

Review Article: The Living Life in Eternity: The New Tolstoy Biography from *Lives of Extraordinary People*

A. G. Grodetzkaya

Institute for Russian Literature/Russian Academy of Sciences, Pushkin House

Зверев, Алексей и Владимир Туниманов. Лев Толстой. Вступ. статья В. Я. Курбатова. Москва: Молодая гвардия (Серия «ЖЗЛ»), 2006. 782 стр.

There is a tragic story behind A. M. Zverev and V. A. Tunimanov's biography of Tolstoy: it is the posthumous labor of both authors. Aleksei Matveevich Zverev managed to write parts one and two, bringing the biography up to the "turning point" in Tolstoy's life (his last written chapter is on *Anna Karenina*), but died before completing the project. Aleksei Matveevich's widow, the theater historian N. D. Starosel'skaia, approached Vladimir Artemovich Tunimanov, a long-time friend of her husband, with a request to finish the book. Once he had accepted the task of summarizing the last, and most complicated, stage of Tolstoy's life and art (parts three through five and the section "Tolstoy's Drama"), Tunimanov in essence completed the biography, but died himself in May 2006, before the book's publication.

The authors' plaintive, almost hopeless assertion resounds in the epilogue: "In America and Canada interest in Tolstoy is now at an unprecedented peak." And in Russia? "Seemingly apathetic and, for some reason, reserved [...] It appears that Russia, having deified Tolstoy at the begin-

ning of the twentieth century, has grown cold towards its own great novelist" (773).

One has only to walk into any Petersburg bookstore for confirmation of this. At best, the shelves contain one or two translated monographs or republications. Meanwhile, North American slavists unanimously agree that they have been experiencing a boom of interest in Tolstoy over the last two decades, and this interest has drifted over to Tolstoy at the expense of Dostoevsky (the two will likely spend all eternity in postmortem rivalry). The International Tolstoy Society has been operating for twenty years; the refereed annual *Tolstoy Studies Journal* has been published since 1988; and in America and Canada, a number of serious, general monographs on Tolstoy have been printed in the recent past.¹ And quite frankly it is now nearly impossible to undertake any study of Tolstoy without acknowledging the scholarship of North American slavists.² But can one *really* get by without Russian scholarship?

The issue of the reading public's "cold" reception of Tolstoy is treated by the authors with a certain severity; on the whole, as V. Ia. Kurbatov notes in the "Foreword," severity and honesty distinguish their position. The first reviews to appear were brutally honest, since, to paraphrase Chekhov, the name of Tolstoy permits no other kind. A. Nemzer, a reviewer of the book, claims

the impulse to write the biography was “not only professional interest (which has also become a rarity, despite the fact the dizzying complexity of Tolstoy’s “material” is enough to frighten as well as allure just about any philologist), but also the inherent need to speak about what is most important.” Basically agreeing with the authors of the epilogue, Nemzer attempts to explain the reasons for Russians’ estrangement from Tolstoy:

It is painful to say it (and even more so to experience personally), but Tolstoy is an unpopular writer [...] This distancing from Tolstoy (Tolstoy’s distancing) did not begin yesterday, but in the late 70s when our signature drink became a mix of our untroubled (yet intolerable), neophyte religiosity (termed cautiously “idealism”), our comfortable idolatry of culture, our cheap brand of opposition (flipping the bird from a safe distance), our constant desire to be “original,” and our steadfast cynicism. We did not need Tolstoy for this kind of mixture; and not just Tolstoy the moralist and religious thinker, always persisting to the end, but Tolstoy, the artist’s artist, whose work exceeds all human conception and approaches our eternally flowing and unfathomably complicated Life to the extent that art can. Tolstoy really cannot be “assimilated,” “tucked away,” “contextualized” in any sort of ideology (including “Tolstoyism”) or artistic movement (including “realism”). Attempts to appropriate Tolstoy so obviously distort the essence of his life’s work, so vulgarly and naively inflict violence on his majestic word that they invariably end in farce [...]” (Немзер)

Another reviewer, claiming that the book cannot be read all at once, advises the reader to “start again from the beginning” once the final page has been turned. That is, “once you’ve surrounded yourself with Tolstoy’s own compositions, the materials collected for his biography,

the abundance of memoirs, his correspondence. Contemporary commentaries to all these things have not yet been written” (Шевелев).

There you have it: the commentaries have not been written; neither Tolstoy’s understanding of life nor his majestic word can be apprehended; the memoirs have not been read, to say nothing of the biography and the materials from which it is composed. Meanwhile, Tolstoy’s students and followers, as well as the outstanding scholars of his life and art, spent decades working on a biography (the *materialy* were collected by N. N. Gusev, and after him, L. D. Opuľskaia). Tolstoy’s biographers have succeeded surprisingly well, given that his “material” indeed presupposes an epic biographer. The first Tolstoy biography, begun during the subject’s life and with his aid, was P. I. Biriukov’s four-volume opus. Its value is beyond dispute, and all subsequent biographers—and there have been many—have relied primarily on Biriukov’s work. His successors include V. V. Veresaev, author of *Living Life* (*Живая жизнь*), and Bunin, who spent the greater part of thirty years on his own epic work, *The Liberation of Tolstoy*; Tolstoy’s English admirer, Aylmer Maude; Romain Rolland, who wrote his *Life of Tolstoy* in addition to biographies of Beethoven and Michelangelo; Henri Troyat; and finally V. B. Shklovsky, Zverev and Tunimanov’s predecessor in the “Lives of Extraordinary People” (*Жизнь замечательных людей*) series.

That these works, with the exception of Biriukov’s *Biography*, have not been reprinted (just as B. M. Eikhenbaum’s studies, in no way the ideological product of their time and place, have not been republished since their first and only print runs in 1922, 1928, and 1931) is another matter entirely.

However, Tolstoy’s “departure,” so keenly felt by the authors, has become the pledge and harbinger of his swift and inevitable return. The new biography by Zverev and Tunimanov offers evidence of this return. The situation “surrounding

Tolstoy” is long overdue for change and is literally changing before our eyes. The *Complete Collected Works of Tolstoy in 100 Volumes* is in progress. The following works have been published and republished: *Переписка Л. Н. Толстого с сестрой и братьями* (1990), *Неизвестный Толстой в архивах России и США* (1994), *Новые материалы Л. Н. Толстого и о Толстом. Из архива Н. Н. Гусева* (1997), *Л. Н. Толстой и Н. Н. Страхов: Полное собрание переписки* (2003) [*Correspondence of L. N. Tolstoy with His Sister and Brothers, The Unknown Tolstoy in the Archives of Russia and the United States, New Material from Tolstoy and about Tolstoy, From the Archive of N. N. Gusev, L. N. Tolstoy and N. N. Strakhov: Complete Collected Correspondence*]. Following a conspicuous period of interrupted activity, the Russian-language Tolstoy studies journals—*Яснополянские записки*, *Яснополянский сборник*, *Толстовский ежегодник*, *Толстой и о Толстом* [*Yasnaya Polyana Notes, Yasnaya Polyana Miscellany, Tolstoy Yearbook, Tolstoy and about Tolstoy*—have resumed publication. Commonly seen here, particularly in the titles, is the return to the highly acclaimed publications of the 1920s, as is the appearance of anthologies with articles by some of the most outstanding thinkers of the first third of the twentieth century—S. L. Frank, L. I. Shestov, N. Ia. Grot, P. B. Struve, E. N. Trubetskoy, S. N. Bulgakov, V. V. Rozanov, N. A. Berdiaev, N. O. Lossky, D. S. Merezhkovsky, G. V. Florovsky, I. A. Il'in, V. N. Il'in, F. A. Stepan *et al.* (see Л. Н. Толстой: pro et contra and Русские мыслители о Льве Толстом).

Let us turn now to the biography at hand. The authors, writing at the end of the twentieth century, start at its beginning. Russian philosophy of the early part of the century, with its reconceptualization of all Tolstoy’s “discoveries”—his artistic insights, journalistic revelations, ethics, treatment of religious and social problems, the meaning of his living word and “living life” for

Russian and world culture—finds a place in the book. Here one sees, both obviously and sometimes less so, Tolstoy’s younger contemporaries, those with whom the authors of the biography agree and argue heatedly, while Tolstoy’s personal life—“the life *as path*”—is reconstructed. The book opens with the polemic between Merezhkovsky and his long-time opponent, Bunin:

Merezhkovsky’s terming of Tolstoy as the “seer of the flesh”—pronounced during the subject’s lifetime and long accepted wholesale—reflects an obvious injustice insofar as it presupposes the opposition to Dostoevsky, the “seer of the spirit.” However, Bunin, enthralled by Tolstoy’s remarkably sensorial memory, used the word “memory” (память) in quotation marks [...]. If these are reminiscences, then they are not about him *per se*, but rather about something that extended over a number of years and was only embodied in Tolstoy with especial brilliance. (12)

And another reference to Bunin:

Yet Bunin, who was biased and whose assessments were not always convincing, keenly sensed Tolstoy’s paradoxical essence and wrote about his unique understanding of the “flesh of the world,” about his unprecedented adherence to this “flesh”—time, space, reason—and his irrepressible, nearly raging passion to overcome it, his desire to escape submission to “forms,” anything temporal and of this world. (14)

Finally, the authors’ main point: “Tolstoy’s obsession with the eternal, which manifests itself in every moment of the present, in varying degrees of haziness and distinctness, was patent even in childhood” (14). Thus is the tone throughout, but particularly emphatic and persuasive in parts one and two. The Eternal (that is, outside “time, space and reason”) resides in a “strange man,” (the title of one of the chapters)

Lev Tolstoy, and in his “mysteriously dear childhood,” in the “wilderness of boyhood” and the “Spanish castles” of youth (also chapter titles), in the “truth” of the Caucasian and Eastern wars, in his literary and domestic art, love, family happiness and unhappiness.

Page after page, the authors divine and reveal all that is great, unique, miraculous, enigmatic, and poetic in the life of their hero. They find penetrating and poetically elevated words to depict the riddles of this life, as well as their answers: “He preserved from his childhood—which was at once poetic, mysterious and tender—the all-consuming feeling of love as a natural state of the soul, as the natural form of interaction among people” (38). Tolstoy’s heroes “live on the page, revealing before the reader the fullness of existence as it spills out in all different directions and the richness of their character, which is not regulated by any sort of common denominator, but on the contrary is flexible and thus resists any finalization” (192).

In parts one and two, Tolstoy’s biography is constructed primarily via his autobiographical hero. It is as though Tolstoy were constantly looking within himself: the writer’s self-analysis in his letters and diaries is tested against and supplemented by the self-analysis of his hero. Thus every real person from Tolstoy’s biography (as the prototype of the literary persona) is psychologically gauged by the latter. This method works well, for it facilitates not the separation but rather the organic merging of life and art, illustrating how the two spill over into one another. The first parts of the book are characterized by their exceptional, *Tolstoyan*, attention to detail—to the minor things, the “pattern” on life’s carpet, to use Tolstoy’s favorite expression from Herzen. The next half of the book can hardly be compared to “carpet weaving,” for the second author is engaged in an entirely different craft. He highlights only separate episodes and details in Tolstoy’s unwieldy world, the immeasurably widening

space of his late artistic and philosophic prose, journalism, memoirs, diaries, and correspondence.

Despite all this, the book stands as a whole, and the “cement” holding it together (an emblematically Tolstoyan principle) rests on the commonality of the authors’ understanding of Tolstoy’s place in Russian and world culture of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. We have the following summation of Tolstoy’s great *roman*:

War and Peace became a literary achievement of singular importance because it represented an organic fusion of lyrical and philosophical narration, spread out against the backdrop of world events and bearing enormous significance not only for the fate of a nation but for all humanity [...] *War and Peace* was such an unexpected phenomenon with such cohesive durability that it remained unparalleled in world literature. (228-29)

In addition, one is hard-pressed to classify the book as pure biography. The research on Tolstoy’s artistic works, *publitsistika*, and diaries surely belongs with the most authoritative secondary literature. Take, for instance, the observation of the transition from the typical hero in the prose works of Tolstoy’s contemporaries to the formation of the *hero-personality*, the *hero-individual*, and how Tolstoy realizes the principles of artistic individualization; or how, in the book’s second half, the author examines folk “character types” of the late Tolstoy and the “typical” *personae* of his late journalism.

Admittedly, Zverev and Tunimanov’s *Tolstoy* is not for the general reader, but for the worldly. The authors themselves are exceedingly sophisticated and experienced. They succeed in saying about Tolstoy what has gone unsaid for so long for various reasons, but primarily ideological: only so much *could* be said during the Soviet era. The two scholars’ view of Tolstoy is completely uninhibited, without backwards glances. This is to

their merit—their personal fearlessness—and it is a merit of the times. One senses in the new *Tolstoy* the atmosphere of freedom of the last decade of the previous century—no topic is off-limits, everything is discussed openly. What is more, the most intense, nerve-wracking moments (particularly in the second half) are courageously exposed. For instance, Tolstoy's stance towards the Orthodox Church and the drama surrounding his excommunication are presented openly and directly. His family drama, Sofia Andreevna's emotional "spasms," the relations between parents and each of the children—all of these are shown as they have never been shown before—openly, undauntedly, at times harshly, and all taken from the diaries, correspondence, and memoirs of the many participants and witnesses of the family's periods of war and peace. But all of this is treated with the utmost tact, with what is—for a person living at the end of the twentieth century—an inherent knowledge of the ontological depth of such conflicts. Thanks to this knowledge, the lonely Tolstoyan *path* acquires a certain existential overtone. The twentieth century features in the book not only via its great "beginning," but also by setting the stage for all the dramatic attempts to answer the "eternal questions." Thanks to the authors, Thomas Mann, Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, Franz Kafka, Jean-Paul Sartre, European cinema, and Merab Mamardashvili enter into dialogue with Tolstoy.

A few words now about Tolstoy's biographers. A. M. Zverev was a specialist in the history of West European and American literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a scholar of the twentieth-century American novel and Russian émigré literature in France, and the author of a recent Nabokov biography. V. A. Tunimanov was primarily a Dostoevsky scholar, but possessing a wide-ranging expertise, he also authored a number of works on Herzen, Leskov, Goncharov, Russian and European prose, and nineteenth- and twentieth-century journalism and criticism.

The new *Tolstoy* invalidates the notion of any "cooling" of interest in Tolstoy. The book brings the reader into closer proximity to Tolstoy in a new way; he or she is infected and overwhelmed by the daring, "wildness" and grandeur of Tolstoy's thought, word, and action, and the immensity of meaning in his life's *path*.

(Translated by David Houston)

Notes

First published in *Русская литература* 1 (2008).

1. R. Gustafson, G. S. Morson, R. Silbajoris, D. Orwin, G. Jahn, A. Mandelker, K. Feuer, A. Donskov, and others.

2. See, for instance, Sorochan and Stroganov's hardly encouraging review of *Tolstoy Studies Journal*: "[...] the point here is that a journal with defined parameters has been established and printed—a journal that secures the operation of a whole branch of Russian studies in America. At a time in our country when Tolstoy scholarship has practically faded away, our American colleagues have propelled it forward with astounding diligence" (Сорчан 423).

Works Cited

Бирюков П. *Биография Л. Н. Толстого*. Кн. 1-2. 1923. Москва: Алгоритм, 2000.

Эйхенбаум, Б. *Молодой Толстой*. Петербург, Берлин: З. И. Гржебина, 1922.

---, *Лев Толстой. Книга первая: 50-е годы*. Ленинград: Прибой, 1928

---, *Лев Толстой. Книга вторая: 60-е годы*. Ленинград, Москва: ГИХЛ, 1931.

Л. Н. Толстой: *pro et contra. Личность и творчество Льва Толстого в оценке русских мыслителей и исследователей: Антология*. Санкт Петербург: Издательство Русского Христианского гуманитарного института, 2000.

Немзер А. “Напоминание о главном.” *Время новостей* 9 февр. 2007. 29 January 2008 <<http://www.newstime.ru/2007/23/10/171225.html>>.

Шевелев И. “Толстой после Шкловского.” *Московские новости* 4 мая 2007. 29 January 2008 <<http://news.webmoskva.ru/news/3506567>>.

Русские мыслители о Льве Толстом. Тула: Издательский дом «Ясная Поляна», 2002.

Сорочан А., и М. Строганов. “*Tolstoy Studies Journal.*” *Новое литературное обозрение* 64 (2003): 412-23.

Tolstoy’s Epilogue

(from the Maude translation, with Apologies to Auden)

This man is still needed to justify the final collective act.
That act is performed.
The last role is played.
The actor is bidden to disrobe
And wash off his powder and paint:
He will not be wanted any more.

And some years pass
During which he plays a pitiful comedy to himself
In solitude on his island
Justifying his actions by intrigues and lies
When the justification is no longer needed.

And displaying to the whole world
What it was that people had mistaken for strength
As long as an unseen hand directed his actions.

The manager having brought the drama to a close
And stripped the actor
Shows him to us.

“See what you believed in! This is he!
Do you now see that it was not he
But I who moved you?”

- Robin Feuer Miller

