2003

Review of Faithful Realism: Elizabeth Gaskell and Leo Tolstoy A Comparative Study

Josie Billington

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Who is the English novelist worthy of comparison with Tolstoy? The name of George Eliot immediately suggests itself, though even *Middlemarch* does not have the range of *War and Peace*. What Henry James said of Eliot – that she is ‘also a good deal of a philosopher and it is to this union of the keenest observation with the ripest reflection that her style owes its essential force’ – seems to apply to Tolstoy as well. F. R. Leavis, we recall, invoked the name of the Russian novelist in his appraisal of Eliot, arguing that the best parts of *Daniel Deronda* and *Anna Karenina* are great in the same way. It is, therefore, with some surprise that one greets Josie Billington’s comparative study of Tolstoy and Elizabeth Gaskell.

In the initial chapters Billington, in a somewhat elaborate fashion, establishes Gaskell’s ‘subtly relaxed worldview’ (9) and defines the nature of the novelist’s realism, her acceptance of the miscellany and the formlessness of the real. Along the way, however, there is a lively discussion of *Wives and Daughters* in relation to Maria Edgeworth’s *Helen*. Billington’s treatment, it seems to me, is more sensitive than that of Marilyn Butler, who previously made the same comparison and emphasized Gaskell’s rigid dogmatism (*The Review of English Studies*, 1972).

It is in the second half of the book that the comparative study as such begins in earnest. In the Introduction Billington confesses that she started out with a view to establishing the similarities between the realist visions of Gaskell and Tolstoy, but that as the work progressed it became increasingly clear that Tolstoy is a crucial figure not only in relation to Gaskell, but to the English Victorian period as a whole. There is no single English equivalent of Tolstoy, she discovered: ‘Rather, it is as if, in England, Tolstoy is split between a range of nineteenth-century writers’ (10). Accordingly, Eliot and Hardy are brought in for consideration. Billington offers a three-way comparison of Cynthia Kirkpatrick (*Wives and Daughters*), Gwendolen Harleth, and Anna Karenina; three heroines who make the same mistake of
evading what is wrong in their lives. Gaskell, it is noted, leaves Cynthia untouched by her own wrongdoing: she ‘leaves Cynthia’s mess be’ (135). Neither George Eliot nor Tolstoy can do likewise; so they provide characters like Deronda or Levin as powerful alternative forces. Yet, a stronger affinity is found between Tolstoy and Gaskell. Billington stresses the fact that nothing comes out of the meeting of Levin and Anna at the end (except for a transitory sexual frisson), and says that their essential separateness is not for Tolstoy a disaster, which it surely would have been for Eliot, and would not have been for Gaskell: ‘The capacity thus contentedly to witness the phenomenon of different worlds thrown together in the one world points to a far deeper connection between Gaskell and Tolstoy’ (139). Hardy’s *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is contrasted with *Resurrection* (an intriguing parallel is drawn between the furmity-woman’s accusation of Henchard at the magistrate’s court and Nekhlyudov’s encounter with Katusha in the courtroom), and we are told that ‘the fallen man who in Hardy’s version falls the more’ becomes in the Russian novel ‘the Christian mortal given a second chance, charged not with fulfilling his tragic destiny but now with the burden, duty and opportunity of reformulating it’ (158). Unlike Hardy, Tolstoy, it is argued, did not find life’s refusal to be humanly meaningful a cause for despair.

Billington’s treatment of Tolstoy is sure and vigorous enough to make one want to go back to him, but her comparative analysis of Gaskell and Tolstoy as a whole seems a little problematical. In the end it is the difference rather than similarities that is emphasized: they ‘offer and represent two close and yet finally different modes and visions’ (173); the one accepts the finitude of life, while the other seeks to grasp the eternal. It is through this contrast, we are told, that we can best appreciate Gaskell: ‘What Gaskell offers to us is a reading of life so steeped in itself as to bear quietly magnificent testimony to her own acceptance of limitation in the face of life’s intractable mysteries. So quiet is her own testimony that only Tolstoy’s intolerance of those mysteries can begin to show us how great an achievement Gaskell’s apparently easy acceptance of them really is’ (176). We might accept the contrast, but one wonders if the ‘greatness’ of Gaskell’s achievement is thus established. Perhaps the argument would be convincing if we could ascertain that Gaskell underwent the exactly same crisis as Tolstoy and then reached this calm acceptance. ‘Once again we seem to need Tolstoy,’ Billington says, ‘to show a reader how to value a work like *Cranford*’ (178), and then she points out a detail in *Master and Man* that makes explicit the process ‘by which one would arrive in a fallen world at the deeply religious belief in goodness going on’, which remains implicit in the Gaskell novel (180). Such observations, interesting though they may be, rather dangerously run the risk of becoming mere assertions.

Toru Sasaki
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