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The Liberation of Tolstoy: A Tale of Two Writers

Ivan Bunin
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In his last days, as in his extraordinarily fruitful life, Leo Tolstoy searched for truth. Fleeing his home in 1910 at the age of eighty-two, resentful of the turmoil he believed his wife had caused him, progressively weak and sick, he wrestled with concepts that had driven him since he was young. “God is not love,” he dictated to his daughter as he lay dying in the train station at Astapovo, “but the more that one loves, the more one gives witness to God, the more one truly exists.”

Tolstoy died at Astapovo twelve days after his desperate departure from home, saying, according to one eyewitness, “From you I came, to you I shall return, accept me, O Lord.” In Bunin’s view, death was Tolstoy’s liberation, his release from a life that was both charming and pain-filled, exasperating and deeply satisfying. In death, Bunin believes, Tolstoy finally found answers to the “damned questions” of life.

Bunin acknowledges that his own struggle with the same questions made him see Tolstoy as a spiritual brother. Although forty years his junior, Bunin met Tolstoy, and they sometimes wrote each other. Bunin was himself a Russian literary light—he won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1933—and he has written a semi-biography of Tolstoy that touches less on his life than on his thought and, particularly, his search for truth through religion.

The book contains valuable advice from Tolstoy on writing: “Write, write, but only if you really want to,” he told Bunin on their first meeting. “Just remember that such a thing can in no way be the purpose of your life.” Bunin quotes Tolstoy at another time: “The only thing needed in both art and life is not to lie.”

The main subject of the book, however, is the religious search of a great writer, and Bunin believes it was this search that gave sublime depth to books such as War and Peace and Anna Karenina. He has produced an interesting work that should appeal not only to those who love Tolstoy but also to those for whom a truth-based religious life is a goal.

KEITH COLLINS (April 15, 2001)

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