

Tostoi's Last Fiction: a footnote to a note

by David Ackley

Disingenuously, before a departure which he executed in the dark of early morning, Tostoi had left a brief note for Sophia which said that leaving everything behind and going off by themselves was just something that old men did. A note of simple explanation, and complex omission. He was of course not by himself, his daughter Alexandra being with him. The omissions were more lies, at least one for each grasping child, petitioner, disciple. Sophia's hysteric possessiveness, jealousy, suspicion gave her special standing; the lie in her case was large, heartfelt: from her he simply had to escape, having no longer the stomach or stamina for the tantrums perpetually refreshed from the bottomless well of her jealous paranoia. There was an underlying note of farce, even burlesque; Tolstoi never would have written this, with all the posturing and insane self-dramatizing: amazing that the last act of his own life had all the bizarre excess of his rival Dostoevski, the only one who'd do it justice.

He tells his seminar that the traditional critical bifurcation of Tolstoi into artist and preacher is not the way he sees it. Rather he thinks Tostoi's life is a reflection of the artist's oscillating views of his art, the sometimes dazzling shifts between the side that believed that things play out as they will while the artist, at best, could merely observe and describe, entranced by the way that life teases us toward sight and understanding, then shifts ground leaving us baffled and blind. This is the artist whose avatar is Pierre Bezukhov, the mild, intellectual anarchist of War and Peace who can and does believe by turns in whatever is to him passionately presented, a restless and uncommitted seeker. But for Tolstoy there is the other artist who composed, controlling his terms, reining in his characters whenever they romped toward unacceptable freedom in the interest

of the larger picture, the great composition, understood with the understanding of the god who created and manages it all. But the notion of control, or even order, was itself a tease, and in the end there was nothing left to do but escape from the insistent chaos (which his love of truth must have insisted was also, at least in part, his own creation) that even the attempted imposition of that vision, maybe *especially* that, left in its wake. What he'd abdicated was that hopeless disarray which represented, more than anything, the failed outcome of his own dreams of peace, unity, order.

