

Tolstoy's Wisdom and Folly: A Review of Gary Saul Morson's "*Anna Karenina*" in *Our Time: Seeing More Wisely*

STEWART JUSTMAN

Gary Saul Morson, "*Anna Karenina*" in *Our Time: Seeing More Wisely* (New Haven: Yale, 2007), 263 pages.

By an accident of history, the work that introduced Bakhtin to American readers was not *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* or *The Dialogic Imagination* but his anthem to the medieval culture of carnival, *Rabelais and His World*, a work written decades before but first published in English in the year of revolt, 1968, whose spirit it now seemed to glorify. No one has done more to correct the image of Bakhtin as a celebrant of revolt than Gary Saul Morson. Some years ago when I was getting interested in Bakhtin, I came across a remarkable, richly argued essay on "Prosaic Bakhtin" by Morson. Situating Bakhtin squarely in the Russian tradition critical of excessive theorizing and schemes of political salvation, it changed my understanding of the thinker from that point forward. The prosaic Bakhtin does not melt the person into the collective body of the people, and in contrast to the reveler who escapes from the world of ordinary practice, he inhabits a moral order wherein "selves create, exercise choice, take responsibility, and develop unpredictably, while interacting with a social world that is also uncertain."¹ These terms serve as the coordinates of Morson's thinking from work to work. Because choice, responsibility, and uncertainty flourish in the realist novel as in no other literary medium (and achieve there a vividness and detail beyond anything attainable by philosophical abstraction), Morson finds the great novels of the nineteenth century incomparably interesting and instructive. "Prosaic" are the masterworks of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy—especially Tolstoy. As Morson writes in *Narrative and Freedom*, "Tolstoy stressed the moral importance of what we do at each prosaic moment,"² an emphasis well adapted to the most quotidian of all literary forms. When, in the opening scene of *Anna Karenina*, Stiva says of the crisis brought on by his adultery, "It's all my fault—all my fault, though I'm not to blame," he denies the

¹Gary Saul Morson, "Prosaic Bakhtin: Landmarks, Anti-Intelligentism, and the Russian Counter-Tradition," *Common Knowledge* 2 (1993): 54. See also Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaic* (Chicago: Stanford University Press, 1990).

²Gary Saul Morson, *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 158.

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moral import of his action even in professing it. He is convicted, as it were, by the very narrative in which his words appear. And so it is with Stiva's sister, argues Morson in the brilliant sequel to *Narrative and Freedom*, "*Anna Karenina*" in *Our Time: Seeing More Wisely*. By deliberately caricaturing her husband, failing her parental responsibility, and persuading herself that her fate is written, among other actions, Anna stands convicted of violating the principles informing her story and governing its very composition.

In a tale of adultery we expect to side with the lovers against the world—passion against repression. Doesn't Dante swoon with pity for Paolo and Francesca? Who prefers Mark and Isolde to Tristan and Isolde? Is Emma Bovary to reconcile herself to the stultifying mediocrity of her husband? But readers who bring to *Anna Karenina* an idealization of illicit love will find themselves systematically misreading a novel designed to test and refute their dearest preconceptions. And so tenacious is the myth of true love in a false world that even the common sense of critics seems to be that *Anna Karenina* vindicates the heroine. It is against this body of critical, or actually uncritical, opinion that Morson writes in "*Anna Karenina*" in *Our Time*. (It is astonishing to see students of literature wedded to the myth of authenticity besieged that drives the pop psychology movement. Such students would not think to describe *Anna Karenina* as "truly the Harlequin Romance of its day," as the guide to the novel published for Oprah's Book Club has it, but their view of the self engulfed in a sea of lies is a Harlequin Romance in its own right.) I can think of no comparable instance of a majority reading so demonstrably fallacious, and no instance of a scholar able to argue as successfully as Morson against the grain of opinion.

How does Morson demonstrate what Tolstoy thinks of Anna's adultery? By citing Tolstoy's own words—the words of the text. Both because of the subtlety of the novel's composition and readers' overinvestment in the myth of doomed passion, one authorial comment after another has gone unregistered by critics of *Anna Karenina* (while, conversely, statements given in a character's voice in free indirect discourse may be misattributed to Tolstoy). The very history of the text's reception thus bears out the Tolstoyan dictum that the most important things lie right in front of us, "hidden in plain view."³ Throughout "*Anna Karenina*" in *Our Time* our attention is called to passages in the novel ignored by critics, perhaps in the belief that narrative shows but dare not tell:⁴

By stressing Anna's "spirit of deceit and falsehood" and by correcting her perception of Karenin, Tolstoy makes his evaluation of her self-justifications clear. I would say "unmistakably clear" were it not that critics have so often made the mistake of missing Tolstoy's explicit comments. It is as if these comments did not exist at all. I am at a loss to understand how Boris Eichenbaum, one of the most famous literary scholars Russia ever produced, and the author of several volumes on Tolstoy, could have stated that in *Anna Karenina* "Tolstoy does not intrude his judgments and estimations. He watches life from on high." This view of the novel preceded Eichenbaum and continues to this day. Perhaps its very repetition has contributed to overlooking Tolstoy's frequent "intrusion" of judgments. (108)

But the notion that an Olympian Tolstoy is above issuing judgments may not be enough, in and of itself, to account for the disregard of his judgments. Added to that is his way of

³Gary Saul Morson, *Hidden in Plain View: Narrative and Creative Potentials in 'War and Peace'* (Chicago: Stanford University Press, 1987).

⁴On showing and telling, see Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).

delivering judgments readers do not care to receive, crossing their myths, including in the case of *Anna Karenina* the myth of illicit love defying the hypocrisy of the world. The illusion that authenticity (hypocrisy's antagonist) belongs to Anna has stood despite all the evidence Tolstoy places before our eyes.

The unfaithful wife who characterizes her husband as unfeeling while hurting him, who revels in falsehood while insisting on her hatred of falsehood, and who acts out of concern for social opinion while claiming it is her husband who cares only for propriety: all these instances of hypocrisy, I think, call into question critics' description of Anna as a rebel against falsehood. (108)

On every question of interpretation Morson's appeal is to the text—sometimes to a passage perceptibly inflected with irony, sometimes to a clause folded in the middle of a sentence, sometimes to an explicit editorial comment (“that spirit of falsehood and deceit in herself which she had come to know of late”), sometimes to entire patterns, but in any case to the page itself. There is something superb about this book's simple cogency. As a novel is rich with observed experience, “*Anna Karenina*” in *Our Time* is rich with evidence. The author will have no truck with the notion that textual evidence belongs to some bygone paradigm, or that evidence is not confronted but created.

So too, in contrast to those who might claim that *Anna Karenina* approves the heroine and her illicit love “despite itself,” Morson bears in mind the author's intention. Not that he thinks it impossible for a text to conflict with authorial intention as revealed in notebooks or letters.

I ... agree that an author's own pronouncements on his work, though not to be set aside lightly, cannot be decisive if the text contradicts them. That is why I have relied on the text itself, not the author's comments or earlier notebook versions, in elucidating it. What is most important is not what the author says about the work but what he does in it. (129)

The work itself reveals the author's intention, not, as the Freudians might have it, by eluding his conscious designs or revealing its meaning only to readers possessed of a special key, but by its patterns of authorial commentary. As “*Anna Karenina*” in *Our Time* shows, those who read the novel as some kind of ode to doomed love are in the position of maintaining an interpretation in the face of the text and the one who wrote it. And Morson attaches all the more importance to Tolstoy's judgments in that he deems Tolstoy both an artist of the highest order and a sage.

Not only, then, does Morson read the text of *Anna Karenina* with a care that constitutes a moral act, but he reads it as a source of moral wisdom. Far from being a synonym for repression and a fetter on the human capacity for progress as so many now believe, morality for Morson, as for Tolstoy, is the very element in which we live, and such is Morson's regard for Tolstoyan moral wisdom that he concludes “*Anna Karenina*” in *Our Time* with a series of 163 maxims derived from the novel. Of these my favorite is “The road of excess leads to the chamber of horrors” (no. 8), a fitting corrective to Blakean antinomianism and an index of the author's preference for the prosaic over the extreme, the ecstatic, the utopian. To Morson, instructed as he is by history, especially Russian history, utopianism connotes more than street theater or the proclamation of a Year One: it connotes despotism and state terror. Other Tolstoyan dicta sound something

like Practice is wiser than theory (“Life requires practical wisdom . . . In practice theorists rely on practice”—no. 109) or The heart knows more than the head (“In matters of ethics, we know some things more surely than any reasons we can give to justify them”—no. 146)⁵ or Reforms backfire (“Most attempted reforms fail or make the situation still worse”—no. 89). These precepts and their cognates strike me less as utterances of a unique wisdom than as articles of conservatism.⁶ (Stiva, identified by Morson as evil in its most banal and sociable guise, reads a liberal newspaper and holds liberal views by habit.) Estimable though they are, such precepts are no more indisputable than any other political proposition. It is true that not all 163 theses are distinctly conservative, and that Tolstoy possessed a singularity that makes it impossible to confine him in any given category. Perhaps we can say that Tolstoy held some common beliefs in an original manner.

If, as Morson contends, *Anna Karenina* shows us how to live, the theses deduced from the novel tell us how in so many words. Not that they are narrowly prescriptive:

Most of what we do, we do by habit. Habits are the product of countless small choices at ordinary moments. (No. 12)

The importance of habits and ordinary life establishes the importance of parenting and the family. (No. 19)

Changes in habits that are to work must not conflict too much with the elemental force of one’s personality, the sum total of one’s habits. (No. 106)

Christian love is possible but not necessarily desirable. (No. 115)

We do not owe the same treatment to everyone. Attention and effort are limited resources, and we owe the greatest responsibility to those who are closest to us. (No. 148)

The sage is expected to practice what he preaches. How well did Tolstoy abide by his own principles?



“In order for a work to be good, one must love its main basic idea, as in *Anna Karenina* I love the idea of a family,” Tolstoy once wrote.⁷ But it is one thing to love the idea of a family and another to love one’s own family. As if Bacon’s adage, “He that hath wife and children hath given hostages to fortune,” fell short of the truth, Tolstoy in his later years considered himself a hostage—the captive of his family, his wealth, his estate, his way of life, his desires, all of them summed up in the person of his wife. Convinced that as long as he remained married he defiled his ideals, the patriarch of a large family discovered the moral necessity of celibacy. Tolstoy once described his union as a struggle to the death, but this was in 1885, fully twenty-five years before he broke at last from his wife and fled into death’s waiting arms. And in repudiating marriage in the name of Christ even while remaining a husband, Tolstoy also turned against such prosaic principles as the particularity of our obligations and the possible undesirability of Christian love.

⁵Cf. no. 84: “We always know more than we know.”

⁶On the generic conservative argument that attempts at reform backfire, see Albert O. Hirschman, *The Rhetoric of Reaction: Perversity, Futility, Jeopardy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

⁷Morson, “*Anna Karenina*” in *Our Time*, 62.

An exchange recorded by Sofya Tolstoy in her diary of 1891 throws a strong light on the irreconcilable conflict of principles in which husband and wife were caught:

Lyovochka said: "You conceive a new idea, give birth, with all the agony of childbirth, to an entirely new spiritual philosophy [that is, the renunciation of family and property in the name of love of humanity] and all they do is resent your suffering and completely refuse to understand!" I then said that while they were giving birth in their imagination to all these spiritual children, we [women] were giving birth, in real pain, to real live children who had to be fed and educated, and needed someone to protect their property and their interests.⁸

Nor were these merely verbal differences. Precisely as a "new philosophy," the spiritual rebirth proclaimed by Tolstoy undermined his existing relations. In defiance of the prosaic wisdom etched into *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy was now convinced of the universality of our obligations and the retrograde nature of the family, in the first instance his own family. Neither a shrew nor a fury, Sofya Tolstoy was locked in conflict with a man of such imperial and contradictory temper that, having married, he found it impossible in the end to justify marriage, having impregnated his wife sixteen times he sanctified celibacy, and having created great works of art, among them *Anna Karenina*, he anathematized art. One evening in 1897, Sofya played two Beethoven sonatas before resuming her copying of her husband's tract, *What is Art?*, in which Beethoven is censured for composing "artistic gibberish." The episode is the marriage in miniature.

In his later years Tolstoy tormented himself continually over his betrayal of his ideals, and Sofya Andreyevna was necessarily drawn into these struggles inasmuch as she literally embodied for Tolstoy everything pulling him the wrong way, the claims of property and the urgency of sex especially. In the lore of the West Woman is a creature of contradiction, but in this case it is fair to say that it was Tolstoy's own contradictions that racked the marriage, and that Sofya Andreyevna held fast to her position—unregenerate position, in his eyes. It was because Tolstoy could not bear to betray his principles, and yet did so continually and could not help doing so as long as he remained a married nobleman, wealthy and illustrious, the head of a large family, that the marriage was so cursed. In effect, and in spite of his own more prosaic wisdom, Tolstoy placed himself in opposition to the elemental force of his personality and the totality of his way of life. A man with a great estate, and a wife jealous of property rights, came to consider property as theft from the poor. If Tolstoyan wisdom argues the superiority of practice to theory, Tolstoy's life had become a shameful illustration of the opposite, an illustration almost as forceful as his art. And because Sofya Andreyevna represented to Tolstoy all that seduced him from his ideals, he was the more willing to delegate to her business that disgusted and offended him, including the management of his copyrights. So it happened that she came into possession of the rights to *Anna Karenina* along with all the other works published by Tolstoy before 1881, the year of his conversion.

We expect the sage not just to utter wise sayings but to live by his own wisdom, to exemplify it. Along with the copyright Tolstoy disowned much of the prosaic wisdom of *Anna Karenina* but, unable to live a life of categorical Christian love, took out his failure on himself and his wife both. For the sake of contrast, we might look to another writer of

⁸*The Diaries of Sophia Tolstoy*, trans. Cathy Porter (New York: Random House, 1985), 117.

anti-utopian bent regarded by many as a source of moral authority. As Lionel Trilling wrote in 1955, George Orwell was one of those

who live their visions as well as write them, who *are* what they write, whom we think of as standing for something as men because of what they have written in their books. They *preside*, as it were, over certain ideas and attitudes. . . . If we ask what it is [Orwell] stands for, what he is the figure of, the answer is: the virtue of not being a genius, of fronting the world with nothing more than one's simple, direct, undeceived intelligence, and a respect for the powers one does have, and the work one undertakes to do.⁹

Orwell was not the titan Tolstoy was, but neither would he have tortured his wife.

"The virtue... of fronting the world with nothing more than one's simple, direct, undeceived intelligence": this is not far from Tolstoyan prosaic wisdom. One looking with undeceived eyes sees what lies in plain sight. (Where the prosaic Tolstoy believes we do not owe the same love to everyone, Orwell in his essay on Gandhi—who corresponded with Tolstoy—maintains that love is preferential by nature.) "The virtue of not being a genius" mirrors the corrective emphasis on the ordinary that runs through "*Anna Karenina*" in *Our Time*. Morson's 163 theses are essentially counsels of humility and intellectual humility, the sort of virtue that would come more readily, perhaps, to one who does not pretend to genius than to a Tolstoy. Orwell likened Tolstoy to a Lear who renounced his title but not his power and lacked humility.¹⁰ It seems to me that Tolstoyan wisdom is wiser than he himself was because it is the wisdom of a humility he could not sustain. For all his self-abnegation, for all his desire to cast off his possessions and privileges and submerge himself in the people, there was a monarch in Tolstoy. Only one who imagined himself the center of the world would insist that all marriages had to be miserable because his was, and would urge all to surrender their property because he could not justify his own, and all to become celibate because he could no longer endure the ignominy of his desires. The man who identified property and privilege as the root of evil forgot the article of Tolstoyan wisdom that says, "The root cause of the greatest social evil is the belief that one has found the root cause of social evil" (No. 100). Significantly, Orwell, though a professing socialist, never turned against property as Tolstoy did.

It is because the wisdom of *Anna Karenina* is wiser than the author himself proved to be that it can make some sense of his eventual desertion of principles such as "We owe the greatest responsibility to those who are closest to us." Literally the first principle of Tolstoyan wisdom is "We live in a world of uncertainty. Assured prediction is impossible." It follows that even if a man is a sage, we cannot be sure that he will remain sagacious. Once a sage, not always a sage. Or consider principle 67 (also held by Bakhtin): "We are not coherent wholes.... We do not coincide with ourselves." Because Tolstoy did not coincide with himself, the man wise enough to arrive at such maxims and to infuse them into his great novels ended up forswearing many of them. Reading "*Anna Karenina*" in *Our Time* is an act of both discovery and recovery—discovery of the text and recovery of a wisdom abandoned by its author.

⁹Lionel Trilling, "George Orwell and the Politics of Truth" in *The Opposing Self* (New York: Viking, 1955), 155–56.

¹⁰See Orwell's "Lear, Tolstoy and the Fool." George Orwell, "Lear, Tolstoy and the Fool" in *In Front of Your Nose*, Vol. 4 of *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), 287–302.