

ALEXANDER F. ZWEERS, UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO

Leo Tolstoy and Stijn Streuvels: A Peasant's Conversion

At first sight, it may seem strange to compare the writings of the Russian Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) and the Flemish Stijn Streuvels (pseud. of Frank Lateur, 1871-1969; the name Streuvels is no doubt derived from the Flemish verb "streuvelen" which means, when talking about hair, to stand on end, for there are pictures of him in which it does). There are, however, several good reasons to search for parallels in the two authors. In the first place, Streuvels felt great admiration, even adoration for the Russian writer. At the end of his 1928 article on Tolstoy, he wrote, for instance: "Tolstoï is er een dien men met eere, als patroonheilige uitkiezen mag!" (Tolstoy is a writer whom it is an honour to choose as a patron saint! - translation mine). There is, in addition, the firm belief of both writers that physical labour is essential for the well being of people who mainly work with their brain. Although Streuvels nowhere directly refers to Tolstoy in his literary work, an interesting parallel can be drawn between the conversion of the peasant Nikita in Tolstoy's play *The Power of Darkness* (1886) and that of Vermeulen in Streuvels' novel (1907) *De Vlaschaard* (The Flax Field).

Tolstoy wrote his *Vlast' T'my* about the people for the people and based his drama

on an authentic though gruesome court case that took place in the government of Tula. Yefrem Koloskov was accused of murdering the child that he had begotten with his stepdaughter. The detail that the latter's father was poisoned was added by Tolstoy himself. In itself it is not surprising that Czar Alexander III, who called Tolstoy a nihilist and an atheist, forbade both the production and the printing of the play. After all, in 1886 the czarist government was in the process of celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the liberation of the serfs and trying to prove that the conditions of life of the peasant had markedly improved during the post-reform period. Tolstoy with his *Power of Darkness*, which can be aptly translated as "The Power of Greed", proved them obviously very wrong.

The plot is as follows: the twenty-five-year old womanizer Nikita starts a relationship with the wife of his boss, the well-to-do peasant Pyotr. Anisya, his wife, becomes so fond of Nikita that she marries him, first getting rid of her husband by poison. At first he immensely enjoys his newly acquired position as gentleman-farmer, but after a while he succumbs to the many temptations of his new life style and by partying and drinking runs through most of Anisya's money. At the end, he becomes tired of

her and starts a relationship with Akulina, his stepdaughter, who bears him a child as was mentioned above. It is obvious that Akulina and her baby cannot stay at the farmstead and it is especially at the instigation of Nikita's evil-minded mother, Matryona that the baby is killed and Akulina married off. Nikita, who is a weakling but basically goodhearted, is coerced to participate in the killing and burying of the baby. However, when he is strongly urged by his mother to join the wedding party of Akulina and her bridegroom in order to give them his blessing, he indeed goes, but not to bless the newly-weds: he confesses his horrendous crimes and repents of them.

It may seem that Nikita's conversion occurs rather suddenly, and indeed it does. On the other hand, upon closer examination Tolstoy prepared for it in a subtle manner. To start with, a sharper contrast than that between Nikita's parents is hardly conceivable. While the father, Akim, displays a childlike innocence and a pure devotion to Christian virtues, his wife Matryona is shrewdly manipulative and in her greediness not averse from committing the most horrendous crimes. It is interesting to add here that the author himself was of a different opinion. In 1896 he reportedly said:

It is definitely not necessary to play Matryona as a villain, as a kind of Lady Macbeth, as most people think proper. This is an ordinary old woman who is smart and in her own way wants the best for her son. Her acts are not the result of some evil qualities in her character but simply the expression of her

view of the world [...] In her opinion everybody performs dubious acts – life is impossible without them and she is not afraid of them.

In this curious triangle Nikita is given the part of a protagonist who has been made the plaything of the opposing forces of his parents. Akim, his father, is the antagonist representing "goodness," Matryona, his mother, the antagonist representing "evil." Nikita is positioned in between them and is pulled now in the good, now in the evil direction. He is basically an upright character, a feature even acknowledged by his mother. In act four, Nikita is incapable of burying the baby, who turns out to be still alive. Matryona reacts:

He's too kind-hearted. It's hard for him, the dear boy. Well, no help for it! It is his sin too. [...] Eh, eh, eh! How scared he was! Well, even if it is hard, you couldn't do anything else.

Early in the play there is another example of Nikita breaking down when he realizes that he is on the wrong track in life. He has become the master of a spacious peasant house and the husband of the woman who was previously his mistress. He is as yet too immature to bear the consequences of the major change in his life. Because of his recently acquired wealth, which he easily equates with the power entailed by money, Nikita feels entitled to bend the people around him to his will. Soon after his marriage to Anisya, he has already grown tired of her and in his search for new pleasures has taken his stepdaughter Akulina to town on

a spree. He returns home drunk and is unexpectedly confronted by his father, who is utterly disgusted by his son's behaviour. He has actually come to ask his son for money to buy a new horse. Nikita throws a ten-ruble bill at him and at first, in his confusion, Akim accepts it. But after an ugly scene between Nikita, Akulina, and Anisya, he makes up his mind and leaves the "filth," as he calls his son's house. During the following altercation, Nikita's conscience is stung more than anything else by his father's reproach that he lacks a soul. In his drunken state, and being an uneducated peasant who lacks the intellectual means to counter the accusation, he can only react with his emotions: he breaks down and weeps.

At this point it is instructive to refer to Tolstoy's well-known treatise of 1862, entitled "Who Should Learn how to Write from Whom: The Peasant Children from Us, or We from the Peasant Children?" From the title it is self-evident that Tolstoy deals here with the problem of education. His major dictum is that "our ideal is behind us, not in front of us". What Tolstoy basically wants to say is that the truth cannot be learned but has to be rediscovered in the human soul. For that process to take place you don't need any learning but rather a readiness to open up to God whom Tolstoy understands as love. Thus, the inner process Nikita has to go through is one of peeling off the layers of voluptuousness, selfishness, and greed implanted in him by his mother. In addition, Nikita's major breakdown occurs obviously just before he decides not to attend Akulina's wedding party. As a matter of fact, he is in such an inner turmoil that he has made

up his mind that he is going to hang himself. But the execution of this plan is obstructed by the presence of the ex-soldier Mitrich who, drunk though he may be, nonetheless succeeds in making Nikita change his mind. A hard life has taught Mitrich that there is no need to be afraid of anybody, and this boldly stated conviction moves Nikita to join the wedding party - but as was already mentioned above, his intention is not to bless the newly-weds as his mother has urged him to do, but to confess his sins.

When reviewing Nikita's emotional development, we recall the following: at the beginning of the play Nikita was ready to obey his father's wish and marry Marina, the girl with whom he had had an affair. But as time goes on he turns out to be powerless when confronted with his mother's bargaining skills. She is aware of Anisya's fondness for her son, and being firmly set in her endeavour to obtain financial gain from the success her son is having with women, she collaborates in Anisya's plan to poison her husband. In the course of this act and the horrendous killing and burying of his child, Nikita is taken by his mother to the brink of the abyss, but in the end he is saved by his father's propriety.

It is not surprising that it is all but impossible for an essentially weak character like Nikita to stand up to the evil influence of his mother, who firmly believes that she has won the game. She is therefore completely taken aback by Nikita's conversion and repentance, and exclaims: "O-oh, he is bewitched! How did it happen? He's out of his head - Get up, what are you talking nonsense for?" It is an interesting peculiarity of her speech

that she likes to say that people act under an evil spell. But it is rather she herself who, unconsciously but therefore also unconditionally surrendering to that evil spell, constantly acts under its influence.

Stijn Streuvels was first destined to work in his father's bakery. As a matter of fact the young man was not very interested in educating himself, and was encouraged in this indifference by his father, who apparently once said: "Als 't leeren een zwijn ware, ge zoudt het de keel afsteken" [If education were a pig, you would cut its throat]. The young Streuvels none the less developed a passion for reading and read everything he could lay hands on. And thus it happened that he received at one time a French translation of Tolstoy stories under the title *Contes Évangéliques*. The young man was not in the least attracted by the looks of the book, but its contents, as he stated in an article in 1928, "hit me. It was the first time that in a story the deeper side of life was touched upon and it made me think about it. I felt like someone who had discovered a gold mine, enriched inside, but above all excited that I now knew the place where these treasures were hidden. It was necessary to find immediately all of Tolstoy's other works."

For Streuvels, the baker who had become a writer, it was only natural to describe the rural life of Flanders. He was so successful in acquiring an intimate knowledge of the fierce battle of the Flemish rural population for their daily bread, and described it with such finesse, that in a 1925 history of Dutch literature he is called "the most important Flemish prose writer." The depiction of the close link between man and nature is the most

prominent feature of his novellas and novels, and for that reason his works are considered the best example of the so-called *streekroman*, in English approximately "novel of rural life." It can therefore be easily understood that Streuvels fully agreed with Tolstoy's statement about the importance of physical labour for people who mainly work with their brain.

If we draw a parallel between Tolstoy's peasant, the twenty-five-year old Nikita, and Streuvels' Vermeulen, who is almost fifty, we must acknowledge right away that there are major differences in their characters and the nature of their tragedies. They are both simple, uneducated peasants and they both kill their son: one at least participates in the murder of his infant son, the other delivers his twenty-year old son Louis such a violent blow that the young man falls down on the field where labourers are busy harvesting flax. Until the end of the novel it remains unknown whether Louis will live or die. But pivotal here is not the question of what will happen to Louis but the remarkable conversion of the father. Until the moment of his violent act, Vermeulen considered himself the only merciless master of his farmstead and of the people working for him, and expected complete obedience from them to whatever he ordered. But in accordance with the inevitable law of nature, Louis, who had always been an obedient child, grows up to become a strong young man who starts to think about life, independent of his father's wishes. Vermeulen senior is aware of the approaching danger, but simply cannot stand the thought that in the near future he will be forced to authorize the next generation to look after

what he has always considered to belong only to him. After a severe thunderstorm, Vermeulen senior forbids his son and the labourers to continue harvesting the flax. Common sense, however, dictates to Louis that it is not right to leave the plants in the wet soil and that it is necessary to remove them from there as soon as possible. At the moment that Louis and the labourers are busy doing that, the father suddenly appears on the field and becomes so infuriated by what he sees that he delivers his son a blow that initially seems to be fatal.

Nikita's and Vermeulen's emotional development obviously differ greatly. Nikita acts under the evil influence of his mother, and he is not the only one who is guilty of the loathsome killing of the child. It is indeed he who performs the act, but because of his inborn goodness, which is only temporarily suppressed but never destroyed, he remains totally unprepared for his degrading task. He feels that he has been manipulated by exterior forces, and for that reason he cries out: "What have they done? What have they done to me?" In other words, he feels that he is not responsible, that outside evil forces took advantage of his weakness. And on this basis, a parallel can be drawn with the hero of *Streuvels*. It turns out that the simple peasant Vermeulen who constantly sits at the bedside of his dying son and tries to the best of his abilities to look after him, is deep down also a good man. "Vermeulen zag de spotgrijns van zijn wezen, uitgreten, en nu verstond hij dat een kwade geest hem verleid had" [Vermeulen saw his own sneer mocking his own person and now he understood that an evil spirit had seduced him].

Because of the fact that both the young Nikita and the old Vermeulen are convinced that they performed their loathsome act under the influence of external evil forces, they also feel that they are capable of defying them. And, indeed, in the end their good qualities prevail. At Akulina's wedding Nikita confesses his sins, although that confession lands him in jail. Vermeulen is suddenly aware of the fact that he was terribly mistaken in thinking that the essence of his life lay in being in charge of everything that took place in his household. Suddenly he understands that he did not want to get rid of his son but loves him with all his heart.

Finally, a parallel can be drawn between Tolstoy's and *Streuvels*' depiction of the inner conversion in the peasant soul as something that happens suddenly and remains incomprehensible to both heroes, something they cannot account for in a reasonable fashion. Both authors, although they prepare the spectator and reader to a certain extent, prefer to leave the reason unexplained.

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