisions before the final version, created the illusion of the characters' autonomy, thereby explaining on the basis of hard textual evidence why so many readers don't feel the presence of an author but see the unfolding action as real life playing itself out before them.

With regard to Eikhenbaum and his fellow Formalist Viktor Shklovskii, whose book (*Material i stil' v romane L. N. Tolstogo*, 1928) is a close companion, Feuer supplements and expands their view that *War and Peace* was conceived as a warning against the sudden emancipation of the serfs and the violent revolution it might lead to. On basis of the manuscripts, she confirms that Tolstoy initially planned to write an overtly polemical novel aimed at the reformist Tsar Aleksandr II and

the liberal intelligentsia. This is important, because no one before her had tested their theory and moved it beyond pure speculation.

Feuer, however, offers two substantive correctives to the Formalist thesis, both of which stem from her profound psychological insight into Tolstoy and his creative process. First, she discerns in Tolstoy an "instinctive contentiousness, the desire to shock and the instinct to contradict" (159), which explains why he rejected the intelligentsia of the 1860s. In her appraisal, Tolstoy's political conservatism was no more a factor than his life-long urge to oppose whatever ideology was in vogue at the time. Second, she demonstrates that despite this fact aesthetic imperatives replaced the political agenda in mid-1864, so that by the time Tolstoy started writing the final version of the novel, the polemical purpose was no longer important to him. Only when he was writing the second half of the novel (from mid-1866 on), she argues, did Tolstoy return to the political conception, now sublimating it in the philosophical digressions or in the narrative itself (e.g., the peasant rebellion at Bogucharovo: III, 2, ix-xiv).

One can detect, however, in Feuer's attitude toward the Formalists' position, a veiled impatience and desire to break free of their agenda. When Eikhenbaum and Shklovskii wrote their books, the NEP period was ending and the Party was exercising much tighter control over all ideological production. It was clear to the Formalists that they must accommodate the new regime or perish as scholars. This predicament helps explain why their focus shifted from pure literariness to literary sociology. It also helps explain why their books on *War and Peace* go to such extremes to emphasize political phenomena and class warfare. To be sure, there was a solid element of truth in their theory, as regards the genesis of the novel, but Tolstoy, prior to 1890s at least, was not so much a politician as to cede artistic enthusiasm to polemical gestures. He could not tolerate ideological camps of any sort, and he found polemics utterly distasteful. This is why he left St. Petersburg in 1857 and chose seclusion—a stance he adhered to until he himself became a political movement and had to receive, begrudgingly, a stream of devotees who sought his blessing. Until

that time he remained, as Feuer describes him, "his own man . . . without party or faction" (180). The very writing of *War and Peace* was an activity that removed him spiritually from the politics of his time. He withdrew into a historical epoch dearer to him than his own and immersed himself in an aesthetic fantasy that insulated him from everyone but his family.

The artistic instinct in Tolstoy, at this time, was stronger than the urge to polemicize. Feuer understands this, and in fact proves this repeatedly in her analysis of the texts. "[The] first political conception was fading" (113), she writes about the transition from the early manuscripts to the final version. "Its political conception had been superseded," she adds elsewhere (201). There are two sentences near the end of her book that capture poetically the gist of her argument:

As work on the novel proceeded after this first year its contemporary political conception began to fade. . . . Tolstoy became interested in the 1805-1812 period itself, still not as a historian, but in the way that an artist, who sets out to paint love as a rose, begins to forget about meaning and to care far more for the perfect re-creation of thorns and petals. (201)

At this crucial stage, when Tolstoy finally started writing the novel as we now know it, he "forgot" politics. It is hard to sweep away by any backtracking the devastating persuasiveness of this conclusion, which Feuer leads us to intelligently and persistently. However, as her book draws to a close, she argues forcefully that the "political conception" reappears in the last half of *War and Peace*. By doing so she raises a problem which is hard to resolve. An author's "conception" would seem to lie at the core of any good work and nourish it continually, not disappear and reappear again at whim. Feuer herself, I think, senses that her argument is strained, as is evident from the language she chooses to characterize this recrudescence (it is a "trace," a "legacy"). The choice of words suggests some hesitancy about giving it full importance.

After reading Feuer's book one thinks of Tolstoy essentially as an artist, not a politician, and though many today are eager to erase the distinc-

tion between the two, I believe Feuer still recognized the difference.

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The first thing one feels when reading this book is grateful; grateful to Robin Miller and Donna Orwin for making such a splendid piece of writing available to scholars and lay readers interested in Tolstoy's work and his working methods. The format of a round table discussion does not require any kind of official review, and so I will not provide one. Rather, I would like to register my amazement at one phenomenon the study brings out, call attention to one major issue it raises, and then talk a bit about what I see to be its only real weakness. The last will be done not as a way to criticize what Kathryn Feuer did, but rather to point out an avenue of approach she chose not to follow.

My amazement has to do with the quantity of material that Tolstoy (and not only Tolstoy) saved. It is hard to imagine that scholars who study the work of writers in our computer age, when a single key stroke replaces one draft with another, will ever have access to the layer upon layer of drafts, sketches and plans that Kathryn Feuer was able to examine. Most likely, the difficult act of physically writing something down inspired a reverence for the object that the print function has destroyed. I also never cease to be amazed at the calm self-assurance on Tolstoy's part that someone would actually want to look at this literary midden heap some day. And I am even more amazed that all this material was so carefully preserved and catalogued despite wars, revolutions, and gigantic shifts in ideological attitudes toward Tolstoy himself. All of this points up Russia's exceptionally strong cult of cultural relics, a national characteristic that I think most Americans find almost incomprehensible when they first begin to study Russian literature. These lovingly preserved (and, in the most radical cases, completely reconstructed) christening dresses, yellowing writing implements, and moth-eaten dressing gowns seem like nothing more than

a secularized version of St. Anthony's wonder-working teeth.

My own inclination has generally been to think that literary drafts belong in the same category; that they are not a whole lot more useful than dried out pieces of an author's sealing wax for understanding works of literary art. Indeed, at a conference in Smolensk a few years ago, I caused a minor scandal by suggesting to a group of Russian Akhmatova specialists that the best thing that could happen to Akhmatova studies in Russia would be for her archive to burn down. The Russian love affair with archival materials was, I claimed, making it almost impossible for them actually to read the works of art they were in theory interested in. Rather, they spent all their time discussing whether one draft of a poem had been written before another draft, and then using both drafts to make completely unwarranted assumptions about what the final text meant.

On the other hand, like practically everyone else, I have been known to consult drafts when specific questions arose that I thought could be answered through them. What Kathryn Feuer's study does, however, is to show how the drafts can themselves be made to speak, not so much as a springboard to an interpretation of the final text of the novel, but as a kind of literary work themselves. Most importantly, we can use the drafts as a process oriented work to explore not what an author wanted ultimately to say, but how he himself went about figuring out what he needed to know about his own work. And it is in her reconstruction of the process by which Tolstoy came to find *War and Peace* (Part I of the book) that this study shines most brilliantly. Kathryn Feuer's reconstructions of how Tolstoy combined and recombined his material, throwing out potential beginnings, taking up other ones, circling back to what he had initially thought about are both intellectually exciting and completely convincing. Particularly brilliant are her explanations for why Tolstoy was unable to create a central negative hero and what he did about it. Reading this section of the book, one sees a whole new research field open up, although to take advantage of it, a scholar would have to possess an excellent literary intuition and be as talented a writer as Kathryn Feuer

obviously was.

Wonderful as the first part of the study is, however, I found the second part to be a bit of a let down. In part, this may be because I am not by nature an intellectual historian. I am glad that in the final version of the novel Tolstoy so successfully hid its connection with the local politics of 1856, and although I can be impressed by Feuer's historical detective work, I am just not that interested in what she found out. But more fundamental is that after reading all her work about the novel's genesis, one gets the distinct impression that while Tolstoy read and thought deeply about philosophy, politics, history, and so forth, he had never read another novel. This omission seems somewhat strange, for after all, whatever its political origins, *War and Peace* is a novel, even if Tolstoy was uncomfortable with that designation for obvious reasons. Considering Feuer's obvious gifts as a writer and reader it seems somewhat mystifying that she did not pursue some of the most obvious literary sources that the drafts she examines bring to mind. One example can be found in the discussion of the historical introductions: "I write of a time still joined by memory's chain to our own, of the time when our fathers danced the minuet and the matradura in short-waisted gowns by the light of wax and spermaceti candles..." (quoted in Feuer 90). To me at least, it is obvious that this type of introduction and even its particular cadences were borrowed from Dickens' famous opening of *A Tale of Two Cities*. How, I wonder, did Dickens' literary treatment of the French revolution fit into Tolstoy's literary scheme? Perhaps Feuer felt that literary sources for the novel had already been discussed sufficiently in the critical literature. Still, one wishes that she had been willing to revisit those sources in light of her reconstruction of Tolstoy's work on the novel.

In the final analysis, I still may sometimes think that a bit of archive arson might be good for Slavic studies, but having read this book I have also come to see that when handled well, archival materials can create a paratext that is a thing of beauty in and of itself, regardless of its relation to some other, published work.

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Back in 1964, in the Tolstoy Museum at 11 Kropotkinskaja Street in Moscow, as I was wading through reams of dead Soviet print about Tolstoy, I was complimented on my patient labors by someone who said that the young American lady who preceded me had “wasted her time shuffling through moldy Tolstoyan manuscripts that even we ourselves cannot decipher.” That lady was Kathryn Feuer, and she deciphered the wealth of knowledge and understanding pertaining to the gestation of Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* that we are now lucky to share in her present book.

It is a wonderful piece of meticulous research and thoughtful observation of the grand blossom of Tolstoy’s novel unfolding petal by petal through the many pages of his indecisions and a hundred visions and revisions before his judgment, years later, that it was an example of “bad art.” Thanks to Dr. Feuer’s patient insight we can now see that Tolstoy was as enormously wrong as only the greatest of writers can be. That is her best accomplishment, going far beyond her modest thesis “that *War and Peace* originated in Tolstoy’s response to political events in Russia in 1856, and that this initial political conception of the novel dominated its first stage of composition and left lasting traces in the finished work (1).” This thesis is abundantly supported in Part II of the book, and the argument there does illuminate a number of new dimensions of the novel not only in relation to Tolstoy’s intellectual conceptions but also as a work of art. For me, however, the meticulous tracing of the tangled lines of the characters’ progress toward their final shape and name was personally most fascinating and most instructive. It was like watching the novel grow to a huge tree of many living branches until it stood “a thousand times right,” like Prince Andrey’s oak. It became clear that for Tolstoy the process of writing was as organic as the process of living itself and not like the imposition of an abstract design conceived beforehand. Perhaps it would be better to say that it was a struggle between the imperatives of organic growth and the intentions issuing from such an abstract design. Professor Feuer is especially

sensitive, for instance, to Tolstoy’s mental processes as he struggled with the problems of the novel’s opening. She depicts him trying to find a way both to sketch out his characters’ backgrounds and to lay down the basic patterns of his ideological notions while at the same time creating living people who could embody all this without themselves becoming mere abstractions. Or, as she put it, “could a hero, and a group of characters from diverse backgrounds, without biographical preparation, be adequately presented in the midst of a conversation which was itself to set forth the thematic lines of the novel?” (92). That, and the notion that in the beginning stages Tolstoy had characters but not yet roles for them, and vice versa, I found very useful. I felt myself placed at a perspective which illuminated much about the inner workings of the novel, the particulars of its progress in Tolstoy’s mind. I could see what was happening in his “kitchen,” without any need to reach for philosophical profundities of interpretation.

Equally illuminating is Feuer’s amusing insight that in those early stages Tolstoy found himself at times staring at a dead end, because his characters, as then conceived, did not permit any further development of the novel. What do you do, for instance, with a Pierre (then Pyotr) who needs to undergo a long intellectual and moral development toward the radical ideas that would shape the novel, when at the outset he is already a sixty-year old Decembrist come back from Siberia in 1856? And so, with Professor Feuer patiently leading us by the hand we see how entire versions, sometimes well developed, are dropped until Tolstoy finally devises a proper way to fit the characters or to create new ones to make things fall into place. This tells us a tremendous amount about the novel as it finally stands.

On the other hand, some things that do not seem very clear in the final text—Pierre’s admiration for Napoleon in the opening chapters, for instance—were better explained, as Feuer shows, in the earlier, discarded versions, where such thoughts were more clearly motivated and more comprehensible because Tolstoy had elaborated them more fully. Similarly, Feuer shows how some characters, such as Rostov, and at times even

Andrey are more interesting in the early drafts, when they were not yet fully developed, or "finalized," to borrow a word from Bakhtin. The preliminary Pierre also looks like a much more intriguing character than he seems at first glance in the final text, because he "did not smile as others smile, for his smile blended with a non-smile almost imperceptibly." This Tolstoyan syntactic curiosity came about because, as Feuer says, "Tolstoy labored mightily to reconcile the images of the forceful, intelligent and gloomy Petr and the weak, kindly, ever-smiling Arkadii-Leon" of the earlier drafts (97).

Another aspect of Tolstoy, somewhat surprising if we believe with Bakhtin that he was a "monological" writer, emerges from his efforts to avoid, as Feuer puts it, "arrogating to himself the ability to go inside the consciousness of his characters." On the contrary, the early drafts show that he kept trying "to establish authorities external to himself for the truth of his portrayals" (124). This Feuer ties in with the issue of the author's voice which, when too intrusive, destroys, or damages, the illusion of reality in the fiction at hand.

Such insights in Professor Feuer's book lead us to realize that we need a comprehensive reading of the novel, with simultaneous awareness of its roots at any given point. We need a reading that reflects an evolving comprehension of the entire universe of the novel in which the finished text is

but an "articulated island."

Feuer concentrates on two aspects of the novel's evolution: (1) the interrelationship of the drafts leading to the final text of *War and Peace*, and (2) the various configurations in the political and historical thought of the time and of Tolstoy's relationships to them. The main problem for Tolstoy, according to Feuer, comes down to the question of how to produce a chemical blend of the different parts of the novel instead of their remaining just a mixture that can be shuffled around in various ways without arriving at a meaningful whole.

Professor Feuer's scholarship is very impressive indeed; the simple honesty of her method is charming; and the meticulousness of her work is downright admirable. She achieves truly profound insights in her close textual analysis as well. We gain considerable clarity and a sense of how the lego blocks of the novel were put together over and over again by the long-suffering Lev Nikolaevich. What I miss in the end is a sense of depth, perhaps even mystery, about the novel, now that its genesis has been explained so well. I wish to absorb thoroughly all the knowledge Professor Feuer has offered us in her book, remember it well, and then go on reading Tolstoy as if I did not know anything about it at all.

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