

Beauty and the Beast

DAVID LITTLEJOHN

TOLSTOY, by Henri Troyat. Translated by Nancy Amphoux. Doubleday. \$7.95.

There are three reasons for the excellence, the peculiarly exhausting excellence of this book. The first is the sheer quantity and quality of life lived by its protagonist (and his antagonist: this is the life of two Tolstoyes). With these reaches of barbarism, energy, sensuality, mysticism, notoriety, and disorder none of the subjects of the recent great wave of literary biographies can begin to compete.

The second reason draws on one aspect of this exaggerated, mad vitality: the Tolstoyes' compulsion to record every tiny wave of hatred or exhilaration or self-disgust in a proliferating mountain of diaries, letters, and memoirs that must have been at once the blessing and the curse of Henri Troyat's labors.

The third is the genius of Henri Troyat.

The exaggerated quality of Tolstoy's life begins with that of late Czarist Russia; a holy, Dark Ages autocracy, a feudal aristocracy, pogroms, slave beatings, saints and gypsies and madmen, "snarling wolves and bare shoulders": the intensity of life is sometimes obscene. The lives of Tolstoy's Aunt Aline, of the blind poet who lulled his grandmother to sleep, read like tales out of medieval folklore.

Parents and grandmother were seized by death before Leo was ten, and the sensuous richness of a Russian aristocrat's country life was suddenly exchanged for the strangeness of Moscow, 130 miles across the snow. No richer seedtime for a novelist could be imagined than this childhood of death and disruption in a land and a time of extremes. There followed an adolescence of violent enthusiasms, a young manhood of Rousseauvean idealism and epic debauchery; at twenty-two, Tolstoy left home for the Caucasus and

war, gluttonous for more experience.

The basic Tolstoyan personality, never radically to be changed, can be identified by his early twenties. He was a man of extraordinary sensitivity—to a scent, to an image, to an insult. He acted always with freakish vitality, showing the same fanatic zest in haymaking as in lovemaking, in riding as in writing. He was still boasting of, and recording, his sexual prowess well into his seventies. But he could also, as one of his daughters remarked, relish with equal lust the dry pleasures of abnegation and abstinence. Sudden and violent reversals, in fact, are the characteristic on which Troyat concentrates as best defining Count Leo Nikolayevich Tolstoy. "His periods of concupiscence and asceticism always alternated in rapid succession," Troyat writes of him at twenty-two. "He was two men—a sybarite and a saint—sewed up inside one skin, each loathing the other."

ERRATIC, impetuous, primeval in the directness and intensity of his emotions, knowing every passion and its reverse: he had, with all this, a disgust for artifice and decorum, a holy obsession with "honesty," that did not preserve him from his own elaborate structures of self-delusion, for all that it may have contributed to his art. (The classic horrible instance: forcing his eighteen-year old fiancée to read a detailed account of his past seductions.) He invested all his prodigious energy in school reform one week, gambling the next, astronomy, Greek, hunting, peasant welfare, metaphysics, until his young wife could wonder to her diary, "Am I just another of his passing crazes?" And he had (the final ingredient in this recipe for a novelist) an unparalleled fascination with himself. Add to all this a self-assurance so great that nothing could ever bend or break it down, and the pattern

is set. Once this was acquired (at about his thirtieth year), Tolstoy was able to bind up all his contradictions, and impose himself upon the world for fifty years as the embodiment of a new moral order.

In Troyat's account of the public career that followed, Tolstoy's fiction appears of secondary importance: a sort of platform of popularity from which the prophet-reformer could speak to his people. By thirty-four, he was a practicing public crank, a Russianized super-Rousseau drinking foaming goat's milk, making his own shoes, dressing like a muzhik (his version of the Noble Savage), sneering at art, and preaching a vague, anti-authoritarian, pantheistic Christianity. By 1881 he had made the full leap of faith, turned his profits and properties over to his wife, and moved bag and baggage into a rigid, uncompromising private world. Here he was to dwell, battered and battering, for the rest of his life.

To the dense, grand, sensuous masterpieces of realistic epic fiction succeeded holy manifestos, a legion of crackpot disciples, Tolstoyan colonies, rewritings of Scripture, movements of reform. The most celebrated writer in Russia at forty, he became at fifty its most subversive and untouchable idol. His books were banned, and read by millions. He was excommunicated by the Holy Synod and denounced by the Czar, but crushed almost to death by adoring mobs. He was turned to as an oracle, his every word recorded; he was a Czar above Czars. News cameramen, souvenir hunters, the needy, the troubled, disciples and parasites, the famous and the insane swarmed upon him at Yasnaya Polyana, lived in the house, ate at the table. His eightieth birthday, in 1908, became an orgy of celebrity worship. The mob watch at his deathbed, in 1910, could scarcely be equaled even today. It may reasonably be claimed that no author in history has suffered a comparable fury of fame.

THE CENTRAL TRAGEDY of this life, however, was played not in the arena of words and ideas, but in the home—if "tragedy" is not too formal a word for the harness of mutual torment in which Sonya Andreyevna

Behrs and Leo Nikolayevich Tolstoy were yoked together for forty-eight years.

Sonya was, at first, the perfect Desdemona to his Othello, an innocent, gay girl held spellbound by this rough-hewn, "experienced" count almost twice her age. (See the subplot of *Anna Karenina*.) But she soon blossomed into something very like her mate: as strong, as selfish, as volatile, as emotional; and very strategic with her favors. They scratched out rival diaries—Tolstoy an "honesty" in action—and then showed them to each other, and then wrote angry replies, and so on, treasuring their transient resentments like connoisseurs of hate.

Through the six years' gestation of *War and Peace*, Sonya grew content. As long as she could be her artist-husband's helpmeet and guard, she could also be his jailer; as long as he was writing novels, he was in her power. She could write, in 1868, "We still argue, but the causes of these quarrels are so deep and complex that they would not occur if we did not love each other as we do."

But when the novelist became the prophet, the battle was rejoined. "It will pass, like a disease," she wrote hopefully. Instead, she watched with horror as her husband, her noble, celebrated, wealthy author-husband, began to turn in disgust from all she most treasured: her home, her comforts, her children, her position, her religion. As a novelist, she could meet him; as a saint, he was lost. And *he* watched in horror as the necessary companion of his nights became a living insult to all his sacred truths.

As she raked in the profits from his profane writings, he writhed in mortification. "A fight to the finish has begun between us," he declared in 1885. Many times he tried to leave, but could not. "God's commandment" to husbands held him back.

When the sex tie was finally broken, in his eightieth year, Sonya very nearly went mad. Now she had lost all hold. She threw herself into a vile family scramble for the posthumous rights to his works, now valued in the millions; but he had invested all his affections and all his trust in his chief disciple, Chertkov, a heartless servant-master whose power over

her husband drove the Countess to despair. She countered with hysterical seizures, tried mock suicides *à la* Anna Karenina. "They are tearing me apart," Tolstoy wrote of the two rivals, and finally, on October 28, 1910, walked out to his death.

SO THOROUGH, so intimate is the wealth of written record generated by Tolstoy's life that his biographer can at times become all but omniscient. Tolstoy's courtship of Sonya, for example, was recorded instant by instant not only by the participants—master diarists both—but by many observers as well. We have Boswellian recordings of conversations; warring diaries of marital tensions and bliss, corrected sometimes several times a day; dreams, fantasies, obsessions, hallucinations all described in minute detail; the combative letters and memoirs and journals of children and associates.

Priceless, certainly; unique. Yet this carload of documentation teems with troubling implications. The very fact of recording one's actions and emotions *changes* those actions and emotions, as Troyat clearly recognizes. In the Tolstoy's private diaries "honesty and candor alternate with insults and self-pity," and much is written in strategic self-defense. "The miracle is that their marriage stood the strain of this continual rivalry to see which could be most truthful." The documents were at once a therapeutic release, notes for novels, and missiles from one side of the bed to the other; later they became the valuable objects of a frenzied family struggle.

Their implications today, for biographer and reader, are almost as complex. Granted that their creation is itself evidence of aberration, of a morbid self-fascination and self-

dramatization; granted further that the Tolstoy's cannot be said to have discouraged their publication. Still, may they not, by the unavoidable demands they make on his attention, by their semi-scandalous fascination, tempt a biographer to focus on the domestic, the conjugal, and to scant the achievements that made Tolstoy worth writing about in the first place? To reduce the author of *War and Peace*, in fact, to the role of a selfish, oversexed, mismatched husband? This temptation is, unfortunately, greatly strengthened by a silence in Tolstoy's diary for thirteen years, from 1865 to 1878, the very years he spent writing his two great novels.

THIS BRINGS us round to the very special genius of Henri Troyat, for his interest is not that of a critic in novels, but of a novelist in men. If Tolstoy's novels seem to be "missing" from this biography, it is not only because they have little place in Tolstoy's life records, but also because Troyat does not like them very much or analyze them very deeply. He makes ritual obeisance before *War and Peace*; but in his plot-outline critique (the one piece of bad writing in the book), it is very nearly reduced to a web of artless sentimentalities, historical inaccuracies, and philosophic bilge. A great Gallic sneer is turned on Tolstoy's "injustice" to Napoleon.

Anna Karenina scarcely fares better. Troyat concentrates on the analysis of its sources and the demolition of its "ideas," and abandons the question of its art and appeal, after a few remarks on adjectives and details, to Tolstoy's ineffable "instinct, inseparable from life, owing nothing to technique."

Resurrection he finds brutal, crude, hammered together like a shoe. Troyat, a master of prose style, winces at Tolstoy's insensitivity to syntactic efficiency, to "a clash of vowel sounds." This does not mean that he may not say useful, even illuminating things about Tolstoy's fiction. But by and large, his criticism is the surface-skimming of an earlier age.

Nor is this very reasonable Academician particularly sympathetic with Tolstoy's idealist pretensions. Troyat himself is more akin to Tur-



genev, Tolstoy's favorite enemy: tact-ful, witty, impeccably suave, appar-ently disengaged; an aesthete and moralist with a deft, dramatic style, a tendency toward the cynical—and a total unwillingness to acknowledge the irrational, immoralist claims of the Exceptional Man. "Ah, the charms of temporary poverty," he observes of Tolstoy's short ride in a third-class coach. "This special menu suited both his philosophy and his lack of teeth," he remarks of the Master's vegetarian diet—a sleek nastiness worthy of Gibbon. Saints are very hard for the unconverted to live with, be they wives or biogra-phi-ers.

And yet I cannot imagine Tolstoy finding a better biographer. Though he steers clear of Tolstoy's soul, and avoids the lower reaches of the cre-ative unconscious, Troyat has still written a magisterial biography.

The sure, dramatic order—of book, of section, of chapter, of para-graph, of sentence—is almost enough to justify the French educational system. He deploys his vast materials, plans his strategy, shifts his focus or point of view, moves from drama to abstraction, opens and closes his pe-riods or his chapters, with the assur-ance and finesse of a master. The whole book glows with his intelli-gence and is articulated by his tact.

Troyat's rhetorical "presence" is as fluid and mature as Jane Austen's. He can energize and judge in the same perfect word, invisibly make the keenest distinctions with just the right detail, the mock drama of a rhetorical question, the wit of a pa-renthesis, all the while shaping a growing, organic drama that we at once experience as life and savor as art. His play of words bespeaks a lifetime of using them well; his sen-tences sing—even in English. (The translation, by Nancy Amphoux, is nearly perfect, invisible: she *is* Troy-at, for all I could tell.)

As a judge—and biography, of course, is a hugely moral business—Troyat guides us through this jungle of guilt and blame (barring the ex-cesses of skepticism mentioned above) with excellent balance. As a novelist himself, he knows the combination of words, details, rhythms, and quo-tations to bring these lives back to life, to make horribly clear the high human price of genius.



He never tasted milk

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A British Museum

RICHARD MAYNE

NO LAUGHING MATTER, by Angus Wilson. Viking. \$6.95.

I first met Angus Wilson in the early 1950's, when as Deputy Superintendent he presided over the vast circular Reading Room of the British Museum. That dingy rotunda was—and still is—a submuseum in itself, a daily haven not only for the nation's scholars but also for a rare collection of licensed eccentrics—gaunt, elderly recluses in threadbare overcoats and greasy beards, fingering their way along the small print of nineteenth-century treatises on witchcraft or surreptitiously eating stale cheese sandwiches under cover of Migne's *Patrologia Latina*. One constant reader was a tiny middle-aged lady who wore navy-blue shorts and canvas sneakers even in the depths of a London winter, her thin bare legs mottled puce by the cold.

It was tempting to believe that among these frail grotesques there might be some future Karl Marx, meditating theories that would one day change the world. But it was even more tempting to imagine that all of them were characters out of Wilson's stories, called into being and manipulated by that slight, graying figure behind the barrier on the central dais, surveying the room with keen, feline composure.

In those days he was chiefly known for two volumes of needle-sharp short stories, *The Wrong Set* (1949) and *Such Darling Dodos* (1950), on which he had impaled innumerable specimens—shams and egotists, penniless snobs and dilettante rebels, nostalgic progressives and bourgeois bohemians, all datedly adrift between prewar pretensions and postwar rationing, between Munich and McCarthyism, between crooners and rock 'n' roll. I myself was then still a student at Cambridge, using the British Museum to explore eleventh-century ecclesiastical polemics, and I approached a real author with some diffidence. To my surprise, the supposedly waspish satirist turned out to be both genial and kindly when accosted by an unknown reader whose only published writing be-

tween hard covers at that time was a couple of essays in a university anthology. It was all the more surprising in that one of the two essays was a priggish and imperceptive criticism of Angus Wilson's first book.

SINCE THEN, Wilson's geniality has become more evident in his work. Eighteen years and thirteen books later, the short-story writer is now firmly established as a major novelist, involved with themes too big for mere vignettes—time, aging, death, the forming and unfolding of character, the interplay of hope and achievement, of environment and stubborn will. On the broader canvas of the novel, the catty lightning portraiture appropriate to short stories becomes not only inadequate but impossible: people evolve into three-dimensional figures almost irrespective of their creator's intentions. The test for any short-story writer turned novelist is whether he can aid this process without forfeiting sharpness and originality. Will his insight equal his gift for observation? Can he allow his characters to grow, and surprise the reader, without losing parental control? In successive books, Angus Wilson has continually grappled with the same formal problem. In *No Laughing Matter* he has come close to solving it by unusual means.

His first novel, *Hemlock and After* (1952), was in this respect only partially successful. The plot hinged on an almost anecdotal "revelation," and although this made possible a sympathetic study of the central character, those surrounding him were mainly "supporting players," recalling an Orson Welles or Donald Wolfit production of Shakespeare, all star and no firmament. Far more impressive, because much richer, was *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* (1956)—one of the few novels I know that plausibly re-create the world of scholarship (as distinct from that of the campus), and a warmly understanding treatment of the academic conscience. By now, Wilson's technical mastery enabled him to tackle stiffer

challenges: a woman's inner world, in *The Middle Age of Mrs. Eliot* (1958); a fantasy about the future, in *The Old Men at the Zoo* (1961); and the lower-middle-class society of a "new town," in *Late Call* (1964).

With these achievements behind him, it might have been tempting to settle into the role of a traditionalist novelist; and with British publishers as eager as their American counterparts for the Great National Novel, the pressure for a saga—if only in one volume—is strong.

At first sight, this is what *No Laughing Matter* appears to be. It spans half a century, from before the First World War until 1967; it recounts the adventures of six children, sons and daughters of a pretentiously "charming" mother and her dim, ineffectual husband, a minor literary journalist. The family is brilliantly credible (Angus Wilson himself was the youngest of six sons). Its members' various forays into the outside world bring together many segments of British society and many phases of recent history: the life of the 1914-1918 trenches; the clubland survivors from Edwardian literature; postwar Oxford; the women's rights movement; the Bright Young Things of the 1920's; left-wing politics and journalism; the maneuvers of shady financiers; theatrical touring companies and the metropolitan stage; fascist marches in the East End of London; homosexual circles both sordid and "aesthetic"; the cinema; the art world; law courts and prisons; a school in the country; refugees from Hitler; Second World War evacuees in provincial hotels; literary lectures; travel in Europe and North Africa; middle-aged expatriates in Portugal; roving television newscasters; the 1967 teen-age scene. With so wide a range, the book resembles a British Museum in itself, a teeming time capsule from its author's own period.

The American publishers liken *No Laughing Matter* to *The Forsyte Saga*, and even to *The Constant Nymph*. True, they point out that the comparison suggests "a contrast as much as a likeness," but even this seems neither flattering nor just. In fact, the book easily transcends such categorization. Far from being a lumbering cavalcade of British history or a touching portrait of "in-