

Reviews

Morson, Gary Saul. *Anna Karenina in Our Time: Seeing More Wisely*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. 2007. 288 pp.; \$35; ISBN 9780300100709.

With interest and intermittent enthusiasm, I read Professor Morson's *Hidden in Plain Sight* and *The Boundaries of Genre*. The first made me want to read *War and Peace* again and the second to see for myself what I now would make of Dostoevsky's *Diary of a Writer*. I didn't find the same things Morson found in those books, in spite of his fine pointing and emphatic demonstrations, but, as Ezra Pound tried to remind us: "If another man has ideas of *any* kind (not borrowed clichés) that irritate you enough to make you think or take out your own ideas and look at 'em, that is all one can expect" (222).

Readers of Morson's previous work already know Morson is impatient with academicese and writes to be understood. He has managed to accommodate his admiration of Bakhtin so that Bakhtin, as if reading over his shoulder and animating his writing, does not have to be cited at almost every turn anymore. But when a critic develops a clever idea and then, in disregard of his own sympathetic imagination, lowers his head and lays out his case, I like to remind myself of Tolstoy's preference for those writers who modestly conduct their searches for truth:

Amiel's whole life, as presented to us in this Journal, is full of this suffering and whole-hearted search for God. And the contemplation of this search is the more instructive because it never ceases to be a search, never becomes settled, and never passes into a consciousness of having attained the truth, or into a teaching. Amiel is not saying either to himself or to others, 'I now know the truth—hear me!' On the contrary it seems to him, as is natural to

one who is sincerely seeking truth, that the more he knows the more he needs to know, and he unceasingly does all he can to learn more and more of the truth, and is therefore constantly aware of his ignorance. ... He is talking to himself, not thinking that he is overheard, neither attempting to appear convinced of what he is not convinced of, nor hiding his sufferings and his search.

It is as if one were present without a man's knowledge at the most secret, profound, impassioned, inner working of his soul, usually hidden from an outsider's view. (Amiel 14-15)

Morson is as smart as he seems prickly, but in this book we are not present, and he does not intend for us to be present "at the most secret, profound, impassioned, inner working of his soul." That is, Morson sees the truth, but cannot wait: "For Tolstoy, goodness and evil are always right before our eyes, camouflaged but visible to those who learn to see them" (54). Never having been convinced of Tolstoy's penchant for camouflaging, I resign myself to trusting my own eyes and not belonging to that group of initiates Morson apparently chairs.

The only reason I can imagine future readers taking up this book is to witness Morson's 82-page attack on the greatest character in literature, but he makes as if he has bigger fish to fry: "the present volume has been written to make the novel speak to our concerns today" (1). Tolstoy, however, knows there's something fishy about having to argue art's relevance: "If the work does not infect people, no explanation can make it contagious" (*What Is Art* 14-15).

Morson claims: "What [Tolstoy] has to teach us, and how *Anna Karenina* teaches it, is the theme of the present book. A great deal is at stake. If we are to avoid the horrors of the

twentieth century, we may need to think differently" (13). Is Morson suggesting that Stalin, Hitler, Pol Pot, and Idi Amin fell asleep during Russian Lit 101? I wish I could accuse Morson of cynicism, of simply wanting to impress the series editor of Yale's *Russian Literature and Thought* (someone also named Gary Saul Morson) of his project's social relevance or of wanting it to compete with and conquer those literary self-improvement titles on how Proust or Shakespeare can change our lives. But he's not angling—he believes, and he repeatedly sounds the bell for the Apocalypse. "Any belief that one has the key to everything," writes Morson, waving a key overhead, "that there are no exceptions, that contingency does not exist, that the world is simple enough to be described in terms of a few laws, that under the complexity of things a single truth abides: all these extreme and totalistic presumptions spell disaster. *Levin comes to learn the complexity of things, and Anna the simplicity*" (133).

Morson launches the main part of the book with a campaign to get us to recognize Dolly's moral superiority (to everybody, not just Anna): "If by the hero of the work we mean not the character who occupies the dramatic foreground but the one who most closely embodies the author's values, then the hero of *Anna Karenina* is Dolly" (38). In heroes, values are nice, but vitality is better. Morson overlooks (and it's right there in plain sight!) that the character most infused with her author's energy and life is Anna. There is no disputing that good Dolly suffers and keeps her family together: "The one person [besides Morson] who does appreciate her efforts is the author, for whom motherhood is more important than any other occupation" (43). But Morson is not interested in simply getting us to give Dolly a longer, more appreciative look (although he's convinced me we should). Having made a number of astute reader's observations, he abandons any fine discussion and reduces the novel to *Pilgrim's Progress*: "As Dolly represents good, Stiva represents

evil" (48). (Maybe I'm misreading Morson. Maybe I have misread *Anna Karenina* fifteen or twenty times, and instead of seeing a representative of evil, I see in the first half of the novel the most dynamic, delightful male character in Tolstoy's fiction. Morson, impersonating Dostoevsky, says my response is the problem: "We like it [i.e., evil], and do not even see the harm in it, which is one reason there is so much of it" (49).)

In any case, in spite of his being able to sensibly and sensitively discuss Anna's attention to her red bag at her suicide, Morson now prefers to read *Anna Karenina* for moral lessons on honesty: "In *Anna Karenina*, the key mistake is to equate intensity with truth" (78). I think those of us who love Stiva and Anna (we who are finally, according to Morson, blind romanticists and enablers of evil) are like the servants who hang in there at the Oblonsky house: We not only sympathize with Stiva, we love him. No matter how hard we try, no matter how much we sympathize with Dolly, we cannot love her. It's not fair, but it's so. We equate Stiva's and Anna's intensity with life; we sympathize with and love the flawed ones who embody life. While we can grant that the wise ones embody Truth, we don't love them for it. After all, Truth is cheap, prophets are a dime a dozen, and Levin's search for truth is, after the second reading, admirable but boring. But there's only one Anna. "Intensity" is so rare in literature and life that we're willing to read thousands of pages of Dickens for a few moments with Sam Weller, Mrs. Gamp, or "The Storm at Sea."

Onward to Morson's big argument: Anna is a liar! See (more wisely)! She's lying. Look (hidden in plain sight)! She's lying again. She's lying to herself, to her husband, to her son, to her lying lover, to her lying, self-deceiving self! "Tolstoy wants us to measure what she sees against what she could see and used to see. If readers recognize the gradual process by which Anna 'schools herself,' they may learn to avoid similar self-deceit" (86). Yes, lying is bad. Anna is bad: "Anna cannot love

her daughter that way [that is, in her imagination, as she loves Vronsky], because Annie is always right there, with her illnesses, her need to be changed, and other prosaic demands. Annie plays virtually no role in her mother's inner thoughts as Tolstoy allows us to eavesdrop on them. This absence, if we detect it, is one of the novel's most horrible examples of negative evil, and it derives directly from Anna's romantic narcissism" (68). It seems to me poor Annie is neglected as much by Tolstoy forgetting her as by Anna. If Annie had ever occupied Tolstoy's inner thoughts we would have heard more about her.

Morson, for all his irritated loneliness as a prophet, makes a couple of fine observations of Anna and her plight, but one of them he buries in a footnote, as if he wants to keep his sympathy for her from getting the better of him: "if readers are like me, they identify with Anna, find her suffering acutely painful and wince at her unreasonableness, which can only make her suffering worse" (241). Why does Morson relegate his human, actual response to a footnote? With all due respect, if Morson were a character in the novel, he would be Karenin. For all his intelligence and good intentions, there is something inflexible and severe in him.

By the time I reached the last real chapter, "Levin," I was fed up and irritated with Morson, and so perhaps someone else can take on his analysis of the importance of Levin's tome on agriculture: "That book turns out to be of immense importance in understanding the novel's themes and their relevance today" (149).

I will take a shot, however, at the amazing and unnecessary "163 Tolstoyan Conclusions," with which Morson terminates *Anna Karenina in Our Time*, as if offering us party-favors on the way out the door. I love and collect quotations, but what Morson has compiled are not quotations or even paraphrases. We know Tolstoy fiddled with the quotations with which he packed the dull Calendar books

at the end of his life, and I forgive him. Yes, the world's greatest literary genius can tweak the great thoughts of the world's great thinkers and get away with it. But what are we to do with Tolstoy digested through the mental tracts of the professor from Northwestern? Mayn't we have citations, sir? How could Morson compose *this* conclusion—"Whenever we feel we have the key to everything, we are leaving something out"—and not pause to think about the key with which he believes he has unlocked the wisdom that was hidden in plain sight?

Did Tolstoy hide anything, or is there simply so much there, particularly in this greatest of all novels, that we never stop being dazzled, even if it turns out that we are only rediscovering gems we picked up last time or the time before?

Tolstoy, as usual, in his own words, concludes it best: "Every artistic word, whether it belongs to Goethe or to Fedka, differs from the inartistic in that it evokes an endless mass of thoughts, images, and explanations" (Wiener 196). *Anna Karenina's* endlessness is no longer enough for Morson. He wants Anna's hash settled, once and for all. Just as he says, accurately and wonderfully of Stiva, "[he] would be able to solve Dolly's quandary if he were not himself the culprit," (41) if Morson himself had not written this reductive thesis, he would tear it apart.

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Гулин, А. В. Лев Толстой и пути русской истории. Москва: ИМЛИ РАН, 2004. 253 стр; 194 руб. (softcover).

If there were such a thing as "left" and "right" Tolstoyans, this book would likely belong to the productions of the latter camp. Alexander Gulin endeavors to identify some of the primary strands in Tolstoy's treatment of Russian history and, in so doing, the movement of Russian history itself in Tolstoy's time. What emerges is a portrait of Tolstoy as an emphatically nationalist writer whose fictions embody a persistently idiosyncratic—and largely syncretic—worldview.

The guiding argument is quite straightforward, its central proposition being that Tolstoy's attitude to history is shaped by a "religious-philosophical system" that comes to full expression in his fictional works dealing with Russian history, the crowning achievement of which is, of course, *War and Peace*. The book is organized accordingly: It opens with a preliminary account of the main elements of this "religious-philosophical system" and proceeds to examine their inflection in several of Tolstoy's works, culminating in a fairly extensive engagement with *War and Peace*.

The opening account features Tolstoy's adventures in the Caucasus and the fictions ostensibly arising from them, fictions which bracket Tolstoy's career as a writer. Here Gulin maintains that Tolstoy's experience in the Caucasus was pivotal to all his subsequent thinking about history. Specifically, he holds that Tolstoy began at that time to define an

opposition between nature and civilization that would become the lynchpin of his "religious-philosophical system." Briefly stated: The natural human being is purer, and morally better than the corrupted "ape of civilization," to borrow a term from Heidegger.

Gulin pursues this thesis in two of the Caucasus fictions, *The Cossacks* and *Hadji Murat*, and then develops its broader implications in his discussion of the Sebastopol sketches. Gulin's metaphors become increasingly intense from this point on: he reads Tolstoy as opposing the common, "natural" Russian to the uncommon, unnatural creation of European civilization. While this opposition first gains larger political and metaphysical significance in the grim defense of Sebastopol against the European powers, it assumes titanic proportions on the pages of *War and Peace*, which, Gulin informs us, could have been called "Concord and Enmity" or, still better, "God and the Enemy of Humankind—the Devil" («Бог и враг человеческий—диавол»). At stake in the novel is a veritable *Weltanschauungskrieg*, with the Russian victory representing not only the triumph of the good as embodied by the common Russian people, but also that of the naturalist view. In this latter sense, the good represented by Russian victory is not merely Russian: It belongs to all, at least according to Gulin who insists, immoderately but entirely consistently, that Moscow is sacred not only for Russians.

Now, there is no doubt a strong layer of support for Gulin's interpretation. That there is some form of opposition between the life of the natural human being and that of the supposedly civilized one, stands on the very surface of the texts Gulin examines. Moreover, that this opposition retains within itself a rejection of European culture, understood as the imposition of an alienating civilization, should surprise no one who has read Tolstoy's texts. That, indeed, this rejection may be accompanied by the celebration of purity, sim-