

Reviews

Jay Parini. *The Last Station: A Novel of Tolstoy's Last Year*. New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1990. 290 pp.

Parini's novel is the sort of book that almost begs to be dismissed by professionals in the field. We know too much; Parini's task was too easy (that "Tolstoy's life is a novel" is one of our great truisms); the real-life characters themselves wrote up--indeed, overwrote up--the events of that last year from every conceivable angle; and for potting around in this rich earth, the novel has already received too many wildly positive reviews. This first impulse to reject on our part would be a mistake. Jay Parini has done a very creditable job, achieving in his portrait of a deeply divided and estranged Yasnaya Polyana such moments of translucent paralysis that the reader must take a deep breath just to push on.

Parini's technique--surely the correct one to apply to a colony of graphomaniacs engaged in a war over diaries and memoirs--is to alternate chapters from the pen, or point of view, of the major participants. He surrounds Tolstoy with five distinct spheres of influence and commentary: Sofya Andreevna, Dr. Makovitsky, Valentin Bulgakov, Chertkov, Sasha. These five persons are all to one extent or another "novelized," that is, the events they relate in "their" chapters are documentable and familiar but Parini has filled them in, motivated them, added inner and outer dialogue. But there are two other types of chapter as well. The first type, entitled "J.P.," consists of Parini's own lyrics, which serve to suspend tensions for a page or two at critical points. The second, labeled "L. N.," are excerpts from Tolstoy's own writings (letters, diary entries, the end of "The Death of Ivan Ilych"). Clearly these two initialed chapter-types belong to a special category of authoritative voice--to, as it were, real authors. Parini respects this difference between himself/Tolstoy and everybody else in the novel by inserting Tolstoy "whole," by reproducing Tolstoy's texts in these "L. N." chapters without contextualization or commentary. Others at Yasnaya Polyana always risk Parini's intervention; the sage, however, is allowed to speak absolutely for himself. (A check of the Tolstoy letters and diaries quoted by Parini indicates for the most part unabbreviated, and--with one or two inexplicable exceptions¹--accurate

¹The major "inaccuracy" occurs on Parini's p. 130, in ch. 19 ("Chertkov"). Chertkov is recalling a treasured letter he had received from Tolstoy dated November 7, 1884, in which Tolstoy recalls his unfinished novel about Peter I. The explanation Tolstoy gave of Peter's evil deeds was that the tsar was "simply

direct quotation.) Tolstoy, it seems, can create fictions, even fictions of himself, but he is not a victim of them.

No one senses the unfairness of this better than Sofya Andreevna--in my opinion the novel's finest, although by no means fairest, creation. At one point she is trying to win Valentin Bulgakov to her side; she knows she has nothing to win, and her bitterness and jealousies run so deep that she could hardly work with her winnings if she made them. She begins by praising the young secretary:

"I think it surprises him that such a young man could be learned. When he was your age, he was whoring in the Caucauses."

The dear boy cleverly ignored my derisory remarks about Lyovochka--a good sign. Tact is among the more socially useful forms of insincerity. It is noticeably lacking among my husband's associates. Lyovochka, of course, has never had to worry about not offending people. If you are Leo Tolstoy, you merely reveal the Truth." (67)

In that paragraph there is so much anger, helplessness, pride and awareness--so much, in short, of Dostoevsky's *Underground*--that one involuntarily admires her ability to survive at all. It is not the sort of sympathy transmitted, say, by Louise Smoluchowski's *Lev & Sonya*;² matters have gone much too far for that. With *Sonya* it is a matter of

too busy" with building ships, working the lathe, making proclamations. He recommends for Chertkov "a little more calm and idleness." Tolstoy writes (in R. F. Christian's translation): "It's a truism that idleness is the mother of vice; but not everyone knows that feverish, hasty activity is the handmaiden of discontent with oneself and especially with other people." This point is reversed in Parini's compressed version of the sentence, which reads: "It's a truism that idleness is the handmaiden of discontent with oneself and, in particular, with other people."

The omission is unfortunate, reducing Tolstoy's advice to an inconsistent banality. To be sure, in a world where Parini's readers knew all Tolstoy's correspondence by heart, this "compression" would lend itself excellently to analysis: the stiff and unforgiving Chertkov, in "his" chapter, would indeed suppress memory of such a recommendation to frivolity in a letter from his revered master. But surely the readers of this novel are not expected to notice the discrepancy.

Then there are a few liberties in chronology. On Parini's p. 173 (ch. 25, "L. N."), the famous letter to Sofya Andreevna of 14 July 1910 is dated 14 June; likewise, some of the diary entries are only approximately dated. There would seem to be no special novelistic reason for these departures.

²See the review of Smoluchowski by Stephanie Sandler in *TSJ*, vol. 1 (1988): 27-30.

animal entrapment, and Parini has a poet's ear for patterns of entrapment as an older woman might feel them: the fading of her body as an endpoint for Tolstoy's interest, a morbid weariness about the present interrupted by long stretches of absolute lyrical recall of the past. Sonya's wandering memory gives the novel most of its historical dimension. And the results are disastrous, because that sort of remembering leads her into traps like "...I will triumph. Our love will triumph." "Our love" is now her possession.

The other characters are also successful, but shallower. There is the embittered and God-ridden Dushan Makovitsky; the translucently inexperienced Valentin Bulgakov, a marvel of mental balance; Chertkov, ungenerous and manipulative but--like so few of the others--utterly attuned to Tolstoy's needs in the present; and ponderous Sasha, combining her mother's tenacity with her father's intellectual stubbornness. The image of Tolstoy himself through these various lenses is quite fine, most of all for its being very old. (Its closest competitor are the marvelous comments Vsevolod Meyerhold made in the mid-1930s to his theater company about his visit to Yasnaya Polyana some three decades earlier. Meyerhold had been in awe, gazing at a spot high on the door where the great man was bound to appear: "...at last the door opened and in came this little figure in a black overcoat and a yarmulke, a little man like this, and with teeny little steps he headed off somewhere, to go the bathroom or someplace. Tolstoy turned out to be a dried-up, little old man. I was speechless..."³) Parini, too, is good with age. For all the patience, humility, and authority of Tolstoy's own writing in the "L. N." chapters, through others' eyes we see a frail, revered and very stubborn old person, one who cannot abide change in any ritual or personality except at his own initiative, and who deeply needs at all times a rapt audience. Chertkov with his Tolstoyan colony on call and Makovitsky with his endless pious note-taking understand and cater to this. That they are the least attractive characters in the novel must give us pause.

Here the underside of Parini's "authoritative" strategy is revealed. In giving Tolstoy's voice that uninterrupted and unmediated status in the novel, he suggests to the reader--or to this reader--that a steady diet of "confession in diary form" is a pretty poor way to grow if your goal is a "Tolstoyan" one. The well-known letter to Sofya Andreevna from 14 June 1910 (which Parini reproduces as his ch. 25) makes this very clear. First there is the problem of love. "I have never stopped loving you," he writes, even though he then insists that all the possibilities for active love had disappeared (a half-century earlier, at work over the three-part typology of love in chapter 24 of "Youth," Tolstoy would not have made such an error). Then there is the problem of private narrative itself. If you feel misrepresented,

³Meyerhold relates the anecdote to his company in connection with the character of Pimen (rehearsal notes from a production of Pushkin's Boris Godunov). See Paul Schmidt, Meyerhold at Work (Austin, TX: University of Texas, 1980), 120-21.

Tolstoy writes to his wife, "I shall happily take this opportunity to say, in my diary or in this letter, what my relations with you were really like, and what your life has been, as I have seen it." Sonya is right: in this format all her husband ever has to do is "reveal the Truth." Everyone else, in their chapters, must put up with messy dialogue on the spot.

Parini is clearly familiar with the translated primary documents of the period, and it is a formidable body of writing to organize. But a more serious problem is its quality. The traces of life and thought left by the Tolstoys and their associates are so articulate, lucid and self-aware that one wonders how any later writer could improve on them--short of trimming, juxtaposing, in essence assembling a collage. There's an element of that in this book, although this fact should in no way detract from the creative achievement (and quite beautiful writing) of the novel.

A more serious criticism, however, is that Parini--with the great iconoclast and nay-sayer Leo Tolstoy as his subject--has written such a conventional novel. A novel with all the skillful foreshadowings that Tolstoy so polemicized against and replete with scenes of sexual voyeurism, that sine qua non of the genre (the virgin Bulgakov being deflowered by green-eyed Masha at Telyatinki, a very boring story; Dr. Makovitsky recalling an act of oral sex with a Hungarian prostitute, his one experience with women; the initially subtle and then leaden intimations of lesbianism between Sasha and Varvara Mikhailovna). All these activities doubtless really went on, but biographical novels leave a lot out and it would have been better if some of those descriptions had been, well, left out. Parini is so excellent with the traces of things, with those situations that require restraint and register tiny, terrible shifts of mood. He understands best how old and worn-out things keep on living, and even get miraculously revived (the old Tolstoy on the train, suddenly surrounded by a rapt audience, is one example). But perhaps the inclusion of the body in its young and spontaneously erotic forms is Parini's final challenge to Tolstoy, and to Tolstoy's disgust at novels that take on such stories.

One might consider Parini's book in connection with the Finale to Middlemarch. "Marriage, which has been the bourne of so many narratives, is still a great beginning...It is still the beginning of the home epic--the gradual conquest or irremediable loss of that complete union which makes the advancing years a climax, and age the harvest of sweet memories in common." It is doubtless truer, as George Eliot sensed, to end a novel on old age than on happy weddings. And what about real life? Parini's novel shows us the Tolstoy family at work undermining both beginnings and ends, with the only way out an absolute reinvestment in the old man's written texts. If those texts weren't so extraordinary, it would be a bitter harvest.

Caryl Emerson, Princeton University