

# Reviews

Meyer, Priscilla. *How the Russians Read the French: Lermontov, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 2008. xiv + 277 pages. Cloth. ISBN: 9780299229306.

Priscilla Meyer's *How the Russians Read the French : Lermontov, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy* brings together and expands upon her previous articles on these writers as well as her article on the role played by the *Revue étrangère* in Russian literature during the 1830s and 1840s. *How the Russians Read the French* occasionally shows traces of its previous incarnations. For example, Meyer asserts that "Janin's *The Dead Donkey or the Guillotined Woman* is an important (and entirely unexamined) subtext for *Crime and Punishment*" (94) and that Janin's *La Confession* is a "hitherto undiscovered, governing subtext for the same novel" (89), although she herself has discussed and examined these works in articles more than a decade ago. This is a trivial, but annoying, editing glitch in a book that will be of real use to many Slavists and their students.

Meyer begins her book by quoting Dostoevsky's remark that the study of how certain Western writers influenced Russia and to what extent "would be an extraordinary and serious undertaking. [...] [T]he history of the reincarnation of an idea into another idea" (Dostoevsky 1876). As distinct from source studies, or studies of "influence," the subject of Meyer's book is "the dialogue between the earlier (French) and later authors, the Russian writer's interpretation of his subtexts" (11). Her book therefore belongs to "Subtext Studies," which she says, quoting Robert Bellamy, are a way of examining "what goes into and what comes out of a ...creative mind" (7).

Although it would also be possible to apply her method to illuminate other works by these three writers, most notably many other works by Dostoevsky, Meyer limits her analysis to Ler-

montov's *Hero of Our Time*, Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, and Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. She declares that these three novels all follow a similar pattern: the Russian writer "views the French texts he selects as outmoded, harmful, or decadent and rewrites them in the direction of purported Russian aesthetic vigor and moral integrity" (11). "The Russians use the French to novelize their philosophical and religious deliberations" (120).

Meyer knows that these novels also draw importantly from English and German sources, but for the purposes of this book, she limits herself to French subtexts. Given the venue of this review, I will limit my comments to her chapter about *Anna Karenina*.

Meyer argues that Tolstoy uses the French materials as a baseline against which to consider adultery: he builds the relationship among Karenin, Anna and Vronsky in dialogue with Rousseau, Dumas fils, Zola, and Flaubert. The subtexts Meyer considers for *Anna Karenina* are therefore Rousseau's *Emile et Sophie*; Alexander Dumas fils' *Man-Woman, Response to Monsieur Henri d'Ideville*, and *Claude's Wife*; Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*; two of Zola's early novels: *Thérèse Raquin* and *Madeleine Féral*; and, not surprisingly, considering Tolstoy's epigraph to the novel, the Gospels. According to Meyer, Tolstoy does not adapt the French novels, but he responds to them and orders them in a hierarchy:

[A]t the bottom are Zola's novels, which are part of the context of the adultery novel, but function only as sources for some dramatic moments. Tolstoy rejects Dumas' view of the battle of the sexes, which functions as a subtext for Kitty and Levin's relationship, as well as some scenes surrounding Anna's betrayal of Karenin. The fullest subtextual relationship is reserved for *Madame Bovary*. (154)

Meyer states that Tolstoy's antidote to the decadence he found in the French novel of adultery is made up of the ideals of Rousseau and the eternal authority of the Gospels. Her detailed discussion of the way Tolstoy reworks *Emile et Sophie* is illuminating and immediately relevant to the development both of Levin and of Anna Karenina. My only quibble with Meyer's careful analysis of the relationship between the two works is the statement: "In both cases, the atmosphere of the capital affects women whose incomplete marriage makes them vulnerable, Petersburg society ladies having acquired from Paris looser attitudes towards adultery" (158). Yet the crucial first step in Anna's adultery happens in Moscow, not St Petersburg. Ironically, Anna is there trying to smooth over the effects of Stiva's philandering on his marriage, but she has not thereby acquired a looser attitude towards adultery in regard to her own conduct.

Curiously, Tolstoy is not recorded as having said much about *Madame Bovary*. Yet the fullest, unmistakably subtextual relationship Meyer treats is the one between *Anna Karenina* and *Madame Bovary*. This comparison is not a new one, but the detail in which Meyer works out the transformations is exceptional (even down to a consideration of the uses of manure and the importance of cigar cases. In these two novels, a cigar is not just a cigar... but it is one too). In the final section of her chapter on *Anna Karenina*, Meyer shows how Tolstoy's antidote to adultery, and indeed to all the decadence that these French novels represent to him, required "not only the ideals of Rousseau but also the eternal authority of the Gospels" (200).

Meyer's *Anna Karenina* chapter deserves the close attention not only of comparatists but also of all readers of Tolstoy who want to see the artisan/artist at work on his subtextual materials. Her Dostoevsky chapter is perhaps even more useful than the one on Tolstoy, since the materials discussed in it are not as well-known to the

general reader as those transformed by Tolstoy. Meyer is generous in her extensive notes, acknowledging relevant contributions to her argument by other scholars (e.g., a nod to Liza Knapp's "Tue-la,! Tue-le!" or to Thomas Barran's discussion of the importance of Rousseau's "Confession of a Savoyard Vicar" for Levin's quest for the meaning of his life). Other notes acknowledge colleagues and students who have provided important insights about subtexts. There are, however, two odd exceptions. In her chapter on Dostoevsky, Meyer is uncharacteristically dismissive of the work of Donald Fanger. As for the scholarship on Tolstoy, Amy Mandelker does not even appear in the bibliography, which may be because it is a little out of date (the last entry I noticed was from 2002). Nevertheless, the bibliography is a useful resource, as is the whole book, which will be a boon not only to all close readers of these three major novels, but also to readers for whom the "subtexts" are the primary points of reference.

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**Croskey, Robert.** *The Legacy of Tolstoy. Alexandra Tolstoy and the Soviet Regime in the 1920s.* Seattle; London: U of Washington, 2008. 84 pages. ISBN: 9780295988771.

This rather small volume is painstakingly researched. It focuses on the relations between Alexandra Tolstoy and the new Soviet regime, but as the author acknowledges in the introduction, the study "reflects some other themes found in the scholarship of the 1920s, such as the question of continuity across the divide of revolution, conflict over cultural policy, the position of the old Imperial intelligentsia in Soviet society, and the importance of patronage