
Reviews

Sharon McCartney. *Karenin Sings the Blues*. Fredericton, NB: Goose Lane Editions, 2003. 98pp. CAD\$19.95.

Canadian poet Sharon McCartney's recent collection of poems entitled *Karenin Sings the Blues* was published just before "the year of *Anna Karenina*," a fortuitous, yet obviously unintended coincidence. A common reaction of readers and of listeners to public readings of this superb collection is to purchase the novel. If readers are motivated to read or re-read it, that can hardly be bad; so long, that is, as they appreciate these finely written and intriguing poems for themselves. The author uses the novel to explore her own themes of life's purpose, loss, memory, family, death, and the like. At the same time, to separate the two works may ultimately be impossible, and pointless to boot.

This is McCartney's second collection of verse, and it has been short-listed for both the Atlantic Poetry Prize and the ForeWord Poetry Prize. Of the 51 poems in this slender volume, slightly more than half are contained in the eponymous section, although by a page count they make up about two thirds. The other two sections, "California" and "Persuasion," will not be considered here, with a couple of minor exceptions.

The poet gives voice to various human and non-human characters as well as objects from the novel, sometimes from within its parameters, but more often from a variety of external perspectives. In some poems she extrapolates moments from within the novel, as for example in "How Anna Changed Her Mind," "Vronsky's Revolver, After Vronsky's Unsuccessful Attempt at Suicide," "Varenka," and "Anna's Morphine":

I am the fat tongue unlocking her lips,
booted knee scything her snug thighs,
gloved finger that orbits her pursed nipple,
breath on her nape, engine, engendering—

no, I am better than that.

I am the good news that nothing matters, . . .

Others, such as "Kitty Widowed," "I Thought I Knew Who I Was" (written in the voice of Anna's daughter), or "Stiva Dines" are situated chronologically subsequent to the novel.

How can one be more or less than alive?
Even the suffering, the sinking, after indulgence
is suffused with loveliness, the memory
of a ballerina's lemony fingers on one's lips,
veal croquettes in a velvet sauce,
coquettes in tulle.

I am as sorry about Anna as anyone
but must I deny my appetite? . . .

Others stand outside the novel but parallel to it, for example the delightful "Levin's Complaint." In it Levin chastises Tolstoy for artistic and philosophical shortcomings, with such remarks as: "Now how probable is that?"; "Do you delight in such irony-/What makes you so bitter?"; "You missed your mark with *Madame Karenina*"; "Vronsky deceives you"; "My own character? I cannot thank you for that." Of course, each point is elaborated just enough to render it palpable. McCartney reveals an acute appreciation of Levin's character, of Tolstoy's novelistic technique, of his struggle to come to terms with his personal demons, and of his artistic challenges. Her brilliantly conceived irony and piercing questions simultaneously, like a two-headed lamp, illuminate her own poetic persona and world view in the process.

In interviews McCartney has expressed concern that her poems not get lost in the process of juxtaposing them with the novel. Most readers will value them on their own merits. At the same time, each poem engages the reader in the pregnant tension produced by the interaction of the poet with the novel(ist). McCartney turns Tolstoy's technique of "defamiliarization" back on the novel itself and on those elements of it which she has selected out for meditation, elaboration and response. For readers coming to *Karenin Sings the Blues* from *Anna Karenina*, this defamil-

iarized encounter with familiar elements is likely to take place within the conceptual space of the novel, at least initially. McCartney re-perceives things from sharply different perspectives, for instance, the thoughtful musings of Anna's morphine or "The Little Engine That Killed Anna Karenina" as it contemplates the contingent and uncertain status of human life. ("To look at the end and come back;/Some say it's a gift but I can't.")

It would be intriguing to know whether the author of "Frou Frou, After Vronsky's 'Awkward Moment' at the Last Obstacle of the Steeplechase Breaks Her Back" or "Laska, Levin's Hunting Dog, on the Loss of her Right Foreleg" was familiar with, say, "Kholstomer." Intriguing, but not determining. McCartney's interpolations of such questions as death and suicide in the mouths of her speakers are subtle, profound, and clearly deserving of engagement with Tolstoy's own. Moreover, this is one of the areas where we can most easily make connections with poems in the other two parts of the collections, such as the haunting "My Father Tells Me Why I was Born" or "Rant."

The poems are highly literary. ("I read in order to write.") In the section entitled "Persuasion," in the final poem of the book, "Song," McCartney brings us back to *Anna Karenina*: it opens with "Reading *Anna Karenina* on a blizzard afternoon." None of her poems can be reduced to a single moment, a single concern, or a single idea; yet by framing the volume this way, i.e., by inserting a reference to *Anna Karenina* into a poem which combines the quotidian concerns of a burnt supper and a board game with a keen and highly distilled expression of the meaning of family and the denial or acceptance of death, she reminds us of why we read and why great literature brings us back to the question of who we are.

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Vladimir E. Alexandrov. *Limits to Interpretation: The Meanings of Anna Karenina*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004. 353 pp.

Vladimir Alexandrov has written an ambitious and frequently elegant book in which he attempts what few literary critics within the recent past have done: to offer an extended discussion of several literary theories, to develop his own hybrid of several of them, and to apply it, with rigour and sustained honesty, to practice—that is, to a large and complex text—in this case, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*.

He divides his book into two parts: the first, "The Plurality and Limits of Interpretation," which is really an introductory chapter of some twenty-five pages, succinctly lays out his theoretical argument. Even earlier, in the "Introduction" Alexandrov informs us that his "reading of the novel is . . . an attempt to 'map' or to understand the relations among as many of its plausible meanings and ambiguities as possible and thus to identify what complexity inheres in it" (9). His key point, at this early stage in his analysis, is that there are limits to interpretation.

At the same time he argues powerfully for the importance of the reader's being open to the text. To condense his argument at this point, he cites Lentricchia's bitter aphorism as one of his epigraphs to Part I, "I believe that what is now called literary criticism is a form of Xeroxing. Tell me your theory and I'll tell you in advance what you'll say about any work of literature, especially those you haven't read." Alexandrov states his own aim, his own opposite emphasis, clearly: "I strive to understand what the writers are saying as fully and clearly as possible in their own terms, no matter whether I personally believe this to be false, heinous, ambiguous, contradictory, anachronistic, irrelevant to my own view of things, offensive to me and to others, or by contrast brilliantly perceptive and deeply moving" (18). He describes, in effect, a Bakhtinian readiness to be completely open to the word of another and to make it, however temporarily, one's own. I am also reminded here of Genette's description of reading as an