

Reviews

Louise Smoluchowski. Lev and Sonya: The Story of the Tolstoy Marriage.
New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1987. 304 pp.

Lev and Sonya will be provocative if old reading for Tolstoy scholars. Ms. Smoluchowski has quite emphatically not written a scholarly biography, though she has consulted a full range of memoir and autobiographical sources in the original Russian as well as in translation. She makes virtually no reference to competing biographies, yet her interpretation is an implicit challenge to her predecessors and in many ways more persuasive. Scholarship about Tolstoy's writings has no place in this biography whatever, and, for the most part, Ms. Smoluchowski confines herself to bland evaluations of the fiction, referring to it largely to explain what Mr. and Mrs. Tolstoy were doing with their time during the day. The scholarship that should have mattered has to do with the perils of writing a biography of Tolstoy—for example, the essays of Gary Saul Morson and Krystyna Pomorska.¹ The problem is in the diaries: as Eikhenbaum has shown, Tolstoy used them as much as a laboratory for his writing as to record truths.² It remains problematic, then, for biographers to take the diaries at face value. Ms. Smoluchowski writes of how Lev Nikolaevich and Sofia Andreevna read each other's diaries, which warns us that what was written there may have been designed to elicit particular responses from the reading spouse. This practice at the least suggests that the diaries were not impersonal transcriptions of daily life for either husband or wife. Ms. Smoluchowski is, to be sure, sensitive to questions of reliability in her sources and she makes clear judgments about friends' and children's memoirs. Yet for readers skeptical generally about the project of biography, particularly when the biography is based on materials intended for publication and for the eyes of a special reader, Lev and Sonya will provide limited satisfactions. Ms. Smoluchowski does not reflect self-consciously on the difficulties of writing the Tolstoy's life story.

Ms. Smoluchowski does surmount many a major problem in writing about Tolstoy's life—for example, that memoir and autobiographical materials abound and that there is so much time to account for. She chooses creatively among the memoir accounts and the events they suggest, managing to cover long periods of time in a few paragraphs without falling into generalities. Ms. Smoluchowski is, quite simply, a wonderful story-teller and she has found in the Tolstoy marriage a story she feels strongly about telling. That, indeed, is her first innovation in the canon of Tolstoy biographies: she writes not just of her or of him, but of their marriage. As such, she is writing about a subject that is central to the nineteenth-century novel,

certainly to Anna Karenina and War and Peace. There are extraordinary insights into the rhythms of intimacy and the perils of emotional dependency in this tale about two Tolstoys.

Where Ms. Smoluchowski differs from novelists who created the marriage plot is in the trajectory: the Tolstoy wedding occurs, of course, early in her story, and as a result the tale becomes one of family life, not just of an unfolding relationship between two adults. She creates the illusion of the family's daily life brilliantly, recounting childbirths, crises, summer relaxation, and visits to Moscow with facility and grace. One is always aware, for example, of just how many children Sofia Andreevna has borne at any given moment, and how many are still alive. So, too, does one sense the demands of daily life made upon Sofia Andreevna and the importance of her management of the house in ensuring an atmosphere for her husband's writing. Like all great nineteenth-century novelists, however, Ms. Smoluchowski is a bit in love with her characters, and this has large consequences for one's impression of the Tolstoy marriage. She is as much in love with the idea of their marriage as she is with them individually. Time and again, the author stresses how much "Lev and Sonya" were in love, in spite of their extraordinary fighting. One feels her apologizing for their tensions, making them out to be a "normal" part of domestic life, but the tale Ms. Smoluchowski tells reads more like a family nightmare. She believes in the family as passionately as did Tolstoy, at least early on in his marriage, but her story of boundless intrusiveness, hysterical mistrust, and manipulative struggle is enough to make one wonder what it is about family life that keeps people together. She is hardest pressed, not unexpectedly, to explain the betrayals of Aleksandra Lvovna, who allied with Chertkov against her mother; here, Ms. Smoluchowski shows her skills for psychological insight, for she lays great importance on the way that Aleksandra Lvovna got lost among the Tolstoy children, particularly the way that she suffered from being ignored when the favorite son, Vanechka, died. Similarly, a great deal is made of the impact on Sofia Andreevna of this death, and rightly so. What woman would have lived easily through the loss of a child when her husband was trying to convince himself and her that it was a good thing?

Yet the explanation for Sofia Andreevna's erratic behavior, especially near the end of the marriage, rests nearly as much on an idea of shared literary work as it does on her endless labors as a mother. Ms. Smoluchowski insists that, so long as husband and wife were engaged by the project of his novels, all was well. The problems arose when his work shifted from fiction to philosophy and theology and when he began working so much in solitude. After decades of hearing literary scholars lament the cultural consequences of Tolstoy's abandonment of fiction, we have a biographer who regrets his changed interests as a writer because they were bad for his marriage.

Perhaps there is nothing particularly bad about this reversal. The sense of public achievement as defining one's life is, after all, a highly political value and one that thinkers of many sorts, including feminists, have criticized. In this sense, the reversals of public and private life that are at the heart of Lev and Sonya are much to be admired. Feminists will, similarly, find Ms. Smoluchowski's interpretation of Sofia Andreevna greatly appealing. There is sympathy for her endless labors, empathy for her feelings of being unappreciated, and clear-headed analysis of how the female life-cycle might have played its role in Sofia Andreevna's emotional ups and downs. Ms. Smoluchowski notes that Tolstoy learned a great deal about the psychology of women from reading his wife's diaries, and this observation strengthens her case for portraying Tolstoy's fiction-writing as the product of their joint labors. From a feminist perspective, however, one can also challenge Ms. Smoluchowski's romance of the family: she seems not to have considered how Sofia Andreevna was almost doomed from the start by her total emotional investment in her husband's projects. A more critical perspective on family happiness might have yielded different insights into the sources of tension in the Tolstoy family and a less apologetic tone in describing their conflicts.

Ms. Smoluchowski is, in any case, a supporter of sexual intimacy within the family; she misses few occasions to note the patterns of sleeping together between the Tolstoys, and she has valid sympathies for the consequences of sexual neglect in Sofia Andreevna's life. Her advocacy of sexual gratification causes her to read the later writings of Lev Nikolaevich rather angrily. "The Kreutzer Sonata" particularly arouses her wrath, in part because she reads it as exactly the sort of personal attack on Sofia Andreevna that she herself perceived in the story. This is hardly the most creative reading of the story--but Ms. Smoluchowski consistently focuses her creative energies on reading the patterns of intimacy between the Tolstoys, not the literary texts that he produced. Her insights into the consequences for the marriage of Lev Nikolaevich's extreme views about sexuality are, in general, precise and subtle. One wonders, as an aside, why Sofia Andreevna's friendship with the composer Tanaev elicits so little sympathy from Ms. Smoluchowski, who views it as "Sonya[...] making a fool of herself over Tanaev" (191): in particular, she misses the sensuality of music as the key to their friendship, dismissing Sofia Andreevna's passion for music as trivial amusement (one of the more unfortunate sentences in the biography has it that "she found the kind of relaxation in music that some find in alcohol, drugs, or mindless shopping," 199).

Still, Lev and Sonya is an impressive book. Its strength is its narrative flow and conviction; insights are offered into the world from which Tolstoy created his fiction which should contribute to our changing view of him as a novelist. To offer but one instance:

the texture of daily life, as Louise Smoluchowski creates it, resembles nothing so much as a good Dostoevsky novel. Rather than the passionate details and belief in individual integrity that mark Anna Karenina and War and Peace, this biography gives us one scandal scene after another. Not only husband, but also wife threaten to leave repeatedly and more than once make a dramatic departure. Every torturous conflict yields to a melodramatic and slightly unbelievable resolution. If, as readings of Romantic poets have taught us, the writer models his or her life as an extension of the writing, then what would it mean for Tolstoy's literary achievement that he created a world to live in so much at odds with his fiction?

NOTES

1. See Gary Saul Morson, "Tolstoy's Absolute Language," Critical Inquiry, Vol. 7, No. 4 (Summer, 1981), pp. 667-687; Krystyna Pomorska, "Tolstoj's 'Triplets': An Approach to Biography and Creativity," Semiosis: Semiotics and the History of Culture, In Honorem Georgii Lotman, ed. Morris Halle et al., Michigan Slavic Contributions, No. 10 (1984), pp. 176-180.
2. Boris Eikhenbaum, Molodoi Tolstoi (Munich, 1968).

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Anthony Thorlby. Leo Tolstoy. Anna Karenina. Landmarks of World Literature. New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1987. 114 pp.

Anthony Thorlby's slim volume on Anna Karenina joins the new Cambridge University Press series "Landmarks of World Literature." Although each book in this series discusses a single great literary work, no further principle of selection seems to guide the general editor. Why, for instance, include Mann's Buddenbrooks rather than The Magic Mountain, or Woolf's The Waves rather than To The Lighthouse? Does Constant's Adolphe belong in the same category as The Iliad and The Divine Comedy? The series boasts some well-known critics: Wolfgang Iser treats Tristram Shandy, Ian Watt writes on Nostramo, and Michael Wood does 100 Years of Solitude. The haphazard nature of the editor's choices skirts the revived controversy over what exactly constitutes the canon of world literary masterpieces, even though the series title would seem to call for such a statement. With the exception of Woolf and Murasaki Shikibu, however, the series treats works by Western Caucasian males, thus