

# Reviews

*Anniversary Essays on Tolstoy*. Ed. Donna Tussing Orwin. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010. x + 268 pages. Softcover. ISBN: 978-0521514910.

Tolstoy has been dead for little over a century. This was of course not just any century. It was one of the most violent and fecund in European history: a caesura separating one world from another still in the process of being born. Thus, if we may argue, with some justification, that the world Tolstoy inhabited is now gone for good, though its dying light still be with us as a tempting, perhaps comforting mirage, what might we say of Tolstoy's legacy? For what can we say of a writer who is both so near and far from us? Are we inclined to take comfort in his world as a bastion against the present age or do we risk a more uncertain, questioning approach? Do we align ourselves with Tolstoy as the fulfillment of a now moribund tradition, or as the harbinger of enigmatic possibility? While such "either-or" questions seem to many readers annoyingly reductive in this age that rages against reduction as a want of subtlety, they do have the virtue of making options uncomfortably clear. Where do we stand, then, with Tolstoy?

Donna Orwin's volume does not explicitly seek to answer this tendentious question, but it offers more than its ostensibly modest aim might lead us to believe. For Orwin places the volume within the unsure context of a post-Soviet view of Tolstoy, not a more general epochal break. And yet the essays, in seeking a new start within this somewhat narrowly defined context, cannot but confront the

broader issue of Tolstoy's "relevance." Here we seem to be in a position similar to that taken by Benedetto Croce in his famous attempt to distinguish the living from the dead in Hegel, a procedure itself generated by intimations of epochal change: It was Hegel, after all, who announced the end of history. Orwin is, however, far too astute to fall prey to the obvious vulnerabilities of such a position, and her volume moves on a different, more interesting axis.

We might define this axis as differentiating between powerful, competing tendencies in Tolstoy's work. On the one hand, there is the magnificent builder, the artist who creates structures, both elaborate and precise, which so beguile us that we may come all too easily to rely on them as constituting a reality, the very reality which aficionados of Tolstoy's work have always praised. On the other hand, there is the equally magnificent destructive spirit that rejects the clichés by which we live with resolute ferocity; a spirit of ceaseless distrust, invention—in a word, of extreme restlessness. The former traits belong to the "great artist of the Russian land," the prophet and sage; the latter to the madman and mystic, the nomad who ran away from home at eighty-two years of age.

One of the signal virtues of Orwin's collection is precisely its close attention to this non-canonical and non-canonizable Tolstoy. Here is the Tolstoy who shakes the shadow of Soviet mummification, the endlessly enigmatic Tolstoy who leaves the clichés of his own—perhaps any—time behind in his simultaneous attraction to and repulsion from

the immediate, the unlimited, the estranging, the wellspring of creativity—and criminality.

It is thus fitting that the collection opens with Caryl Emerson's essay on Tolstoy and music, proceeds to Andreas Schönle's treatment of death, and then Robin Feuer Miller's consideration of animals in Tolstoy's fiction. In each of these essays the central focus is on an object that cannot really be an object, whether that be the false and ambiguous sense of immediacy granted by music; the sublime in the guise of that possibility of the impossibility of our being, death; or the estranging presence whose otherness we tend to forget all too easily, that of the animal. All three of these essays trace in well-informed detail the pattern of attraction and repulsion that characterizes Tolstoy's relation to radical otherness; perhaps only Feuer Miller's eloquent essay downplays the tensions in Tolstoy's relation to animals in favor of investigating it properly. In this regard, it is indeed remarkable that such a fundamental aspect of Tolstoy's work has not been given the kind of treatment it deserves, despite his popularity among analytic philosophers associated with Cora Diamond or John McDowell. All too often Tolstoy's "sympathetic" anthropomorphic invasion of the animal has been lauded where it might be better to look upon the attitude as one of colonization, hardly beneficent, and quite effectively a refutation of the perplexing, perhaps mocking animality of creatures like the famously nomadic dog from *War and Peace*.

Donna Orwin's essay, which follows upon this initial triad, acts as a sort of interlude in the collection, just as Michael Denner's essay stands alone as a concluding gesture and invitation. Between these essays, we encounter two additional triads, one devoted to Tolstoy's spirituality, the other to his exploitation of certain literary genres.

Tolstoy's spirituality is of course a notorious issue. Tolstoy gives free rein to the hedgehog, the bureaucrat—and tyrant—who seeks to impose a decisive plan on human activity that may be

executed effectively by individuals in a broad community. Here is the prophet, the lawgiver, the Tolstoy who clings to normativity as the proper armature by which nature may be tamed, made human, but, as always, in a peculiar way: For Tolstoy's normative impulse seeks to have done with the normative. The essays contained in this section of the collection embrace this complexity by emphasizing the idiosyncrasy of Tolstoy's Christianity as well as the master's evident discomfort with the aridity of philosophical inquiry as practiced by the *Philosophen vom Gewerbe*. Gary Hamburg's essay provides an expert account of possible doctrinal precedents for Tolstoyan Christianity, none of which accounts for Tolstoy's original synthesis of disparate elements in the tradition. Ilya Vinitsky's essay merely strengthens the impression of eclectic originality with its intriguing discussion of Tolstoy's conception of the soul as a sort of "negative pneumatology." Most astonishing, however, may well be the dialogue between Nikolai Strakhov and Tolstoy that is the centerpiece of Irina Paperno's essay. This dialogue shows a Tolstoy who is quite evidently impatient with philosophical discourse, who excuses his clumsiness or inability to express himself within philosophical discourse, a position one can easily confuse with disdain. Paperno's supple treatment of the dialogue allows one to conclude that Tolstoy's complaint with philosophy was not merely that of an artist, as the cliché has it, but of a thinker intolerant of the rhetoric of philosophy, its sometimes scholastic *technē*.

The final triad of essays accentuates this polemical attitude to *technē* in the context of Tolstoy's fiction. Edwina Cruise examines in detail the possible candidates for the English novel Anna Karenina reads on the way back to St. Petersburg, and concludes that the difficulty of clear identification of one candidate is due to Tolstoy's willful synthesis—as caricature—of the tired clichés of the English novel. Justin Weir suggests quietly that Tolstoy views drama as equally beset by cliché,

thus worthy of serving ideological or didactic ends in ironically deadening allegories of deadened conscience, rather than putting those ends into question. And, finally, Gary Saul Morson encourages us to read the most homely vehicle of verbal cliché, the quotable phrase, as offering flashes of connection and insight in the hands of Tolstoy, who deploys the quotable in unquotable ways to defamiliarizing effect.

The two essays that stand alone thematically, those of Orwin and Denner, likewise pay tribute to the unconventional Tolstoy. Orwin convincingly describes Tolstoy's genuine fascination with the figure of the *molodets* in his war fiction, a figure who finds himself most at home in the extraordinary—indeed, often amoral—circumstances of war. Denner considers the remarkable, perhaps perverse, malleability of Tolstoy's image in the revolutionary period, with Tolstoy's complicated adherence to social transformation without revolution lending itself awkwardly to the competing ideological agendas of various constituencies in the ugly political theater of this period.

Where do we stand, then, with Tolstoy? It should be obvious by now that Orwin's collection of essays provides a remarkably coherent answer to this question. We stand with Tolstoy in a new attitude of investigation that seeks out what is enigmatic, unfinished, and difficult. For not only has the Tolstoy of Soviet orthodoxy congealed into a deadening cliché, so has the caricature created by Sir Isaiah Berlin. For if the opposition between hedgehog and fox has had considerable heuristic traction in Tolstoy studies—and rightfully so—it has become exhausted, in need of reformulation and renewal. Orwin's collection makes a necessary, and liberating, step in this direction. Now we might be ready to perceive Tolstoy not as the wondrous artist of differentiation, the seer of plurality, but as a brilliant figuration of refusal, and, above all, of the refusal to submit to the conventional and normative in their myriad guises. This wily,

exciting, and dangerous Tolstoy frustrates the “ordinary course” of things, troubles our repose in the oblivion of the everyday: This Tolstoy is always untimely, revolutionary, ahead of us.

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**Леннквист, Барбара (Barbara Lennkvist [Lönnqvist]). Путешествие вглубь романа Лев Толстой: Анна Каренина. Москва: Языки славянской культуры, 2010. 128 с. (Studia philologica). ISBN: 978-5955104362.**

Intended for general readers, Barbara Lönnqvist's study practices what Tolstoy himself encouraged when approaching literature, namely, exploring a text as an “endless labyrinth of linkages” in order to grasp the essence of the art. Her meditations contained in this slim volume are absorbed in a close reading of *Anna Karenina* and are sparked by “a sense of wonderment.” Lönnqvist traces a personal, though sometimes meandering journey through the novel's semantic features.

The investigation of the rich textual tapestry offered in this study is, as readily admitted by the author, a creative process of collaboration where each reader is the novelist's “co-author.” In a series of perceptive, meticulous appraisals of motifs, images, instances of word play, and linguistic puns, Lönnqvist exposes the novel's major symbolic subtexts that distinguish Tolstoy's unique brand of realism. At times a lustrous interpretation of the classic novel, this book is written confidently, betraying no anxiety towards the colossal body of Tolstoyan scholarship. It offers a delicate nod toward Russian Formalists (who provided an impetus for her inquiry) and metafictional hermeneutics, presenting requisite, yet reticent remarks on Tolstoy's oeuvre.

Lönnqvist is adept at demonstrating connections between the novel's multiple subplots, while highlighting the controlling forces of both