
Reviews

Kåre Johan Mjør. *Desire, Death, and Imitation. Narrative Patterns in the Late Tolstoy.* Bergen, Norway: Slavica Bergensia 4 (2002). Paper. Pp. 150. Index and bibliography.

This is a slim but substantive volume applying the narratological theories of Peter Brooks (*Reading for the Plot*) to three works in Tolstoy's later writings: *The Death of Ivan Il'ich*, *The Kreutzer Sonata*, and *Master and Man*. The basis for Kåre Mjør's selection of these three particular texts is their shared thematic treatment of desire and death. His intent is to delve into each narrative to extricate the process of the creation of meaning within the diegetic unfolding of the tale. The title's formulation of desire refers to narrative motivations and therefore only obliquely touches on sexuality (in *Kreutzer Sonata*), while death is variously regarded as the dying process, death of the other, and the *imitatio Christi*. Instead of elaborating on the more traditional configuration of *eros* and *thanatos*, Mjør focuses on the concept of "existential desire," defined as the craving for a conclusive meaning for life, triggered by the apprehension of mortality. Existential desire compels the creation of a meta-narrative, which, in the works of Tolstoy under consideration, is shown to re-inscribe the reading process itself.

Working from alternating perspectives of Aristotelian poetics, Heideggerian existentialism, and psychoanalytically inflected narratology, Mjør builds on Barthesian concepts of the desire for the ending, famously fused in Brooks' narratology with Sigmund Freud's pairing of *eros* and *thanatos*. The case of *Ivan Il'ich*—where the eponymous protagonist's death-bed effort to infuse his life with meaning results in the retrospective negation of that life—serves as the paradigmatic model for this study. Mjør's theoretical postulates inhere well in this sustained reading of *The Death of Ivan Il'ich*, winning new life for Heidegger's gloss on Ivan Il'ich's dying process as the quest for authenticity.

The chapter on *Kreutzer Sonata* is less compelling, consisting of a sustained synopsis of the work based on Roland Barthes' notion of narrative contract (*S/Z*) and Bakhtinian dialogue. The chapter culminates in the application of the Girardian notion of mimetic desire to the Trukhachevskii-Pozdnyshev relationship, and is capped by a discussion of Foucault's *History of Sexuality*.

The final chapter on *Master and Man* revisits the notion of internal transformation in the face of impending death as expressed in Brekhunov's conversionary re-evaluation of his life. However, lacking in both this chapter and in the pages on *Kreutzer Sonata* is the careful attention expended on the reading process and the textual generation of the desire for meaning that opened the volume so boldly in the case of *Ivan Il'ich*. Pozdnyshev is said to make his effort to recuperate meaning through the hyperdiegetic strategy of re-narrating his murder; Brekhunov's series of reflections on his past are considered to result in the evacuation of desire from the text's own dynamics. One result of the latter reading may be a reductive compression of Nikita's characterization into a foil for Brekhunov's, while the comparison to Ivan Il'ich begins to seem watery and thin. Similarly, the concept of existential desire sits most uncomfortably on Pozdnyshev's shoulders, where the advent of death necessary for the initiation of desire is necessarily transferred to his wife. In the concluding sentence of the book, the author appears to recognize that "the release achieved through death for Ivan Il'ich, Brekhunov and Nikita has not yet occurred for Pozdnyshev," thus allowing his most complex character to escape alive, unconcluded, and therefore, ultimately, unaccounted for. This reader did not desire the end of this all too brief book, and the ephemeral concluding remarks, with their transient but intriguing Girardian take on *Resurrection* and *Father Sergius* are worthy of a more extended treatment.

Death, Desire, and Imitation caters to the specialist with absorbing and thought-provoking interpretive readings of three major short works of

Tolstoy. These short stories are often taught, and the instructor may find many speculative ideas in this book that can do service in classroom discussion. Any student of Tolstoy's later works will find much to contemplate in its pages.

AMY MANDELKER, CITY UNIVERSITY OF
NEW YORK, GRADUATE CENTER

Liza Knapp and Amy Mandelker, eds.
*Approaches to Teaching Tolstoy's Anna
Karenina.* New York: The Modern
Language Association of America, 2003.
Pp. xi + 226.

Whether the competition is for "greatest novel ever written," "most popular Russian novel in the undergraduate curriculum," "most studied Russian novel in the English language," "most often quoted first sentence of a novel," or even "novel, least faithful film adaptations of," *Anna Karenina* will surely finish in the money. *Anna Karenina* is a reliable frontrunner in the American undergraduate literature curriculum. *Approaches to Teaching Tolstoy's Anna Karenina* [*Teaching AK*] is a welcome addition to the long-running series *Approaches to Teaching World Literature*, sponsored by the Modern Languages Association's Publication Committee.

The overarching goal of the MLA series is to "encourage serious and continuing discussion of the aims and methods of teaching literature" at the undergraduate level (vii). Each volume in the series seems to adhere to a fairly regimented protocol, beginning with a questionnaire widely distributed among teachers. For *Teaching AK* thirty nine teachers responded, of whom twenty-three have contributed short essays to the volume. In keeping with the series format, *Teaching AK* is organized around three basic themes: background materials, critical approaches, and classroom methods.

The background materials, ably and concisely handled by editors Liza Knapp and Amy Mandelker, include essential information on names and setting in *Anna Karenina*, a few words on various

Russian editions of the novel, a fair and balanced characterization of the merits of various English translations, and recommended readings available in English. The list of readings, which features recent scholarship (much of it published within the past fifteen years), attests to the growing interest in Tolstoy studies in English.

The editors give well deserved recognition to C. J. G. Turner's *A Karenina Companion* (1993) "an invaluable guide to the novel" (48). They also note that the *Tolstoy Studies Journal* (a source for earlier, scholarly versions of some of the essays represented in *Teaching AK*) represents the best Tolstoy scholarship and criticism" (48). The editors pay special tribute to Richard Gustafson's *Leo Tolstoy: Resident and Stranger*, calling it "the definitive study of Tolstoy's prose" and "the critical work most frequently cited by questionnaire respondents" (47).

Praise for Gustafson's radiant work on Tolstoy almost mollifies this reader's discomfort with the MLA's cookie-cutter approach to the methods and organization of the series, but not quite. Many of the essays on *Anna Karenina*—and here an appreciative "thanks" to editors Knapp and Mandelker, themselves Tolstoy scholars of the first rank—transcend the nominal categories into which they are organized. The twenty-three contributors (mostly American) to *Teaching AK* bring a trove of teaching experience to the novel. The diverse topics and approaches embrace a smorgasbord, something for every taste: close reading of key passages; materials to assist teaching the novel in English translation; the demonstration of specific critical approaches (Freudian, feminist); attention to the novel's form and structure; the novel in cultural context (social and legal status of women; agrarian and political reforms); the literary context of adultery; the use of filmed versions of the novel, the influence of Plato and Platonic dialogue, etc.

In some of the best essays the scholar's voice has ceded authority to the teacher's down-to-earth "how do we engage students with the novel" voice. That collective pedagogic voice, which sounds throughout *Teaching AK*, is one of the volume's greatest strengths. Gary Jahn, for example, writes "I have found that students experience the sense of