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## Reviews

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**Martin Bidney. *Patterns of Epiphany: From Wordsworth to Tolstoy, Pater, and Barrett Browning*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1997. Pp. 236.**

The Christian Epiphany celebrates a moment when the sacred made itself tangible to religious witnesses. Much of Judeo-Christian mythology is organized about such events: the apparition of the burning bush to Moses, the voice of the angel that stills the hand of Abraham, Christ's transfiguration, the incarnation itself. But with the exception of the Catholic Church's still pertinent rituals of beatification and sainthood, post-Enlightenment Europe has made religious epiphanies a largely unproductive category of experience. As a hedge against the disquietingly pervasive influence of the Enlightenment, Europeans have constructed artistic and philosophical systems which privilege the reverse process, a sudden elevation of ordinary experience to a supernatural—but rarely divine—domain. The religious origins of this particular spiritual action lay in the ek-stasis of visionary experience, but the nineteenth century thoroughly secularized the process. Since its generic identity rested in large measure on the ability to heighten the intensity of an instant in time, the lyric was the literary form best equipped to create these secular epiphanies. But in an age dominated by longer forms like the narrative poem and the novel—as most European literatures were after 1820—writers would insert the lyric epiphany into increasingly prosaic contexts.

Martin Bidney's book examines the epiphany in the long poems of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Arnold, Tennyson, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and in the prose of Pater (chiefly Marius the Epicurean and the "Imaginary Portraits") and Carlyle (On Heroes and Sartor Resartus). In the midst of this exclusively English company Leo Tolstoy appears as something of an epiphany

himself. With Carlyle and Browning offering the supporting columns, Bidney uses a discussion of *War and Peace* to build a case for epiphanies of heroism and, paradoxically, history.

The author's avowed goal is to apply Gaston Bachelard's theories of imagination and dream language to a literary investigation of the epiphany. Bidney's springboard text is Ashton Nichols' *Poetics of Epiphany*, whose theses he largely accepts, merely replacing Nichols' "atemporal" with "intense" to define the literary epiphany as an "expansive, mysterious, and intense" moment.

Bidney's larger polemic is with subjectivist currents like Poulet's Geneva School or Deconstruction, both of which, in Bidney's eyes, veer dangerously toward installing the author or the reader, respectively, as the center of critical interest. Though epiphanies present an extreme state of subjectivity, Bidney insists that they can and must be studied as literary objects, deriving force largely from their repetition within a work. To some extent this New Critical exercise in textual isolation mirrors Nichols' idea of epiphany as "a new form of meaning in which the moment of inspiration is absolute and determinate, while the significance provided by the epiphany is relative and indeterminate" (17). Bidney limits himself, therefore, to searching an author's oeuvre for retrieval and identification of epiphanic moments, then constructing the "paradigmatic epiphany" of that author. Bidney's variables coincide with Bachelard's matrix: the four elements of earth, air, fire, and water; shape; and motion.

Slavists should be forewarned. *Patterns of Epiphany* brings Tolstoy into play to answer Bidney's need for a certain model of historical epiphany, and in particular to refute the claim of G. S. Morson that *War and Peace* lacks a center. This ambition is complicated by Bidney's misreading of Morson, who does not argue that the book lacks a focus or foci. Further, *Patterns of Epiphany* unfortunately bears out the reservations which the reader

might have about placing Tolstoy on an otherwise British list of writers. A discussion of literary epiphany that excludes the influence of national tradition as a typological variable is certainly justifiable, but some set of boundaries must be consistently invoked, be they temporal, generic, or thematic. A long list of British authors with one Russian intruder forces the question: if Tolstoy makes Bidney's monograph internationalist, why are nineteenth-century theorists/practitioners of the literary epiphany like Hawthorne and Huysmans unstudied and unmentioned? Finally, Bidney's erudition in the texts of his British cohort is not matched by knowledge of Tolstoy's collected works.

Students of Tolstoy will mourn Bidney's silence on the notable epiphanies of *The Cossacks* or *Anna Karenina*, and will be left to speculate on the relation of Tolstoyan epiphany to moments of enlightenment in "The Death of Ivan Ilyich," "Father Sergius," and "Master and Man," a logical bridge which Bidney does not build. His failure to include Prince Andrei's encounters with the oak is a surprising omission.

To these problems of inconsistency or obliviousness must be added a methodological one. Searching for a paradigmatic application of epiphany—the decipherment of an "ur-signature" that appears elsewhere, in diluted form, in an author's work—arbitrarily promotes scenes which both fit Bachelard's table and completely embody its categories. The paradigmatic epiphany for Bidney's reading of *War and Peace* is Pierre's dream about Platon Karataev. The attributes of Tolstoyan epiphany which Bidney derives from this dream—water, rhythmic motion, and sphere—show that the intellectual flower forced by Bachelard's terms is somewhat (if one can turn the novel's metaphors against the critic) sterile. When the reader thinks of Prince Andrei's delirious deathbed dreams or Petya's somnolent conflation of sounds on the eve of his death, water and spheres hardly come to mind. "Rhythm" is a richer observation, especially if one considers Anna Karenina's railway station peasants and Levin's epiphanic mowing.

By refusing to consider context, Bidney also skirts some important, though perhaps unanswerable questions. Does Tolstoy place Prince Andrei's

acceptance of Natasha's self-oriented love in ironic counterpoint to the Platonic anonymity of Platon's world embrace, or does the former exemplify the pattern established didactically by the latter? Is it accident that the epiphanies of Tolstoy's characters often occur close to death, or is it simply another way of saying that the author uses to great effect the literary conventions of Western tragedy? Is the larger action of Tolstoy's two great novels based on an oscillation between tragedy and comedy—disruption and continuation—that inevitably generates a symbolic language privileging "rhythm"? Nonetheless, Bidney appreciates the eccentricity of Tolstoy's epiphanies. He makes the bold claim that the historiographical voice in the novel is epiphanic. "The author-persona himself intrudes to present elemental revelations on his own behalf, epiphanies embedded in long lectures on historical theory" (129). Divorced from Bachelard's conceptual procrustean bed, Bidney's idea urges one to rethink the role played by the novel's historical essays. Indeed the historical passages do speak "according to paradigm." Tolstoy's narrator writes of "the surface of the sea of history," "the bellicose movement of the mass of European peoples from west to east and then from east to west" (166), and of the emergence and submersion of individual lives (much as individuals dissolve in Pierre's water-sphere image).

Use of a metaphor does not constitute an epiphany. But its repetition serves to mark certain text as inherently significant. "Because they take on a life of their own and attain a surreal emotional strength, [Tolstoy's images] lend unity to the mixture of poetry and polemic, of individual experience and speculative exploring that animates the book" (156).

If one thinks of French Surrealism, then Bidney's term "surreal" exaggerates. But in the more generic sense of "supernatural," the word captures a singularity that distinguishes Tolstoy from virtually all European Realists of his time. His heroes—and Anna Karenina—display a capacity for self-transcendence that undermines the Realist paradigm. The natural poverty of a Realist tradition of epiphanies, of ecstasy and moments of sublime transcendence could explain Tolstoy's lonely place in a study that revolves finally around British

poetry and non-Realist prose. Tolstoy offers the thread which binds a very rich tradition of epiphanies in European letters with its rebirth in the symbolist-influenced prose of Proust, Bely, Joyce, and Woolf. There is only one other Realist novelist who perhaps belongs in *Patterns of Epiphany*, but that novelist is Fyodor Dostoevsky and one misses him here.

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**Pier Cesare Bori. *L'altro Tolstoj*. Bologna: Il Mulino, 1995.**

The publication of *L'altro Tolstoj* will bring the fruits of recent critical and philological work on Tolstoy to those who read Italian. Inevitably, this book will take its place among those studies which reevaluate Tolstoy's religious "crisis" as not only an important aspect of his aesthetics but an almost inevitable epistemological move, even a predictable one, in relation to his other work.

In the introduction, Bori claims that he will investigate the unknown or misunderstood aspects of Tolstoy. If one asked, "By whom is Tolstoy misunderstood?" the answer would be, presumably, "By those critics on both sides of the Atlantic who see Tolstoy's ethical-religious position as a mid-life aberration." Bori's study may be aimed at an Italian critical audience which is not in complete agreement with recent critical insights in the English-language field of Tolstoy studies, nor with the position which Bori expounds with respect to Tolstoy. In the best Italian philological tradition, however, it reveals an exhaustive familiarity with the ninety-odd volumes of Tolstoy's complete *oeuvre* as well as an acquaintance with some of the major Tolstoy criticism written in the United States and Britain by A. N. Wilson, D. Tussing Orwin, Richard Gustafson, P. C. Roule, and Victor Terras.

A specialist in moral philosophy and the history of theology at the University of Bologna, Bori is especially interested in the ethical-religious ("etico-religiosa") quality of Tolstoy's particular quest. He competently handles the points at which philosophy and theology dovetail, even the com-

plex ways in which this occurs in Tolstoy's writings. Bori is also the author of a work called *Tolstoy oltre la letteratura* (*Tolstoy Beyond Literature*) and a work called *Gandhi and Tolstoy*, as well as several other volumes on art history, culture and ethics, and critical theory (*L'interpretation infinita*).

In this book, Bori expends great philological effort in tracing the development of the writer as thinker, often juxtaposing different genres in Tolstoy's *oeuvre* to demonstrate the unity of his thought. Bori positions himself in opposition to critics who resist this reading, perhaps unnecessarily, for quite a few Tolstoy scholars would agree with him.

One thinks of Rimvydas Silbajoris's book *Tolstoy's Aesthetics and His Art* (1991), in which the "unity and consistency" of Tolstoy's work is emphasized, the writing and the philosophy being inseparable.

One can almost predict the marriage of Tolstoy's art, aesthetics, and philosophical theory from a combination of his existential *angst*, his Christian universalist brotherhood, and his belief in the osmotic and transcendent properties of the work of art (culminating in the 1898 work *What is Art?*). In this late work, Tolstoy claims that true art ideally dissolves the boundaries between the artist and the recipient of the aesthetic experience. (Considering that he is espousing these theories a full century in advance of reader-response criticism, there suddenly appears to be method in his madness.) In her book, *Framing Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy scholar Amy Mandelker has formulated the phrase "iconic aesthetics" to describe this phenomenon in Tolstoy, in which the work of art ideally functions much the way an icon functions in the Orthodox Christian tradition: as representation and essence simultaneously.

Bori's reading differs from Mandelker's in this crucial respect, perhaps because of his different understanding of the ekphrastic and metaphorical sense in which "icon" is used in Tolstoy criticism. The religion of Tolstoy is "without icons, without relics, without miracles." Bori asserts that Tolstoy's ontological dualism is not founded on a Greco-Russian Orthodox basis, but one consisting of biblical roots and Enlightenment foundations,