Resurrection and the "Movement Novel"

Advocates of a cause will sometimes gaze wistfully at the best-seller shelves and wonder why the powerful medium of fiction (with, no doubt, the attendant film rights and miniseries possibilities) hasn't been used more effectively to get their message across. Ideological novels are not very common, and when they do crop up they tend not to be very popular or well-regarded (although one can think of exceptions). The Georgist philosophy has very few to choose from, and possibly only one major-league title: Tolstoy's *Resurrection*.

I suspect, though, that *Resurrection's* greatness has little to do with its ideological character, and, instead, its weaknesses can be traced to that. What it succeeds at is the work of the novelist, not the propagandist: rendering credible the inner forces of a spiritual transformation — or depicting the astounding variety of human suffering that contributed to the nobleman's daily comforts. I had read that in some early editions, Tolstoy's references to Henry George's remedy were censored. But when I read the book, and came across those references, it immediately struck me how easy they would have been to leave out, how little the impact of the book would have been changed without them.

Resurrection is the story of a rich man who followed Jesus's advice to sell all that he has and give it to the poor, in order to see the Kingdom of Heaven. Prince Nekhlyudov is a dashing, splendid, propertied veteran of youthful military adventures and inherited wealth. The story begins as he is called to jury duty, a formality in which he takes some pleasure, for it provides him a safe measure of contact with other walks of life. But one of the defendants is a woman, a prostitute, accused of theft and murder.

She is Katusha (though she is now called by the professional name of Maslova), the girl with whom Nekhlyudov had been in love years before, before the army, when he had been free and open, had read George and Spencer and believed in egalitarian progress. He had gotten Katusha pregnant, and had left without a word. It was the way of things; many men had done the same; war had coarsened his thought and there had been no need to think of her — until now. Nekhlyudov barely makes it through his ordeal in the jury box without crying out, or swooning. The case against Maslova is flimsy, and yet by a procedural error, which Nekhlyudov's own distraction keeps him from noticing, she is sentenced to hard labor in Siberia.

There is virtuosity in Tolstoy's descriptions of commonplace events. He reports the layers upon layers of hard work that create the deep burnishing, say, of the Prince's breakfast table, the immense triviality of the Court Officials' concerns or the petty currencies of the pecking order in the women's prison. His minor characters on every social level seem arrestingly human, never caricatured. And yet his descriptions don't seem to be burdened by any agenda. Clearly Tolstoy has much that he wants to tell us, but here he refrains from comment; the descriptions speak for themselves.

From an illustration by Leonid Pasternak

Nekhlyudov is forced to face his betrayal not only of Katusha but of his former self, who sought to joyfully participate in his world, rather than to simply ride on it. He chooses — and from that point on he wavers in his determination only momentarily, under the most extreme temptation — to save Katusha, to marry her if she will have him, and to conform his business affairs to the demands of justice. He gives his two large estates to the peasants. One he sets up on a Georgist model, rather like a land trust; the other he gives away, basically, outright (an arrangement that the wary peasants find less satisfactory). He sells what he can sell, dismisses his considerable retinue of servants, breaks things off with both his splendid girlfriend and his married mistress, and follows Katusha to Siberia.

Katusha is a haunting character, because her most outstanding attribute is not her beauty, or the hard wisdom that experience has brought her (both of those things are in evidence, but she seems quite detached from them) but her intelligence. She is ill-used, but not fooled, and she is always a few steps ahead of Nekhlyudov. She understands the nature of his quest long before he does, and tries her best to release him from his self-imposed duty. On the way to the Siberian camps, she is befriended by a group of revolutionary prisoners, and although she has no schooling at all, she becomes a respected member of their group and eventually *(continued on page 33)*

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Resurrection...

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accepts the marriage proposal of one of them.

In fact it is only after Katusha has let him off the hook (so to speak), that Nekhlyudov is able to focus on what he must do. His devotion to setting matters right with her has brought him a terrible education, and he must now devote himself to setting right all of the injustices he has witnessed. But how to begin? "All the horrible evil he had seen and heard about over the last months, and today particularly, in that awful prison... ruled triumphant, and he could discern no possibility of conquering it or even knowing how to conquer it."

He finds hope at last, not in any program for reordering society but in a new vision of spiritual truth. He sits down to read the New Testament and wonders what society would be like if people were taught to follow the simple, practical advice given in the Sermon on the Mount. (This was Tolstoy's own recommendation as well.) "'And can that be the whole answer?' Nekhlyudov suddenly exclaimed aloud. And the inner voice of his whole being said, 'Yes, that is all.'"

Presumably, Prince Dmitri Ivanovich Nekhlyudov went on from there to become an effective social reformer — and, given what we know of Tolstoy's ideas on the matter, we can assume that he would have found, in the single tax, the best strategy for working to bring about the just society. But the novel doesn't go there, for in the end, what the novel really deals with is "the higher and deeper problem of the individual life". We learn at the close, simply, that a new chapter of Nekhlyudov's life had begun, and how it would end, "the future will show". GJ