

## Reviews

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A.N. Wilson. Tolstoy. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1988.\*

A.N. Wilson's Tolstoy is a welcome addition to the biographical literature on Tolstoy. Wilson writes beautifully in the elegant and witty style of the English essay. He can be a bit arch, and for that reason I still prefer Maude's tone, which conveys, without fawning and without fear of criticizing the master where he deserves it, the magical effect produced by genius. Maude had less information than Wilson, however, and Victorian prudery did not allow him to analyse or even reveal all the information available. Wilson is less thorough than Simmons, but he makes better use of the facts he imparts. He is less melodramatic than Troyat, but he tells his tale with gusto, relishing the twists and turns in the life of as complicated a man as ever lived. He is as clever a writer and psychologist as Shklovsky, but he is more concerned to truly understand what made Tolstoy tick than is the Soviet biographer, who, in the service of the state and his own philosophical concerns, can be arbitrary in his judgments. The "biographer" with whom I would compare Wilson is in fact Eikhenbaum, who, after The Young Tolstoy, wrote books which mix historical and literary-historical explanations with speculations about Tolstoy's psychology as a writer.

Other reviewers have praised Wilson's ability to provide historical and social background to Tolstoy's life and works. This side of the book is indeed particularly satisfying to the English-speaking reader, because Wilson views Russian life as an intelligent and informed outsider. Nor is Wilson a Marxist, and his explanations of the mixture in Tolstoy of conservatism and radicalism ring true. Here Wilson owes a great deal to Maude, who brought English moderation to his study of a society where, from the 1830s on, moderate became a dirty word.

I agree with much of Wilson's presentation of nineteenth century Russian life, and here as in every other facet of his book I admire his ability to present material clearly and vividly. There is, however, much more to his book than this. In the first place, Wilson has given the most balanced account I know of Tolstoy's sexuality. (On this subject, Wilson's book should be read together with another Tolstoy, by Pietro Citati [New York, 1986], who cogitates, sometimes murkily and sometimes brilliantly, over the role of Eros in Tolstoy's art.) Wilson depicts both Tolstoy's almost Balzacian lust and his equal capacity for shame and hatred of the flesh. While he does not explain this combination, he puts it in a Russian Orthodox and Victorian context and, especially in his analysis of the biographical

\* Editor's note: Fawcett has just brought out the paperback version of this book.

element in *The Kreutzer Sonata*, he shows it at work in Tolstoy. He also fully documents Tolstoy's homoerotic side, beginning with Konstantin Islavin and ending with Chertkov. But Wilson respects Tolstoy's insistence, in an early diary passage, about another youth whom he loved, that, while his love is erotic, he does not desire intercourse with his beloved. Wilson, who compares Tolstoy's homoerotic love to that celebrated in Shakespeare's sonnets, goes on to point out that Tolstoy treasured his feelings for young men because of their purity. I think that this is exactly right. Whatever our materialist age makes of such attractions, the idealist Tolstoy, like N.K. Stankevich, for instance, believed in a distinction between spiritual and physical love, and lived this distinction as well as writing of it. Wilson's description of the Tolstoy marriage reflects the subtlety of his judgments about love and satisfies both in the (Tolstoyan) sympathy that he accords both partners and the (Tolstoyan) judgments that he metes out where they are deserved.

Another major theme of the book is Tolstoy's psychology as a writer. Here Wilson draws upon his own experience as both novelist and critic. He understands Tolstoy's imagination and displays its workings with great perspicuity. Like other biographers, he mines the works for biographical information, and he also advances novel and fascinating speculations about how Tolstoy came to write them. This second theme culminates in a theory, reminiscent of Eikhenbaum but psychological rather than historical or linguistic, of why the famous crisis in the late seventies occurred. I do not entirely agree either with this theory or with the interpretations of individual works that arise from the biographer's approach, but I think that Wilson, taking this approach, has pinpointed certain autobiographical elements in the genesis of Tolstoy's works that no one else has seen.

Where Wilson falls down is in his treatment of Tolstoy's thought. The Tolstoy who entered into communion with other great minds and whose fiction expresses, among other things, the pattern of his thoughts is largely absent from the book. One partial exception to this is Wilson's account of Tolstoy's indirect communication with Dostoevsky, in which the two writers, while never meeting, speak to each other through their works. Even here, though, the book emphasizes the rivalry of the two individuals rather than their philosophical agreements and disagreements. Where is the man who sits silently at his desk, reading and thinking? Because Wilson neglects this Tolstoy, his readings of the fiction cannot do it full justice.

But perhaps this as it should be in a biography. In any case, it would be wrong to condemn a book as good as this one for not saying everything, or even every very important thing about its subject. Wilson tells the story of how a fascinating individual became a great writer. The result is must reading for anyone interested in Tolstoy.