

Reviews

McLean, Hugh. *In Quest of Tolstoy*. Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2008. 252 pp. \$75 (cloth). ISBN 9781934843024.

One of my English professors at U.C. Santa Barbara, the poet Alan Stephens, kept us, his undergraduates, at the text as if we were budding scientists at our microscopes. Our first and primary duty as readers? Figure out what it is that's there. Don't interpret. Stephens knew all about the pitfalls of free-association; he understood difficulty, but he disliked cleverness—he made us stick to figuring out what the hell these geniuses, Donne and Wordsworth and Dickinson, were actually saying. The gold was really there; it didn't need to be conjured up.

McLean, as most of this journal's readers know, is professor emeritus of Russian literature at UC Berkeley, and has collected fourteen previously published articles, half of which appeared in this journal (including Professor Gary Jahn's rebuttal to Professor McLean's "God Sees the Truth, but Waits" discussion). McLean keeps us paying attention to what Tolstoy said and wrote; he weighs Tolstoy against Tolstoy. He shows us Tolstoy doesn't need our corrections. (If he needs them, what do we need?) Simply and clearly, what did Tolstoy say and what did he mean? McLean keeps us fascinated by this basic and fundamental procedure, trusting one's curiosity. He continually shows us, in finer detail and larger perspective, Tolstoy's career, informed always by documented evidence. Discussing Tolstoy's discomfiture with *Family Happiness*, McLean ponders, "True, Tolstoy often had a negative reaction to work he had just finished. In 1871 he famously referred to *War and Peace* as 'verbose rubbish' ... and vowed never to write in that vein again. But surely, this passionate repudiation of *Family Happiness* is something quite

different, not only in degree, but in kind. It is a puzzle that calls for more than an offhand explanation. Tolstoy scholars have offered a variety of different solutions to this puzzle, none of which seems to me fully satisfying." (4) And so he proceeds in his quest for a more satisfying solution.

McLean includes only one essay ("Hemingway and Tolstoy: A Pugilistic Encounter") that I'll skip the next time I pore over the book. In the meantime, we all still have our work to do, to read and consider what it is Tolstoy was saying:

Though all the translators duly follow Tolstoy in placing this sentence in an independent paragraph, none of the others could resist the impulse to 'fix' Tolstoy's cumbersome and involved syntax, to clarify and simplify. Were they right to do so? The question goes to the heart of the whole philosophy of translation. In my opinion, it is an illegitimate intrusion, where translators impose themselves as co-authors. Translators should not make themselves into editors. (65)

And readers, he suggests, should not make themselves into interpreters.

McLean steers us on-course and into the heart of matters again and again, and thus keeps giving us plenty to muse upon. He goes as far as he can with scholarship, and then leads us on tours of his ever-curious, ever-sympathetic interest:

Our question [about the lack of references to the mothers of Andrei and Pierre] is thus a microcosm of a much larger one: why was Tolstoy so very abstemious about providing any *Vorgeschichte* to this great novel? For there are many other events that happened prior to 1805 which we might like to know

about. How and where, for instance, was the close and long-standing friendship formed between Pierre and Andrei? ... Likewise, we may wonder about the background of Andrei's marriage to Lisa Meinen. What persuaded his father to acquiesce in that ill-advised union (presuming he did acquiesce), when he was later so adamantly opposed to Andrei's perfectly suitable engagement to Natasha? One could go on with questions like these, all of them evidence of the immense curiosity aroused by the characters in this novel; we would like to know more about them, because through Tolstoy's magic we feel so close to them. (25)

McLean, unlike Tolstoy, seems to have no taste for or delight in argument. After any wrangling over considered opinions, he's the cool-headed, reasonable peacemaker. He graciously concedes, for example, a couple of points to Professor Jahn's equally engaging discussion of "God Sees the Truth, but Waits." He never finishes off a book or story; there's no last word, and he inspires us to go look and reread for ourselves.

The most interesting of the non-TSJ articles is "Love in Resurrection: Eros or Agape?" written for *The Cambridge Companion to Tolstoy*. No one else has made me feel *Resurrection* is worth much more thinking and talking about, least of all Tolstoy himself: "Finally, on December 15, 1899, Tolstoy wrote in his diary: 'Finished Resurrection. Not good. Not corrected. Hasty. But it's off my back and doesn't interest me any more.'" (75) Who is a better quoter than McLean? In every piece he lays out one fascinating quotation after another, all of them connected, reflecting and complementing and complicating our picture of the great man. McLean demonstrates there is pleasure (and feeling) in discussing almost anything Tolstoy wrote, and that a true literary response is a human and humanizing

response: "Though he never undertook to analyze how its effects are achieved, *War and Peace* affected [Isaiah] Berlin emotionally as well as intellectually, as it has so many others." (And here is McLean, reminding us, as Tolstoy would also have it, that the feelings communicated by art are accessible to all.) Regarding Kutuzov's receiving the news of the French retreat from Moscow: "No wonder Berlin was moved. The scene makes me weep too." (216)

The critic Marvin Mudrick once remarked, "It is impossible to know too much about Tolstoy. Everything fits, surprises, and magnifies" (86). McLean gives us this impression as well; Tolstoy is all of a piece:

Imaginary assuaging of guilt seems to have been for Tolstoy one of the fringe benefits of writing fiction. Put an alter ego character into a situation that duplicates one you lived through in real life, but have him behave better than you did, and your conscience is consoled, if not clear!" (15)

(If this seems puzzling, at first glance, McLean provides several examples.)

A few years ago, after I read one of McLean's pieces in these pages, I went and found all the others. Reading this collection convinces me that Professor McLean is the most modest, appreciative, and penetrating critic of Tolstoy I've ever read.

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Works Cited

Mudrick, Marvin. *On Culture and Literature*. New York: Horizon Press. 1970.

