
Reviews

George R. Clay. *Tolstoy's Phoenix: From Method to Meaning in War and Peace*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998. Pp. 138.

This small book is an unusual offering from an academic press, inasmuch as the author does not come from the halls of Academe. George Clay is a fiction writer and essayist whose works have appeared in *The New Yorker* and other mainstream literary publications. As he informs us in the preface, he has spent recent years on a farm in Vermont writing short stories and book reviews while attending to such mundane but satisfying chores as gathering hay, making cider, and distilling maple syrup. The serenity of this life, which in scant detail bears a resemblance to Tolstoy's own, may help explain why Clay became so entranced by the sage of Iasnaia Poliana. But the immediate incentive for Clay's book was the desire to find a model for writing his own new novel. Wondering how one creates the illusion of lifelikeness so characteristic of Tolstoy's fictional worlds, he set about studying the pages of *War and Peace*.

Clay approaches Tolstoy, therefore, as another writer, bringing the sensitivities of someone who has grappled with the same kinds of problems. This perspective makes possible a number of unique and very profound insights into Tolstoy's artistry, but occasionally it betrays a certain naïveté about the critical heritage.

Tolstoy's Phoenix progresses logically from analysis of minute textual features in the novel to interpretation of its broad ontological meaning. Part I, containing three chapters, deals with the nuts-and-bolts of style, offering to explain how Tolstoy was able to make readers feel as if life itself were unfolding before their very eyes. In Clay's view, Tolstoy succeeds because he effects a merger of specificity and universality in the character's experience as well as a coalescence of historical and cyclic time in his narration of events.

In Part II, Clay adopts this idea of merging

opposites as the overriding principle of the novel's construction. The protagonists' lives, he suggests, follow a path of growing awareness that the contradictions of existence are but manifestations of an underlying unity in the universe. Maturity comes when they realize that joy and sorrow, good and evil, God's way and human's way are never wholly detached from each other, that each is necessary for the just working-out of the other. Only Andrew, Clay suggests, is unable in the end to reconcile the conflicting impulses of his own life: his perpetual need for unconditional love and his inability to accept such love. In Part III, Clay seeks to extract the moral lessons of Tolstoy's epic, which he interprets as a warning against hubris. Happiness comes to those who move with the current of life, not attaching too much importance to free will.

Clay writes in a jargon-free idiom that is refreshing in the context of today's specialized critical trends. Reading this book reminds one of "old-fashioned" critics like Percy Lubbock or Edmond Wilson, especially because Clay strives for elegance as well as readability. Unfortunately, this effort becomes self-conscious at times, producing an overly embellished prose.

In my opinion, *Tolstoy's Phoenix* is a good introduction to Tolstoy's novel for the general reader. The author is infected with the joy of reading *War and Peace*, and he communicates this feeling very genuinely. Moreover, the analyses of the characters are perceptive and reliable. Nevertheless, Clay does not offer a radically new way of seeing the novel. The concept of balancing opposites and the idea that the major characters continually undergo swings of good and bad fortune, elation and depression, are familiar from many explications of the novel. The image of the "phoenix" (as a metaphor for the characters' spiritual rebirth) may be original in this context, but it is not used to reveal any new truth about the novel. It sounds strained too when Clay applies it to the "resurrection" of Russia from the "ashes" of the

Napoleonic Wars. Neither the Decembrists nor Tolstoy could have interpreted Russia's fate in the new era as a miraculous rebirth. If anything, the Russian spirit was about to enter a prolonged era of hibernation.

The principal value of this book for the Russian scholar lies in the opening chapters, where Clay delves into Tolstoy's descriptive technique and demystifies its magic. Subtly analysing the minute fabric of the text, Clay shows how Tolstoy generates in the reader a sense of witnessing a three-dimensional reality. The narrator's perspective is mobile, constantly shifting from outside the characters to inside, but never taking up firm residence in any one consciousness. The reader travels with the moving lens of the narrator, which locates itself first inside one character then inside another, showing each from different outside views and constantly refocusing between observer to observed. Clay shows how Tolstoy involves the reader as an active participant in the scene, inviting the reader to co-interpret gestures which are familiar from common experience, but also encouraging the reader to particularize these images from his or her own unique memory of real events. In sum, Clay explains very clearly how Tolstoy imbues the text with a rich and vibrant intersubjectivity.

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Natasha Sankovitch. *Creating and Recovering Experience: Repetition in Tolstoy*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998. Pp. 245. Bibliography. Index.

Tolstoy's penchant for repetition famously annoyed some readers, among them Turgenev ("And how tortuous are these deliberate, stubborn repetitions of one and the same trait" [quoted in Sankovitch 15]). Similarly dismayed, Constantine Leontiev suggested that one might eliminate from *War and Peace* "all those special repetitions characteristic of Tolstoy [. . .] : 'strange, strange, hands,

hands, hastily, hastily, sob, sob, rich lip, rich lip,' the too frequent trembling of the lower jaws of his various characters on the occasion of multifarious emotions" (1110).

In her insightful, subtly-argued, and elegantly-written study, *Creating and Recovering Experience: Repetition in Tolstoy*, Natasha Sankovitch scrutinizes the device of repetition and reveals it to be far more indispensable than Turgenev and Leontiev contended. She demonstrates that Tolstoy's use of repeated verbal elements expresses his understanding of how human beings can create a coherent experience of self and life. To be sure, repetition "contributes to characterization, plays a role in thematic and plot development, and can act as a mnemonic aid to readers," among other functions (6). But Sankovitch's book shifts the emphasis away from narratology and the study of repetition as a mnemonic or expressive device in order to develop the thesis that repetition reflects a Tolstoyan psychology of perception and cognition as well as an ethics that integrates particulars with an intuition of ultimate wholeness. As demonstrated by Sankovitch, style and idea merge in Tolstoy's art via repetition.

The author divides her study into four parts: the first discusses narratological and epistemological concerns made manifest in Tolstoy's repetitions; the second and third focus on his use of repetition inside individual works ("intratextual repetition"); and the fourth considers the repetitions between works ("intertextual repetition") as a way of getting at what she calls "Tolstoyan universals" (183). Her approach to his oeuvre is largely ahistorical, but in inviting us in this last chapter to recognize recurring motifs in Tolstoy's fiction and to move backward from *Resurrection*, say, to *Childhood and Family Happiness*, she imparts a sense of Tolstoy's creative process as dependent upon the very types of repetition and differentiation experienced by his characters. One comes away from this book with a fresh appreciation for the unity of Tolstoy's oeuvre.

Limiting herself for the most part to examples drawn from *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* (for, as she notes, these novels provide her with sufficient material), Sankovitch shows that repeti-