

Narrative Alibis and Meaningful Absences in Tolstoy

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**Weir, Justin. *Leo Tolstoy and the Alibi of Narrative*.
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[Andrei] pictured vividly to himself his absence from this life. *War and Peace*, Volume III, Part Two, Chapter XXIV. (770)

Tolstoy is the kind of author who wants to have his cake and eat it, too. That is, according to Justin Weir in *Leo Tolstoy and the Alibi of Narrative*, he seems to question language's ability to convey an author's meaning even as he wields language to do precisely that in his own works. Similarly, Tolstoy seems to privilege authorial intention as the final word on an artist's work, but often makes comprehending authorial intention difficult. "If the author's intent is so important to *Anna Karenina*," Weir asks, then why is it difficult to decide whether we are supposed to judge or sympathize with Anna Karenina? Why do we still take sides on this question, and not only here, but elsewhere in Tolstoy? Why does Tolstoy "elide, hide, and

otherwise disguise" (5) meaning in his works, and yet at the same time seem to be so intent on telling his readers clearly and unequivocally how they should understand what he's written? More intriguingly, why do Tolstoy's works contain and even rely on so many gaps and absences as a way to convey meaning? The answer to these questions, according to Weir, has to do with the idea of narrative alibi and its relation to authorial identity.

As Weir explains in his introduction, narrative alibi takes two forms in Tolstoy. It is a narrative that exculpates, as in Tolstoy's late works that seek to chart a movement from immoral living to religious conversion (*Confession*, "Father Sergius," *Resurrection*). Here, according to Weir, "we are meant to see that Tolstoy's very authorship of them is redemptive as well" (1). Narrative alibi also points to "meaningful absence, a place in the text where one is supposed to notice that the author has purposely bypassed or concealed an important aspect of plot" (2). In these kinds of narrative, we are meant to pay attention to what Tolstoy and his characters are *not* saying as a way of "exposing the alibis and absences of language itself" (2). Similarly,

when Tolstoy diverts our attention or indulges in various digressions in his prose, he is suggesting subtly and provocatively that meaning, as in the definition of alibi, may be “elsewhere.” Weir argues that we need to take these instances of potential absent meaning into account when we read Tolstoy if we are to understand the author, his works and his relationship with his reader. Whole narratives are constructed through negative means—a missing statement or missing intention forms the basis of an entire narrative, as in *Resurrection*, where a missing line in a verdict condemns Maslova to hard labor in Siberia and sets into motion the novel’s chain of events. Weir asks us to be attentive to these narrative alibis, these gaps and absences on which turns so much of Tolstoy’s fictional universe.

Weir acknowledges that Tolstoy is not unique in this regard. “All literary texts have gaps,” he admits. It’s just that “Tolstoy especially worked to make the hidden parts of his early stories and novels crucial to their meaning” (215). In part one of his study, Weir attempts to show how Tolstoy inscribes absence into authorship as a way of controlling his own authorial image and as a narrative device. Just as sculptures must be understood in relation to the empty spaces the chisel leaves behind, so too are Tolstoy’s narratives dependent on our apprehension of implied absences. Prince Andrei is doomed to unhappiness, for example, because the super-abundance of joy that Natasha brings to his life is painfully attended by its opposite: the equal reality of the possibility of the total loss of her love (38). This is an intriguing idea, and in my opinion it explains, for instance, why Prince Andrei so readily agrees to his father’s demand of a one-year separation before he and Natasha can marry, or why he so easily gives Natasha up after her attempted elopement with Anatole Kuragin: Prince Andrei is as attuned to absence as he is to presence. Perhaps that is why he is so haunted by death in this novel about life.

In a similar fashion, Weir argues, Tolstoy avails himself of the alibi of narrative to enable him to manipulate authorial identity and assert authorial control of final interpretation of meaning in his works. If “real meaning” is always elsewhere (41), then Tolstoy creates for himself a back door through which he can escape to avoid having himself or his works subjected to outside interpretations. Here, we cannot help remembering his famous assertion that *War and Peace* was not a novel, epic poem or historical chronicle, but rather “what the author wanted and was able to express in the form in which it is expressed.” Tolstoy defines his novel apophatically, by telling us what it is not, only to assert what it is in a way that forever grants him, the author, the last word on its meaning, even if the author should change his mind on what that meaning is, as Tolstoy did later in his life when he disavowed *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* altogether. Part one analyzes these notions of absence and alibi in three works in particular: “A History of Yesterday,” *Childhood* and *Resurrection*.

The opening chapter of Part II of Weir’s study digresses somewhat from the notion of narrative as alibi in order to address how Tolstoy “mediates his authorial self” (53). Here, Weir explores how Tolstoy’s literary innovations—open-framed and broken-framed narratives—create opportunities for readers to participate in the creation of meaning in his texts. In his early prose, Tolstoy’s idiosyncratic and innovative realism had at its core the goal of communicating emotional experience with a main character or the implied author as a way of legitimizing the author and his work. Later, Weir argues, Tolstoy was more interested in narratives of authenticity, where the self is not so much imagined as recollected from an earlier, uncorrupted time.

Weir discusses these notions in the context of Tolstoy’s life and his fiction. He also focuses on Tolstoy’s preoccupation with the tension present in the act of writing fiction between providing entertainment and imparting truths. In the second

chapter of part two, Weir explores this tension in “Sevastopol in May,” “Two Hussars,” *The Cossacks* and *War and Peace*, returning to his notion of narrative alibi as he does so. Weir reads Tolstoy’s declaration at the end of “Sevastopol in May” that he perhaps should have left the story unsaid as a prime example of Tolstoy’s deployment of the narrative of alibi, his desire to articulate an absence as well as a presence. Tolstoy wants to have the story both “spoken and unspoken” (73), an outcome that mirrors the text’s subversion of its own fictiveness by its author’s declaration of his fidelity to the Truth at the story’s conclusion. “By forcing us to confront the removal of fiction,” Weir argues, “Tolstoy reveals a hidden or absent meaning in the text, an alibi in the story, of which the author was presumably always conscious” (73–74).

In a similar fashion, absence and presence are significantly inscribed in *War and Peace* in the novel’s preoccupation with death and life, most strikingly figured in the way Tolstoy cross-cuts (as in cinema) between scenes of Count Bezukhov dying and the name day party at the Rostov household. The juxtaposed chapters illustrate a philosophical quandary on which the entire novel meditates:

Does death intrude, get in the way, divert one from a celebration of life? Or do social conventions of consumption, talk, and dance distract one from the greater truth of life, that one’s mortality is everything?” (87)

The answer, Weir implies, is that we cannot apprehend a meaningful presence (life) without the simultaneous acknowledgement of a meaningful absence (death) in Tolstoy’s works.

This aspect of the alibi of narrative is most interesting and, I believe, constitutes Weir’s original contribution to Tolstoy scholarship. After having read Weir’s book, we will be more attuned to the meaningful absences—both on the level of plot and language—that inhabit Tolstoy’s fictional

universe and that change how we read and understand the author.

However, Weir’s book does not always present a sustained investigation into this concept and at times strays somewhat in other directions. Weir is a perceptive reader of Tolstoy, so even when he is not writing on topic, he is always interesting. At times, though, I wanted Weir to test his ideas in a more systematic fashion, perhaps through detailed treatments of works (especially Tolstoy’s novels) in separate chapters, the better for us to understand the function of the narrative of alibi as it develops throughout a given work instead of in select moments. *War and Peace* in particular suffers from Weir’s approach. The longest novel Tolstoy wrote, it receives too little attention in Weir’s study and thus looms as a prominent absence in this study of meaningful absences (*Anna Karenina* fares much better in this regard). Rather than devoting entire chapters to single works, Weir addresses discrete moments in Tolstoy’s *oeuvre* in chapters organized around different thematic aspects. Not all of these concepts or all of Weir’s chapters, however, necessarily develop or directly address the notion of narrative alibi. Weir’s discussion of Natasha in chapter five and his analysis of *Hadji Murat* in chapter six of part three, for instance, do not advance the author’s thesis even as they constitute interesting readings in and of themselves.

On the other hand, Weir’s application of concepts from apophaticism to his analysis of *Anna Karenina* in the second half of chapter five—where he examines how Tolstoy uses certain kinds of absence to shape his narrative, analyzing as well how the self may be “recovered from the negative space of what is already said and done” (102)—and his treatment of *Death of Ivan Ilich* in the first part of chapter six—which explains how Ivan Ilich’s epiphany at story’s end is simply the recovery of the meaning absent in his life—both develop and enrich his analysis of the narrative of alibi.

As in his discussion of *Death of Ivan Ilich*, Weir is most convincing in his book when he engages in

sustained analyses of Tolstoy's works, as in chapter seven on "Lucerne" and chapter eight on *Anna Karenina*. Both chapters address how Tolstoy explores the possibilities—and impossibilities—of communication through meaningful absences, addressing in particular the language of love.

If "Lucerne," according to Weir, is a meditation on the failure to communicate and a demonstration of how Tolstoy produces an entire story out of this absence of communication, *Anna Karenina* is an exploration of the larger consequences that attend the breakdown of communication. In particular, Weir explores Anna's descent toward irrationality and suicide as a function of her increasing inability to communicate, illustrated in the novel by her movement from verbal to nonverbal to written and then symbolic forms of communication. Thus, *Anna Karenina* is not only "Tolstoy's greatest love story; it is his greatest language story" (135). In losing language, Anna loses the ability not only to understand the other, but to understand herself. Anna's non-verbal communication thus describes a meaningful absence, an absence that determines her own fate in the novel.

Absence is not always negatively inscribed in *Anna Karenina*, however, as Weir showed earlier in chapter five. The "unthinkably perfect communication that brings Levin and Kitty together and that stands in stark contrast to Vronsky and Anna's oblique codes" (145), for instance, illustrates how Tolstoy proposes the language of love as the ultimate proof that absence or lack can also bring about positive outcomes.

Interestingly, as Weir points out, after *Anna Karenina*, "Tolstoy ceases to allow love to determine whether meaning is really present or deceptively present. All appearance is now treated as false; all conventions misleading. Anna's suspicious view of the world infects even her author" (145). Part five of Weir's study thus looks at the failure of romantic love and Tolstoy's "destruction of the romantic narrative and its

implicit aesthetics of communication" (147) in "The Devil," "The Kreutzer Sonata," and "After the Ball." Here he strives to discover how "in the alibi of Tolstoy's romance narratives, the meaning of language is absent, deferred and encoded by illicit love" (151).

At the same time, Weir addresses the other meaning of alibi in these texts, that is, how these texts seek to exculpate their protagonists as well as the author himself in their revision of the romantic narrative at the heart of so many of Tolstoy's earlier (pre-conversion) works.

In the final part of his study, Weir addresses the paradoxical role of violence in Tolstoy's art, especially the works of his late period, when the author famously espoused non-violence while depicting graphic acts of aggression in works such as *Hadji Murat*, "After the Ball," "The Kreutzer Sonata," and *The Realm of Darkness*. According to Weir, the "causes of violence, as well as Tolstoy's specific theories of nonviolence and aesthetics, form an interpretive background to Tolstoy's late fiction and non-fiction" (183). Violence in Tolstoy's late work becomes "a sign of absence, of missing authentic childhood and repressed conscience" (194).

But violence must also be read in relation to Tolstoy's "emerging efficient aesthetics" as outlined in his *What Is Art?* (204), and Weir attempts such a reading in his analysis of "Father Sergius." With its famous depiction of self-mutilation and a hero who "defines himself negatively, as a kind of absence" (212), "Father Sergius" presents an ideal narrative of alibi, both as a text which exculpates both hero and author (in its depiction of the overcoming of immoral living) and as a work whose central function is to mediate on a meaningful absence: in Sergius's case, the desire for the *absence* of desire, which is revealed as the ultimate resolution of Tolstoy's romantic narratives in accordance with the new "communicative goal of Tolstoy's aesthetics" (214) that leads to a shared relationship with God. This is all provocative, interesting and

persuasive, and it brings to a fitting culmination the larger arc of Weir's inquiry.

Weir concludes his study, somewhat less successfully, with a chapter that looks at Tolstoy's narrative of alibi "within the tradition of primarily western theories of authorial intent and identity." His goal is to see whether different theories of authorial intention can shed further light on Weir's own attempt to understand how Tolstoy uses "gaps in the meaning in his early works" in order to reinterpret them "according to his late aesthetics" (215). Towards that end, Weir contrasts various theories of authorial intention from Barthes, Ricoeur, Said and Bloom as well as the Russian Formalists Tynianov and Tomashevsky, testing their applicability to Weir's own analysis of Tolstoy. While Weir's tour through the critical literature on authorial intention attempts to provide different angles of view through which to see better Tolstoy's struggle to control the message of his works—a theme Weir returns to throughout

his book—the chapter does little to deepen or alter Weir's own arguments, and poses more questions than Weir is able to answer in his study's closing pages.

Overall, however, Weir's book is a welcome new word on Tolstoy. While not a work accessible to the non-specialist or undergraduate student, *Leo Tolstoy and the Alibi of Narrative* is a provocative exploration of Tolstoy's attempt to conceal, reveal and control meaning over the course of the author's lifetime. It suggests new critical terms with which to approach Tolstoy's life and his works and it makes us keenly alert to Tolstoy's sometimes tortured grappling with questions of identity, authorship and the meaning of art.

Works Cited

- Tolstoy, Leo. *War and Peace*. Trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. New York: Random House. 2007.