

speaking academic environment to subject matters that generally go unremarked there.

Marko Pavlyshyn
Monash University

Jeff Love, *The Overcoming of History in 'War and Peace'*, Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2004. viii + 211 pages.

Anyone who has taught *War and Peace* at undergraduate level will be familiar with – may even have some sympathy for – complaints about the tendentiousness or tediousness of the ‘philosophical’ digressions in which Tolstoy lectures the reader on the nature of history. Tolstoy himself, relegating them to a separate appendix to the 1873 edition of the novel, seems to have had second thoughts, while Tolstoy criticism (after Isaiah Berlin and George Steiner) has seen them mainly as an illustration of the tensions between the novelist’s perception of the diversity of life and the historian’s attempt to confine it within a single unifying theory.

For Jeff Love, this is but one aspect of the conflict between scepticism and dogmatism that, together with a complex of related dichotomies (reason and consciousness, objectivity and subjectivity, relative and absolute, finite and infinite), constitutes the dynamics of the novel. His aim is to demonstrate how the narrative strives to fashion a unity from these ‘protean and dynamic oppositions’ (p.1) and thus that the art of *War and Peace* ‘is no less a product of thought than the historical essays’ (p. 3). For good measure, his intention is also to trace the transformation of a family chronicle into an historical epic. This is a demanding and far-reaching agenda which involves the manipulation of highly abstract philosophical ideas as much as a close reading of the literary text, and no review can offer more than a drastic oversimplification. The first chapter begins with Prince Andrei at Schön Graben rejecting the assumption that generals control battles in ways reason can explain to confront the choice between scepticism and an ‘underlying dogmatism’ that accepts the existence of some ultimate order beyond rational explanation in the face of events we do not control. Chapter 2 transfers the focus to Pierre at Borodino, and through his confusion examines the limitations of a historical narrative which aims to impose order, reason and causality on such chaos. Tolstoy’s alternative, a

proposal for a ‘calculus of history’ which on the mathematical analogy will study its subject as a continuous process of differentiation and integration, is examined first in theoretical terms (what might be the infinitesimal units of change, how they might be combined in a single whole) and secondly in practical application (for example, a study of ‘linkages’ in the novel deriving in part from R.F. Christian’s notion of ‘situation rhymes’). Love then moves on to consider the temporal structure of the novel as an aspect of the tension between its ‘sceptical’ and ‘dogmatic’ tendencies, arguing that the predominantly mimetic narrative mode which foregrounds events in a continuous present tends to avoid ‘a conventional cause and effect relation between the scenes’ (p.102); this leads on to a discussion of the generic characteristics of novel and epic and the suggestion that *War and Peace* moves towards a holistic reconciliation of differing modes of knowing and telling. Chapter 4, ‘The Fundamental Structure’, goes to the heart of ‘the problem of history’ as set out by Tolstoy (and ‘Tolstoy’s narrator’ – the terms are used interchangeably) in the second part of the Epilogue: what are the causes of historical events? What laws govern them? What is the role of the individual and free will? Love’s complex explication here too moves from a consideration of contradictory opposites (reason and consciousness) towards the idea of holistic integration: Tolstoy at once ‘tends to affirm the existence of an overarching order’ in things while ‘asserting the precariousness of this illusion’ (p.156). In these contrasting attitudes Love discovers another binary opposition in the novel: the tragic polarity of mastery, the ‘omnivorous desire to rise above others and impose one’s own particular views on the world’ (p. 167) and its ‘comic’ opposite of reticence, of acceptance of the limitations of cognition and passive humility in the face of unanswerable questions. This becomes the basis in Chapter 5 for a contrastive study of Prince Andrei and Pierre and the other characters (Napoleon and Platon Karataev) in whom these extremes are manifest. Finally, a brief concluding chapter, ‘Freedom and Silence’, examines further nuances of ambiguity in a novel which strives to pursue a final dogmatic view it can never arrive at – unless it be ‘the dogmatic assertion of the impossibility of dogmatism’ (p. 184).

Densely and subtly argued, and underpinned by judicious analysis of historico-philosophical theories from Aristotle to Schopenhauer, *The Overcoming of History* challenges its readers on every level, including the most basic. The author’s claim (p. vii) to have learned ‘how to formulate my

thoughts in a manner better suited to a broader audience of Tolstoyans (and non-Tolstoyans)' is belied by passages of daunting opacity and verbosity, of which this is only one example:

To assert skepticism dogmatically is an elementary inconcinnity that explodes the whole edifice of Tolstoy's novel if the force of his descriptions is to embody a skepticism arising from the notion that experience either cannot be reduced to rational knowledge or cannot be known at all but only invented, thus collapsing the traditional notions of truth and falsity of a narrative as well. (p. 43)

The specialist reader, Tolstoyan, non-Tolstoyan, philosopher or historian, will recognise in *The Overcoming of History in 'War and Peace'* an original and suggestive contribution to Tolstoy scholarship; regrettably, the broader audience to whom it is addressed, and the undergraduates who might benefit most from its insights are all too likely to feel themselves overcome.

John McNair

The University of Queensland

Jack Franke, *The Big Silver Book of Russian Verbs*, New York, McGraw-Hill, 2005, iv + 667 pp.

The publication of yet another guide to the forms of the Russian verb in the guise of *The Big Silver Book of Russian Verbs* attests to the durability of demand for grammatical aids in this area. Those who have studied (or taught) Russian in the past two decades will doubtless be familiar with the standard text by L. Pirogova, *Conjugation of Russian Verbs: Reference Book for Foreigners*, first published in the 1960s and regularly reissued in subsequent decades, and possibly with more advanced guides, such as I.K. Sazonova's *Russkii glagol i ego prichastnye formy* (1989). In recent years Issa Zauber's *750 Russian verbs and their uses* (1997) has served as a supplement to such aids by providing a listing of verbs in sentences illustrating their most common usage. The book under review seeks to cover both these discrete goals in one volume. First and foremost it consists of an alphabetic listing of verbal pairs with a comprehensive description of each partner: conjugated forms, past and compound future (where appropriate), imperative and participial and verbal adverbial forms. An 'innovation' is the inclusion of an entry under the heading