

Reviews

Gareth Williams, *The Influence of Tolstoy on Readers of His Works* (Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellon Press, 1990).

Writing about what he felt to be Tolstoy's chief quality, Boris Pasternak described the "passion of creative contemplation," in the light of which Tolstoy saw everything "in its pristine freshness, in a new way, as though for the first time" (*I Remember: Sketch for an Autobiography*). Pasternak was seized, as so many have been, by the awesome and elusive power of Tolstoy. Gareth Williams, too, as he explains in the preface to his study *The Influence of Tolstoy on Readers of His Works*, has experienced this compelling power.

In a study which covers Tolstoy's major works from the autobiographical trilogy and its drafts through *Anna Karenina*, Williams grounds his discussion in the literary and social issues and debates that concerned Tolstoy and his contemporaries. He relies heavily on biographical and historical material to give coherence to his chronologically structured discussion. This contextualizing information is presented clearly and interestingly, and will be especially useful to those of his readers who have not read a biography of Tolstoy and/or are not familiar with nineteenth-century Russian literary culture.

Another useful aspect of Williams' book, especially for people new to the study of Tolstoy, is that in the course of his discussion he frequently refers to the work--the insights and views-- of Tolstoy scholars from the nineteenth century to the present day: from Chernyshevsky to Shklovsky to E.N. Kupreyanova to G.S. Morson.

The scope, then, of Williams' study is far greater than he allows when he says he is mainly concerned with the means Tolstoy employs to influence his readers. Thus this book is much more, but therefore, in a sense, much less as well, than its author claims.

Williams' original contribution comes in the terms and metaphors he uses to describe several of the methods he identifies. For example, "investigation through invention" is the name Williams gives to characters' internal monologues in which he perceives a "constant branching out away from the original object of inquiry." This process, which follows "a definite pattern," leads, according to Williams, to the contemplation of absolute values. Williams never makes clear why he uses the phrase "investigation through invention" to describe this process. Nor can I agree that these "patterns of thought...are experienced by everyone." I do, however, agree with his assertion that with these passages Tolstoy "ensures that the reader sympathizes with his characters and cooperates fully in the reading experience." And Williams rightly remarks upon Tolstoy's use of repetition and rhythm in such passages to affect readers' emotions and encourage them to think about moral questions.

Williams uses passages from *Childhood* and *Boyhood* to demonstrate his concept of investigation through invention. By the time he mentions the term again, in one of two

chapters dealing with *War and Peace*, I had forgotten what the term meant, so little does it evoke in and of itself. This time Williams discusses the internal monologue of Nikolai Rostov as he faces Dolokhov across a hand of cards. Williams himself seems to question the usefulness of his term when he states at this point: "‘Investigation through invention,’ like all other devices, is not used for long in an unalloyed form; other means of presentation are combined with it, it is interrupted and varied." Thus he suggests that the Rostov monologue is different from other similar monologues, but proceeds to discuss it as an example of "investigation through invention" without specifying what makes it unique.

Williams ably observes that one of the main effects of the passage is to reduce the distance between the reader and Rostov. One reason for the reduction of distance is that, according to Williams, the reader recognizes "the very distinct pattern" of the questions Rostov asks himself. I simply do not discern the pattern--a movement outward from the particular to the general-- that Williams claims distinguishes these passages. I agree with Williams' assertion that Tolstoy relies on internal monologues to draw his reader into the experience of the characters, but I fail to see the usefulness of the term "investigation through invention" or of insisting on a pattern, which if it exists at all, is so general it could describe virtually any internal monologue.

Williams, however, suggests that the "pattern" of questions in "investigation through invention" is reminiscent of the structure of Laurence Sterne's "white bear passage" in *Tristram Shandy*, which in turn is based on the systems of rhetorical invention developed by classical rhetoricians. This discussion is interesting, if unconvincing. Williams turns to the field of music to describe another of Tolstoy's methods. According to Williams, those of Tolstoy's early stories in which the psychological life of the hero is foregrounded can be seen as "songs" in which a single melodic line dominates. Stories in which Tolstoy brings two different responses to the world into view are "antiphonal." In *The Cossacks*, we are told, "Tolstoy moves from an antiphonic to a symphonic presentation of reality." All we are told, however, about what a symphonic presentation might look like is that in *The Cossacks* "as in a symphony, everything coheres and adds to the significance of the whole."

These terms do not appear again in any of Williams' other chapters, a fact which brings me to an annoying aspect of this book. Williams' study lacks an effective organization. Just as it is difficult to identify an overall thesis to the book as a whole, it is near impossible to identify a central thesis or organizing principle for the separate chapters as well. And with one or two exceptions Williams provides no transitions between chapters. Thus although each chapter might include several insightful observations, there is no organizing principle to give these ideas coherence. The vagueness of the concluding lines of Chapter 3 is typical: "The catastrophes and peripetia mentioned by Annenkov are not random accidents, they are part of a moral pilgrimage. This is one of the sources of the strength which his contemporaries found in Tolstoy."

What puzzled me first about this sometimes useful and informative study is its title: *The Influence of Tolstoy on Readers of His Works*. Before beginning to read the book I took this title to mean that in his book Williams would be concerned with how Tolstoy has

influenced his readers and I assumed he meant to investigate what has been the influence of Tolstoy's ideas and convictions on his readers as expressed or embodied in his works. Generally, I would argue, when one talks about a person's influence, one has in mind the power exerted by that person over another by means of ideas and actions. But in the first paragraph of his Preface, Williams states that there has never been a detailed study in English of "the methods which Tolstoy employs to influence his reader and the relationship which he establishes with his reader." Williams also asserts that "I am concerned principally with the way in which...he influences his reader through the images he has created and helps him to join the world of the characters." And in the same paragraph he states "I am principally concerned with the way in which [Tolstoy] attempts to influence the reader through words." These three statements taken together do not constitute a coherent thesis. But having read the Preface through to the end I think that the author's purpose is to study the methods Tolstoy uses to direct the reader's experience.

I proceeded to read the body of Williams' book and I experienced both delight and displeasure as I perceived an impressive compendium of information, insights, and interpretations of a substantial number of Tolstoy's works all written in the period before 1880. Then when I read in the Afterword Williams' own view of his work, I was baffled. In the first line he states: "This study is an attempt to ascertain the *means* [my italics] by which Tolstoy exerts an influence on the reader." He goes on to summarize his accomplishment more fully and explains:

I have shown that Tolstoy believed that literature was communication with a reader and that from his earliest steps in literature he struggled to gain a clear picture in his mind of who his reader was and how he could best communicate with him. Indeed, has there ever been an author who has not imagined to himself the effect his work would have on his reader? *I have merely attempted to follow the author and study some of the effects of his work* [my italics].

There is a considerable difference between means and effects. And although these statements are not contradictory, neither do they provide a coherent statement of purpose or intent.

What Williams really offers, along with a great deal of contextualizing background concerning Tolstoy's literary career and critical reception and interpretations of aspects of some of Tolstoy's works, is an exploration of some of the methods Tolstoy uses to communicate and structure his vision and some discussion of the effects of these methods. Williams' focus is not on the experience of the reader; his focus, on the whole, is on Tolstoy--on his literary intentions and methods.

It must be said that in the two chapters Williams devotes to discussion of *War and Peace*, he is indeed concerned with the experience of the reader. His main point is that Tolstoy makes great demands on his reader. In the first of the two chapters, Williams discusses at length the opening scene of *War and Peace*. His discussion may well be interesting as well as useful to someone reading Tolstoy's book for the first time or for a non-specialist. Then in the second chapter he writes more broadly about the process of character development and Tolstoy's presentation of his historical philosophy. Here, Williams makes a number of insightful comments about the innumerable links among

characters, scenes, and themes that permeate *War and Peace*. He remarks, for example, that even links not easily detected by readers help them to follow, organize, make sense of what they are reading. Although I do not agree with Williams that Tolstoy creates "a system of links, I think his assessment of their central function is quite right: "These links tend, on the whole, to produce an impression of harmony through the perspective which they afford of individual destinies and of the whole range of human behavior of all kinds of love, hatred, cowardice, courage, avarice, jealousy, vanity and pride."

The final two chapters of Williams' study are devoted to *Anna Karenina*. As is the case throughout the book, Williams' style is meandering and digressive. To begin his discussion Williams goes on at excessive length about the importance of the concept of heat in Russia and Europe generally in the nineteenth-century. He points out that Levin resumes his reading of John Tyndall's book on heat when he returns to the country after Kitty's rejection, and proceeds to argue that consciousness, the will and heat are linked not only in the scenes depicting Levin's return home, but in the whole of *Anna Karenina*. Williams, however, never indicates what he thinks is the significance of the image or motif of heat in the novel. Instead, he explains: "It is evident that there is some sort of connection between Levin's ideas of family life, which are closely connected with his will to improve himself, and heat. This connection is not explained in any formula, it becomes evident from the juxtaposition of elements of the material. It is up to the reader to form his own conclusions." Similarly, a few pages later he asserts "Thus Tolstoy made the connection between energy in the physical world and energy in the spiritual world. This connection is not explained in the novel, but it is demonstrated." Thus I am never quite sure exactly what point Williams is trying to make.

In the second chapter devoted to *Anna Karenina* Williams discusses the link between consciousness and will in the novel. He refers several times to the "dialectical process" by which characters try to come to terms with their experience. Just as I object to Williams' use of "system" to describe the myriad links that permeate *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, so do I object to his use of "dialectical process" to describe characters' experience. Tolstoy, I would argue, is nearer to the Aristotelian conception of evolution through quantitative variations than to the Heraclitean insistence on the underlying connection between opposites that pervades Hegel's dialectics. And just as "system" and "dialectical process" would not be words Tolstoy would identify himself with, his character the painter Mikhaylov in *Anna Karenina* would not use the word "technique" to discuss his activity as an artist. And yet Williams writes: "When Vronsky and Anna meet the artist Mikhaylov he is creating a picture which shows Pontius Pilate judging Jesus. The scene poses tremendous moral problems, but the aspect of his technique which Mikhaylov himself emphasizes does not have a moral dimension. He seeks to 'remove the coverings' which cloak what he is portraying in order to reveal, not the truth, not beauty, not goodness or vice, but 'energetic force.'" But removing the coverings is not a matter of technique for Mikhaylov: what one needs to be an artist is an eye, a keenly sensitive and discerning awareness. This awareness is precisely that "passion of creative contemplation" Pasternak wrote of.

Despite my own disagreements with aspects of Williams' description and

interpretation of Tolstoy's works, this study will serve as a useful and provocative introduction to Tolstoy. I do not know what kind of editorial intervention the book received, but I believe its positive aspects could have been strengthened had it received more.

As I read the closing lines of Williams' Afterword I am baffled anew: "It may be that his book is the record of the effects produced by Tolstoy's work only on one reader, that is, the author of this study. It would be surprising, however, if this were the case, since the author has no reason to suppose that his reactions to the works of Tolstoy are markedly different from those of most men." Would the author have reason to suppose that his reactions might be markedly different from those of most *women*? Why would a person choose to use "men" in the sense of "men and women" when it clearly would have been just as easy to say "most people"?

Like Pasternak and like Williams, I, too, have been impressed by the ineluctable power of Tolstoy to enchant me with his vision. At the very least, Williams' study reminded me of how difficult it is to describe Tolstoy's achievement.

Natasha Sankovitch, Ohio Wesleyan University

***Memoirs of Peasant Tolstoyans in Soviet Russia.* Translated, edited, and with an introduction by William Edgerton. Bloomington, Ill.: Indiana University Press, 1993.**

The memoirs included in this volume document the lives of those who attempted to live out Tolstoy's moral ideas during the first two decades of Soviet power. These memoirs describe pre-revolutionary village ways, the battles of World War I, the famine of 1921-22, the relative prosperity of the NEP period, and the brutal years of collectivization and Terror from a unique perspective. Boris Mazurin, an organizer of the Tolstoyan Life and Labor Commune and one of the few Tolstoyans still alive at the time of this collection's publication, describes the ideals that animated the movement and conveys the spirit that sustained it:

Often in frank discussions we would hear such statements as this from Communists--highly placed figures, ordinary members, and investigators, as well as simple working people: "It's all well and good, what you Tolstoyans say. That will all come about--a stateless society without violence and without frontiers, sober and industrious, and without private property. But this is not the right time for it--right now it is even harmful." But we did not understand that. The "Kingdom of God" that lived within us kept nudging us toward carrying out our ideals immediately, without delay. Putting off the fulfillment of our ideals until some indefinite time in the future seemed to us amazingly similar to the teachings of the church people, who urged us to be patient and endure our poverty and deprivation so that we would acquire the blessings we longed for in some future life beyond the grave."(97)