

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.

ALLAN REID  
UNIVERSITY OF NEW BRUNSWICK

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

activity in which the reader, during the act of reading, finds himself bound “hand and foot” to the words of the author. There is also, of course, Coleridge’s exhortation that the reader suspend disbelief, and the generations of critics who have, in one way or another adhered to this dictum. Alexandrov is in good company. But most of all I am reminded of the great teacher, the late Rufus W. Mathewson, who, despite his own admirable knowledge of literary theory, would always say, “read the book, and see what it says; try not to come to any book with your own grid.”

Alexandrov takes this project of being open to the text to an unparalleled extreme, “I have reduced to a minimum my own evaluative remarks about Tolstoy’s novel; anyone can provide their own. What I do instead is to try to identify the matrix of meanings in the novel that is inevitably implicated in the value judgments that readers make about it” (19). He takes to task what he sees as an obsession on the part of current literary criticism with wanting to say something “new” and with conceiving of originality “in terms of an author’s *dialectical reaction* against contemporary critical approaches and traditions” (5). He uses as his example of this a list of some 63 advertisements from the May 2000 issue of the PMLA. I found his spirit of argumentation here appealing, but also wished he had taken into account two things: first, that the very word “novel” also, at least in English, conveys this same hunger for “newness” or originality, and also that although all 63 of his examples indeed emphasize newness, only 20 or so of them conceive of originality in terms of an author’s dialectical reaction. This may be a minor quibble, but since Alexandrov is also arguing (and to some extent I agree with him) that a serious contemporary academic problem lies precisely in the “dialectical character of scholarly publishing,” then it is important that all readers would agree on the basic decoding of this list.

Alexandrov’s emphasis is more on dialogue than dialectic, on an ideal of reasonable conversation rather than the imparting of a monologic message: “I seek two things: to understand how a work can prompt a *plurality* of different interpretations *simultaneously*, . . . and how this configuration of readings allows one to speak about what

can be called the *limits* of that work’s interpretations” (8).

Alexandrov’s quest to find specific tools for the difficult practice of keeping to a minimum his own evaluative remarks about Tolstoy’s novel while nevertheless writing a book about it leads him to turn back to the work of two theorists, Jakobson and Lotman, both of whom, in Alexandrov’s view, avoided the pitfall of pre-structuring any work before having read it. At this point, toward the end of the Introduction, he also tells us that “an additional part of my aim in the pages that follow is to illustrate how aspects of [the] rich Slavic legacy can contribute valuable perspectives to current theoretical debates in the United States, as well as provide counterarguments to some of the more extreme and provocative positions that have been articulated” (22). I admire these three aims: of openness, of grafting the ideas of Lotman and Jakobson onto his own original (even “new”) methodology, of reminding the larger literary community of the importance of our rich Slavic legacy—both theoretical and artistic.

Alexandrov’s Part I is learned, sober, and occasionally bristles with a deep but controlled anger. It makes for engaging reading. After precisely delineating ethical, psychological, semiotic, and metalinguistic arguments to which he is also hospitable, Alexandrov explicates what will be the core of his approach: the interpretation of *Anna Karenina* through its “hermeneutic indices.”

He defines this term as follows: “These moments are *hermeneutic*, because they have to do with the most basic as well as the overarching conditions of meaning formation; and they can be designated *indices* because they identify the locus, the content, and the implications of specific instances of meaning generation in the work . . . . Speaking impressionistically, one could say that hermeneutic indices are signs of a text’s self-consciousness about the kinds of meanings with which it is concerned” (38). Thus, in Part II, for example, when Alexandrov comes to his actual reading of the novel, he discovers that the famous “first sentence also comprises a veritable quiver of hermeneutic indices. . . . There is an obvious focus and value placed on the *family* as a fundamental unit. . . . Similarly, resemblance is elevated, where-

as uniqueness and all its cognates . . . are implicitly devalued by being marked as 'unhappy' . . . (70-71).

Readers will find this meticulous yet ruminative approach rewarding; they may argue that there are many thousands more or perhaps (though this would be strange) fewer such indices than Alexandrov discovers; they may suggest that these indices could be identified instead as moments of fissure or dissonance within the text, moments that work as a kind of irritant; but whatever their quibble or quarrel, Alexandrov's argument makes for compelling, often riveting reading.

It is exciting to watch him bring his keen intelligence to bear on some of the minute units of meaning in the novel's prose. The identification of these hermeneutic indices are the real key to his argument—the occasion when raw praxis results in theory—for “they identify a series of varying *ranges* of meaning . . . that collectively map the shape and the limits—both the terrain and the borders—of a work's possible interpretations” (48). In carving out his own critical stance, he refers, in addition to the intellectual bedrock that Jakobson and Lotman provide, most often to Rorty, to the later work of Fish and Booth, to Iser and to the complex polemic among them. At the risk of suggesting that a long book be even longer, I would have liked to have seen him take into account the writing of Spitzer on hermeneutics and the earlier work of both Fish and Booth on narrative and readers. All of this work is pertinent to his own.

There are moments when Alexandrov's prose is vividly expressive. In the final pages of Part I, for example, Alexandrov argues that there is “no reason to invoke unknowable ‘essences’ when dealing with structures of meaning in works we call ‘literary’” (55). He writes about “thickenings,” “concentrations of relations,” “genius,” “a matrix of relations” that “echo each other, repeatedly and complexly”; he alludes to the reader's being drawn into “receding labyrinths of thought” (56). Out of context these phrases may seem like a bit of purple prose; on the contrary, they are the product of sustained thought and come close to articulating the quiddity of artistic creation.

But his approach is also singularly practical: Alexandrov's account of how he approached his

difficult project is clear and refreshingly unadorned. “I started by reading through the novel several times and marking in the margins all of the textual moments that fit the criteria of hermeneutic indices . . . ; these numbered roughly 1,600. I transferred references to these moments onto index cards, noted their implications for the novel's array of meanings, and then sorted the cards by the categories that appeared to emerge from the novel itself, that is, the narrator, characters, structure, plots, themes, scenes, recurring imagery, and so on” (63). In laying bare his methodology and in describing it in such simple terms, Alexandrov will undoubtedly open himself in some quarters to criticism. This reader appreciates his clarity.

But Alexandrov is far less clear on an equally important matter. Also at the outset of his textual analysis he asserts, I think with some discernible anger, “This kind of reading is especially necessary today because of the shockingly narrow view of Tolstoy that some scholars have recently advocated and that surprising numbers of others appear to have accepted (samples appear in the notes to Part Two)” (65). These are fighting words, yet Alexandrov never chooses to grapple with these other readings head on. After several perusals of his carefully wrought notes, I am not quite certain whom Alexandrov considers most guilty of this narrowness: it seems that he is in strong disagreement with Mandelker and Morson, in mild disagreement with Orwin, and in occasional disagreement with Gustafson, to name the most frequently cited recent critics of Tolstoy. But the terms of this disagreement remain carefully veiled and couched in specific, often narrow terms. That approach, a gentlemanly one to be sure, is fine in itself, but does not mesh well with the charge in the main body of the text that some recent scholars have produced work that is “shockingly narrow” in its view. A statement like that should not stand unsupported by specific commentary; it leads the scholars whose work he cites to a confusion about whether or not they fall into this lamentable category.

Alexandrov's analysis focuses on moments, juxtapositions and interconnections in the novel which readers might expect. He provides what he

sets out to provide: a map crisscrossed with many possible routes from one important place to another. He introduces each of his hermeneutic indices in a way that is both responsive to the text and to the larger questions he hopes to address.

Let me point out only two occasions when I would have liked to have read more: first, on the matter of Anna's red bag—the book seems a bit skimpy on this important textual nodule, and, oddly Alexandrov does not cite Nabokov's brilliant commentary on it, though he does cite Knapp and others. Second, he offers an extended and interesting analysis of the role of art in the novel and especially Mikhailov's attempts as an artist to remove the coverings, "the layers of dross" (86). (See also, 92, 93, 96, 162, 187, *et passim*.) This important hermeneutic index connects, as others have also observed, to Kitty in childbirth. But nowhere does Alexandrov allude to or make the link to the moment when the dying Nikolai plucks at his covers. In the chapter "Death," Mary Nikolaevna observes that Nikolai has begun to clutch at himself. "Clutch? How?" asks Levin. She demonstrates what she means. The narrator then observes, "And Levin noticed that all day long the sick man really kept catching at himself as if wishing to pull something off." Alexandrov does connect Kitty, Nikolai, and Levin of course, but the richly allusive series of indices he does cite seem nevertheless strangely incomplete without bringing in this vital connection between the dying Nikolai, Kitty's labour and delivery, and Mikhailov's creative work. Alexandrov writes convincingly of the ways in which Mikhailov is a "peer of Tolstoy himself," though I wish he had written more about the significance of the fact that Mikhailov tended to forget about a work of art once he had finished it. Does this link him further to or separate him from Tolstoy?

Alexandrov is interesting on the subject of time in *Anna Karenina*, and although he is most concerned with presenting a kind of spatial reading of the novel, his observations about time are canny. He writes, for example, "If one has noticed the relative slippage of time between the Anna-Vronsky and Kitty-Levin plotlines, then it is possible to see the parallel between the affair and the horse race as underscoring the speed with

which Anna and Vronsky move through their lives in comparison to Levin and Kitty" (103).

Most compelling for me, however, is a theme that begins to emerge gradually throughout the course of Alexandrov's book and gains in force and power as his work continues. Ultimately he offers up a reading of the novel in which virtually all of the characters—major and minor—despite their many efforts at love and friendship, despite religion, intellectual inquiry, discourse, and creative work, despite work and play, "live in worlds isolated from each other. . ." (141). He finds a primary indication of this in a demonstration of how time moves differently for different characters, but he offers many other hermeneutic indices to illustrate this point as well. The separate sections devoted to the main characters are insightful, although I would argue that he does not go far enough in endowing Dolly with an extraordinary open-mindedness and capacity for genuine forgiveness nor in recognizing the full impact of Kitty's vanity and unshakeable self-regard. But these are minor quibbles, and certainly fall comfortably into the boundaries of the map and the borders which Alexandrov himself invites us to traverse as we wish.

Alexandrov's ambitious intentions cohere nicely with what Tolstoy himself might have sought in a critic, despite Tolstoy's famously expressed irritation (curiously not cited here by Alexandrov, since it seems profoundly consonant with Alexandrov's own views) toward any attempts at defining what his novel means. Writing to Strakhov, Tolstoy observed, "If I wanted to say in words all that I had in mind to express by my novel, I should have to write the same novel which I wrote all over again." Alexandrov does, however, quote at length from Strakhov's well-known letter (from April of 1876). Tolstoy sounds uncannily like Dostoevsky (as well as his character Lev Nikolaevich Myshkin) when he writes, "But each idea expressed separately in words loses its meaning, becomes terribly debased when it is taken alone, out of the linking in which it is found" (105). As Tolstoy continues in this letter, it becomes clear the extent to which Alexandrov, despite his scholarly grounding in the work of such critics as Jakobson and Lotman, finds the

ultimate bedrock and affirmation for his endeavour in the directive of Tolstoy himself. “[The kind of literary critics we need now] are people,” writes Tolstoy, “who would show the meaninglessness of searching for ideas in a work of art, and who would constantly guide readers through that *endless labyrinth of connections* that is the essence of art, and toward the laws that serve as the basis for these linkages.” That is precisely the task which Alexandrov has undertaken.

ROBIN FEUER MILLER  
BRANDEIS UNIVERSITY

O. V. Slivitskaya, *Ob effekte zhiznepodobii*  
Anny Kareninoi. St. Petersburg, 2004.  
103 pp.

This is a slim volume of pure literary criticism with the far from modest goal of analyzing how Leo Tolstoy achieved the impression of actual lived experience in fictional prose. The essay takes two approaches in its reading of *Anna Karenina*: the first examines the rhythm or flow of narrative as correlated to the pulse and tempo of life events; the second addresses the representation of character and personality in the novel as a Möbius strip of interiority and external description. An intriguing tailpiece, a reading of the short story “Lucerne,” is appended to the monograph.

Literary scholars constantly seek concepts, terms, or discourses that may enhance or enable their analyses, and Slivitskaya has appropriated for her work the synergetic concept of the “fractal” a term employed by physicists and geometers to denote either naturally occurring geometric figures in nature or the meaning adapted by Slivitskaya—the non-linear irregularities of actual matter (such as coastlines and mountain ranges) which cannot be captured by geometric or paradigmatic modeling. Understood more theoretically, the fractal is a fragment or extrusion of great organicity and integrity which re-incorporates in miniature or infinitesimal form the features of the macrocosm to which it is synergetically related. Fractal art can thus lay claim to being more aligned to actual real structures than

an art based on geometrical forms. Slivitskaya suggests, intriguingly, that “fraktal’nost” characterizes Tolstoy’s artistic inclination toward the miniature, and that his textual miniatures, like the story “Lucerne,” can be seen as fractals of the major prose. Regrettably, these ideas are developed only briefly in the monograph’s appended essay. However, the idea of fractal art inhabits the main chapters of the monograph as an implicit interpretive principle for examining the Tolstoyan novel, while Slivitskaya’s essay itself, in its laconic brevity, appears to exemplify the idea of the miniature and fragmentary form that contains an enormity of implications.

In both sections of the work, Tolstoy’s artistic prose is considered to be structured on the asymmetrical relationship of microcosm to macrocosm; this approach is made original by reference to the fractal, or the autonomy and validity of the fragmentary. In terms of plot composition, the pulse of predetermined action (for example, Anna’s tragic destiny, which Slivitskaya sees modelled in the inflexibility of the iron rails of the railroad) is interrupted by lagoons of non-action which serve to lower the systolic pressure of the narrative. Similarly, the alternation of the two plot strands (Anna-Vronsky vs. Levin-Kitty) creates the effect of a collision of personalities when characters reemerge in the action after a lengthy disappearance. Slivitskaya discerns a principle of narrative asymmetry in the alternation of episodes which she suggests, in a somewhat Lotmanian reading, evokes the universal biological principle of asymmetry. The reappearance of a character after a lengthy absence is thereby estranged and defamiliarized, renewing for the reader, the impression of the character’s personality and worldview.

A similar asymmetry of persona is the deliberate result of Tolstoy’s strategy of characterization, which, according to Slivitskaya, consists in the constant juxtaposition of the exterior representation of characters (in authorial description or from the perspective of the visual and auditory perceptions of other characters in the novel) to their inner thoughts via a direct exposition of interior monologue to which the reader is given unique access. It is left to the reader to correlate the inner and outer depictions of character in the novel.