

Martine de Courcel. Tolstoy: The Ultimate Reconciliation. New York: Scribner's Sons, 1988. 458 pp.

Critical works on Tolstoy appear to classify themselves according to their varying attitudes toward "wholeness." Was there a crisis and break in 1881, or is the life a continuity? Are we dealing with a hedgehog, a fox, or with the arena where those two beasts stalk each other? Or--in terms of more recent Tolstoy scholarship--do we favor the Gustafson or the Morson pole: Tolstoy's life and work as a spiritual unity, or Tolstoy as champion of life's fragment and the unintegrated prosaic detail?

In her new biography, Martine de Courcel takes a strong stand for wholeness. Tolstoy left Yasnaya Polyana in 1910, she claims, because he had at last reconciled himself to the moral correctness and necessity of being a writer. This thesis is stated authoritatively in the Introduction: "What Tolstoy owed humanity was a book: the book. He could not write it at Yasnaya Polyana and so he left" (5). As documentation she offers the following hypothesis: "...in the last months and even the last hours of his life one can see a pattern analogous to that which had presided over the working out of each of his novels and every one of his essays and stories" (5). In the conclusion of the biography, de Courcel restates the thesis in more detail. But this time she divides up the "foreshadowings" of literary activity into four periods: a) an irresistible desire to write; b) a deep preoccupation with a problem of general concern; c) a craving for reading; and d) a chance encounter with an incident or true story (398).

Now, in a man whose written traces fill ninety volumes, and who never stopped writing, being preoccupied with general problems, reading, and taking in others' stories as grist for his own mill, such extremely general sequences of "foreshadowing" cannot be assumed to prove much one way or the other. Thus the reader--and especially the reader familiar with the basic contours of Tolstoy's life--is set up to expect a strong argument for this "ultimate and unwritten book" in the body of the biography. Is there anything in these 400 pages to win us over to a thesis like this, so provocative and yet so ostensibly thin?

Unfortunately, very little. The familiar biography is all in place, with the letters and diaries stitched into it as well as the familiar methodological naivete. De Courcel, who has a degree in psychology from the Sorbonne, is mercifully restrained in her occasional invocation of "id," "ego" and "superego" structures (see her comments on the "organized" versus the "idealized" ego in Tolstoy, 114, and later on guilt and love, 395). But her four-stage "foreshadowing" thesis is implicitly informed by psychoanalytic modeling, enabling a sort of "causality by contiguity" that Tolstoy himself would have deplored. This ahistorical approach leads the biographer into all the famous pitfalls of the Tolstoy industry. Art and life are mixed indiscriminately when analyzing the "essentially autobiographical works" of

Tolstoy's early period (44). Unfortunate metaphors are selected for Tolstoy's most calculatedly messy works: in the aftermath of Saul Morson's Hidden in Plain View, for example, it makes one wince when Mme de Courcel refers to War and Peace as an "enormously complex machine" (98) in which "every character had to be set precisely in its orbit, and its course controlled in relation to the courses of all the others" (103).

The Tolstoy marriage, too, is treated with conventional sensationalism. In contrast to the recent chronicle by Louise Smoluchowski (Lev and Sonya: The Story of the Tolstoy Marriage), de Courcel does not take Sofya Andreevna at her word—that she most often wrote in her diary when she was unhappy and therefore her written record was bound to be grim and untrue. So we get the usual spooky picture of the Tolstoy's sexual life: Sonya as frigid (he's insatiable, she's repelled), ever resentful of her pregnancies, alternately fearful about another conception and about abandonment. Over fifty years all those fears and feelings did occur, of course, but de Courcel conflates and generalizes on the written record in such a way that the normal and vigorous times are much diminished. A case in point: Tolstoy's passing desire to re-enlist in the army during the 1863 Polish Uprising understandably caused his wife, still recovering from her first confinement, some anxiety. The event is glossed by Mme de Courcel in the following way: "From that time forward, Sofia never ceased keeping watch on her husband; it irritated Tolstoy so much during the last year of his life that it was one of the 'immediate causes' of his leaving home" (87). On some level this might well be true, and the final year was indeed a disaster. But people in love watch over one another: de Courcel does both Tolstoy's a disservice by presenting the husband as always the trapped animal, the wife as the pathology.

Perhaps the strengthen her "departure thesis," de Courcel portrays Sofia Andreevna in the final chapter very much as Chertkov and Alexandra Lvovna saw fit to present her to the world: authentically mad. All those painfully sane and self-aware passages in Sonya's diaries that Louise Smoluchowski cites—making the case that Sonya's hysteria was more a desperate attention-getting strategy than an illness—are here passed over. Mme de Courcel stresses rather Tolstoy's renewed interest in lunatic asylums, linking it with concern for his wife's condition (346-47). But psychopathology is not confined entirely to the wife. At several points, the biographer suggests (perhaps again in preparation for the "departure thesis") that Tolstoy himself was somehow pathological in his desire to write. For example, the famous sentence from "A Few Words Apropos of War and Peace," where Tolstoy defends his novel as being "what the author wished and managed to express in the form in which it now exists," elicits the following comment: "This phrase suggests that Tolstoy was in some way compelled to do this work, which is not a novel, not by a simple desire to write, but by a kind of pressure, a sense of obligation" (98). Everywhere Mme de Courcel courts the idea of being out of control, driven

by hidden inner scenarios. The act of writing, we learn at the end of the biography, had the therapeutic power of transference for Tolstoy--although it brought no cure (393). He had to do it, and his "reconciliation" with himself was his final realization that having to do it was good: "I keep on writing," so Tolstoy muttered in his famous, final deathbed delirium, "and it comes together like music." Is this an "ultimate reconciliation"? Mme de Courcel is certainly correct that the many compulsions and minor pathologies that interweave with genius are never irrelevant. But her thesis, tacked on to the top and bottom of her text, does not seem potent enough to have merited a new biography.

Still, there are some valuable insights. Mme de Courcel occasionally resists the very conflating moves that her methodology so encourages, as in her refusal to equate Tolstoy's pagan and pantheistic 1859 Speech to the Society of Friends of Russian Literature with the later, more ascetic and "negating" position in What is Art? (99). She adroitly connects Tolstoy's apparent awkwardness in everyday tasks (Sonya's comment that her husband was "always crude and clumsy" in small jobs around the house) with his own idealization of physical dexterity: "his feeling of inferiority about it led him to overvalue manual labor, which he invested with a restorative and redeeming virtue" (161-62). She is right that The Kreutzer Sonata is not necessarily an anti-feminist tract. And on occasion her summing up of Tolstoy (in the writer's own words) is so excellent an antidote to the Bakhtinian image of Tolstoy as "monologic" that one can only applaud: "If [an artist] has found everything and knows everything and teaches or deliberately amuses, he produces no effect. Only if he is seeking does the spectator, the listener, or the reader join with him in his search" (diary entry for 19 December 1900; de Courcel, 278).

The overarching problem of the "departure thesis" does not, however go away, and it is hard to justify its central role in motivating the book. "I began this inquiry without prejudgment and without any prepared hypothesis," de Courcel assures us. "I set out therefore like an explorer on his track...I turned over the stones along his path and the words of his books to see if a hidden answer was not to be found there....It was only at the end of this painstaking work that a flight over the excavation revealed its structure, rather as the plan of a buried city shows up more clearly in photographs taken from the air" (5).

But a "photograph from the air" would never be Tolstoy's vantage point, and--diaries kept in the toe of one's boot notwithstanding--there is almost nothing "hidden" in the Tolstoy life. No special reconciliation (or, for that matter, no catastrophic alienation) is necessary to legitimize Tolstoy's departure from Yasnaya Polyana in 1910. Rather than presume a great unwritten book, is not a more prosaic explanation likely? Something, perhaps, more in keeping with the secret admiration for Russia's

holy fools that Tolstoy once expressed to Strakhov: "If I were alone I would not be a monk, I would be a yurodivy, that is, I would not value anything and would not do anybody any harm" (137). By 1910, too much of Tolstoy was caught up in a war over who owned and valued what, and to those he loved he was doing too much harm. In fact, there was simply too much of everything in the Tolstoy household: too much fame, too much money, too much talent, too many children, too many guests, too many words. It is certainly true that a surfeit of prosaic things does not make for the spectacular and well-focused biography. But surfeit is exactly what Tolstoy generated, and what he came in his final years to fear. It is hard to assume, as Mme de Courcel does, that Tolstoy escaped only to take on more words. If anything, it was probably a flight empowered by a fantasy along the lines of Father Sergius: after trying everything else, lose your passport and go on living, but no one knows where. As Gary Saul Morson has pointed out in connection with Anna Karenina, a certain side of Tolstoy always understood plot "as an index of error" (TSJ, vol. 1, 1988, 5). Tolstoy escaping his family of forty-eight years to write his great book is a very big plot.

Caryl Emerson, Princeton University

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Leo Tolstoy's 'War and Peace'. Modern Critical Interpretations.  
Ed. and with an Introduction by Harold Bloom. New York:  
Chelsea House, 1988. 144 pp.

Leo Tolstoy's 'War and Peace' is one of over a hundred collections of critical essays on major works of Western literature that Chelsea House is preparing under the editorial supervision of Harold Bloom. The laudable intention behind this massive undertaking is to help the modern student of literature who is overwhelmed these days by the sheer 'critical mass'. The seven essays — all published previously between 1966 and 1983 — selected for this volume are by: John Bayley, Robert L. Jackson, W. Gareth Jones, Edward Wasiolek, Patricia Carden, and Martin Price. All of them are well-written and explore such important questions as: Tolstoy's powers of representation, the dialectic of freedom and necessity, multiple narratives, memory, moral vision, and the place of theory in Tolstoy's novel. Along with the essays the editor has provided a brief introduction, a chronology of Tolstoy's life and literary career, a bibliography, and an index.

Despite the praiseworthy intentions, there are serious flaws in this anthology. The muddled introduction by Professor Bloom is a clear signal that this project was put together carelessly and in great haste. While the essays themselves are interesting and well worth the reading — or re-reading — they have been shorn of their original footnotes and even of page or section references to War and Peace. This can hardly have been done over concern about space, since at most, the references would have added ten pages to this slim volume. Scholarly essays, one thought, are meant to lead the reader back into