

LETTERS

From the Editor:

Slavic Review publishes letters to the editor with educational or research merit. Where the letter concerns a publication in *Slavic Review*, the author of the publication will be offered an opportunity to respond. Space limitations dictate that comment regarding a book review should be limited to one paragraph; comment on an article should not exceed 750 to 1,000 words. The editor encourages writers to refrain from ad hominem discourse.

D.P.K.

To the Editor:

David Herman's interpretation of *Khadzhi-Murat* as an "inscription of silence" may offer thought-provoking observations about the unchristian pitilessness of God in this particular literary work (*Slavic Review* 64, no. 1). But Herman fails to demonstrate that Tolstoi has lost his "moral compass" here. The big problem with Herman's thesis is that he never engages with Tolstoi's chapter devoted to Nicholas I, the longest part of the story. Herman attempts to justify this omission by claiming that some "other critics" too "hold [the Nicholas chapter] apart" on the grounds that it "almost sermonizes" (14). True, Tolstoi's satire of Nicholas is cantankerous and preachy. But since when is it admissible for a literary critic to ignore a writer's words because they are contentious? To the contrary, Herman should have confronted the Nicholas chapter at length in order to test his theory of authorial "reticence." Herman contends, after all, that Tolstoi created no clear value system in *Khadzhi-Murat*. In Herman's view, the story never acknowledges "what—if anything—is at stake in it" (4). In sum, Tolstoi has purportedly projected an artistic vision of "impenetrable obscurity" (23).

But the "obscurity" that Herman posits arises largely from his own silence about Tolstoi's representation of Nicholas. The Nicholas chapter (number 15 of 25) is the moral lynchpin of *Khadzhi-Murat*. It models Nicholas as an adulterer and tyrant whose orders bring death and destruction to Chechens, Uniates, and a Polish medical student sentenced to run a gauntlet sure to kill him. Once Nicholas enters *Khadzhi-Murat*, he generates negative meanings about the rest of the represented Russian nobility, including Prince Vorontsov fils and his adulterous wife. The author passes no judgment on the Vorontsov couple when they first appear in chapter 3. But by the end of the story, Tolstoi's language has established a condemnatory pattern of motifs linking Nicholas to other Russian aristocrats, as well as Shamil, and the Russian field commander Butler—a man the author says "grew morally weaker by the day" (chapter 24). One might argue, then, that the Nicholas chapter is the technical as well as moral center of *Khadzhi-Murat*. As V. A. Manuilov wrote in his introduction to Tolstoi's *Kavkazkie rasskazy i povesti* (Voronezh, 1978), the Nicholas chapter is the "apex of a compositional pyramid" (40). That "apex" creates lines of comparison and contrast between Nicholas and all the other personages in the story, including the powerless peasant soldiers in Russia's military machine.

Tolstoi ironically made Nicholas the supreme power in the brutal universe of *Khadzhi-Murat*. Contrary to Herman's construct of a "silent" God, the deity expresses an opinion once in the story—in chapter 15, in the tsar's imagination. There God waits with the human congregation to hail and extol Nicholas when he comes to church. This satiric subordination of God to the Russian emperor is but one detail that makes more plausible a sociopolitical rather than theological interpretation of *Khadzhi-Murat*. Taken in its entirety, the work is primarily concerned with worldly monstrosities, most of which Tolstoi's Shamil shares with Nicholas: megalomania; the corruption that comes from absolute power; government through violence and intimidation; and specifically imperialist "evil" (*zlo*): "[Nicholas] had done much evil to the Poles."

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Khadzhi-Murat may convey an authorial pessimism about using literature “to propagate ethics,” as Herman puts it (13). But at his best Tolstoi did not seek to make literature propagate rules for good conduct; he aimed instead to pose moral questions that would induce readers to exercise their own moral faculties. *Khadzhi-Murat* surely succeeded on that score in addressing the issue of colonial war. Since Herman tries to bolster his thesis by drawing upon Tolstoi’s drafts, let me do the same. One long passage of Tolstoi’s drafts unambiguously condemned the conquest of the North Caucasus as an unjust enterprise instigated by Russia alone. What remains implicit in *Khadzhi-Murat* is the author’s conviction that the Avar hero’s life and death might have been very different had the Russian state pursued a more accommodating policy toward the Caucasian mountain peoples.

Finally, Herman sows confusion by privileging Aylmer Maude’s obsolete English translation of *Khadzhi-Murat* instead of respecting the authoritative jubilee edition of the Russian text. As published in Russian in Berlin in 1912, chapters 11 and 23 of the story duplicated passages concerning Khadzhi-Murat’s memories of his childhood. The duplication was due to the mistake of a scribe who failed to notice that Tolstoi had crossed out Khadzhi-Murat’s mental recollection of his childhood in the manuscript of chapter 11. The Jubilee edition corrected the error so that the childhood memories appear only in chapter 23 when Khadzhi-Murat prepares to flee the Russians. Herman, however, prefers the Maude version that retains Khadzhi-Murat’s silent recollection of his childhood during his interview with Loris-Melikov in chapter 11. Herman even calls it “crucial to Tolstoi’s conception” (9) that the reader should become privy to Khadzhi-Murat’s inner life at that point. This is all clearly a mistake on Herman’s part.

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Professor Herman replies:

About Layton’s second point first: Layton is, of course, correct that the jubilee edition and Maude’s translation differ in the placement of the hero’s childhood recollections (as I myself observe in my introductory note). The original Berlin edition mistakenly has the passage in two places (the wording is nearly, though not absolutely, identical). Maude excised most of the passage on its second appearance. The jubilee edition editors later excised most of the passage on its first appearance. (In defense of the copyist who made the error, Layton’s description of the mechanics is not 100 percent accurate. Tolstoi had not “crossed out” the text in one place; according to the jubilee commentaries, he left behind a “znak otcherkivaniia, oznachavshii iskliuchenie etogo mesta v tekste” [35:630], a somewhat more ambiguous editorial marking.) Between these two versions minor differences in interpretation can be imagined, but they have little to do with my reading (or Layton’s, for that matter). Meanwhile, Maude’s ubiquity and convenience are hard to deny. It is unfair to claim that I “[call] it ‘crucial to Tolstoi’s conception’ that the reader should become privy to Khadzhi-Murat’s inner life at that point”; I simply call it crucial that the reader become privy to Khadzhi-Murat’s inner life. Whether this occurs in chapter 11 or 23 matters little. What matters is that we be afforded insight with utmost modesty and that the points of true importance emerge by implication rather than direct exposition.

On to the main question. How to interpret a work in which 24 of 25 chapters read one way and one chapter has an unmistakably different drift is the key issue Layton raises. It would not be impossible to interpret the one chapter as central and the 24 as subordinate, as Layton did in her *Russian Literature and Empire: Conquest of the Caucasus from Pushkin to Tolstoy* (Cambridge, Eng., 1994); some texts do have a key passage designed to radically alter our understanding of the rest. But in this case it seems to me more sensible to conclude Tolstoi’s real intentions are better exemplified by the 24 consistent chapters than by the one inconsistent one. Not only does a more internally unified work emerge, a profounder and more important one does as well. The available extratextual evidence, too, favors this approach. The chapter on Nicholas was tacked on as a clear afterthought, entering the author’s field of vision only when the eight years’ work on the main themes was finally concluded. And as I note (14n48), Tolstoi himself seems to have believed that the topic ought preferably to be separated from the novella.