

From the beginning of his book to the end Wasiolek works with a fundamental premise: that Tolstoy's thought is essentially the same at all stages of his career and that his fictional characters can be defined by the degree to which they achieve a "right relationship" between the interior world and the exterior, between what Wasiolek calls "the nature within and the nature without" (p. 48). In the process he demolishes Merezhkovsky's dichotomy of "Christian" and "pagan" and adduces some persuasive arguments against positions taken by such eminent scholars as Isaiah Berlin and R. F. Christian. Had he chosen to include a section on Tolstoy's religious writings, Wasiolek could have given additional strength to his thesis by demonstrating that this very same "right relationship" forms the basis of Tolstoyan Christianity as well.

Among the individual chapters, the one devoted to *War and Peace* is incontestably the best. In it Wasiolek proves that the various chapters on the philosophy of history, which have all too often been viewed as vexatious additions, are in fact intimately linked to the narrative chapters and that the novel has, despite its great size, a distinct ideological unity. It is consequently rather surprising to find that the very next chapter—on *Anna Karenina*—begins with the observation: *Anna Karenina* is two novels, Anna's and Levin's" (p. 129). Surely, this view is no more accurate than the analogous opinion of *War and Peace*. Besides, Wasiolek himself draws detailed parallels between the two main narrative lines of the novel (pp. 150-51) and does so in such a way as to emphasize its essential unity. His contrast between Anna-Vronsky and Kitty-Levin and especially his analysis of Anna's love are particularly useful.

Besides *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* Wasiolek devotes considerable space to *Childhood*, *Three Deaths*, *Polikushka*, *Family Happiness*, *The Cossacks*, *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, *Master and Man*, and *Resurrection*; his insightful study of *The Death of Ivan Ilych* is especially commendable.

In addition to the main chapters there is also an appendix with a very handy overview of Tolstoy's life and works. The bibliography—featuring primary works, biographical sources, and literary criticism in a multitude of languages—is one of the primary assets of this volume.

Among the liabilities, it should be noted that *Polikushka* was published in 1863, not in 1861 (p. 36). The story of the "green stick" was told not by Tolstoy himself, but by his brother Nikolai (p. 201). There is a certain amount of confusion over the spelling of "Merezhkovsky": on p. 221 it is "Merejkowski," but on p. 222 it becomes "Merezhkovsky." In many of the direct quotations from Russian, there are obvious printing errors. (See, for example, pp. 202, 207, 221, 222, 223, and 224.) Yet the few mistakes do not detract from the overall excellence of Wasiolek's book. It should, in fact, prove to be very helpful to both teachers and students of Russian literature.

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STEIN HAUGOM OLSEN

The Structure of Literary Understanding

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978. Pp. 235. £11.00.

S. H. Olsen's *The Structure of Literary Understanding*, like many other theoretical works, is difficult to review both briefly and fairly. Though capable of splitting hairs, Olsen argues with such apparent clarity and logic that readers may find their skepticism being lulled to sleep. If a review is designed to recommend—Olsen claims that we should evaluate works of literature for the purpose of "recommendation"—I believe that many readers could profit, in one way or another, from Olsen's central chapters, 4-6.

In Chs. 1-3 he considers and rejects three theories of literature: the structuralist, the emotive, and the informative. In general, attacks on "the romantic doctrine of expression" and "the theory of literature-as-source-of-knowledge" may seem anachronistic in the late twentieth century; on the other hand, Olsen's attack on structuralism may seem timely but too abbreviated. Since his research concluded in 1974, he does not mention such works as Jonathan Culler's *Structuralist Poetics* (1975).

In Ch. 4, "The Structure of the Literary Response," Olsen argues that the basic work of a critic is to group "segments" of a literary work under a "description," and then to continue to subsume the various "descriptions" under others of a progressively more general nature. "The single interpretative description becomes a part of an explanatory grid of concepts which covers the whole of the work and relates different parts of the work to each other." "Ideally" all "segments" are covered by an interpretation, though, Olsen admits, "in practice . . . almost all interpretations are partial." A major difficulty here is the "segment" itself: it is "a passage of text"—a group of sentences, a single sentence, or even part of a sentence. ("Segments" have four aspects: subject—the most important, tone, status, style.) On one hand, Olsen argues that "only if it [a segment] is identifiable as a passage without reference to interpretation can it later become a segment" (p. 124); but he also notes that "a segment can be identified and given artistic significance only through interpretation" (p. 151). Confusing. Matters are not helped when in later chapters Olsen writes of "elements" rather than "segments." And the system does not avoid arbitrariness and subjectivism: "There is no guarantee that two different interpretations of the same work, based on two different initial choices, will identify the same groupings of sentences as segments, and even when they mark out segments which are largely similar, they may assign quite different interpretations to them." And where does an interpretation lead? Apparently to the highest level of generalization. In some cases, of course, Olsen does describe common practices, such as the use of both deductive and inductive reasoning in the process of interpretation: a reader, he explains, may arrive at "a tentative hypothesis" and then move downward toward "segments," and then the reader may need "to expand his interpretation upwards."

In Ch. 5, "The Validation of Interpretative Conclusions," Olsen discusses five criteria which may be used to judge (to challenge, to compare) interpretations: completeness, correctness, comprehensiveness, consistency, and discrimination. Among many other points worth noting, Olsen advises critics to proceed with the assumption that works are coherent and that interpretations which discover incoherence may more often than not be faulty or inconsistent themselves. Apparently

Olsen encourages recuperation or naturalization at nearly any cost. (In addition, see the important essay by James R. Kincaid, "Coherent Readers, Incoherent Texts," *Critl*, 3 [1977], 781-802.) Lest I seem too negative, I must indicate that much of what Olsen writes about his five criteria is clear and sensible. I appreciate his reminder that "the present theory cannot guarantee that there is any one final, most acceptable interpretation. The interpretative debate around a literary work can never be closed"—yes, and that is one of the joys and horrors of the critic's trade.

In Ch. 6, "Evaluation of Literary Works," Olsen discusses five "good-making features" (what unfortunate terminology!) which "constitute the basis on which a reader can order his literary priorities": preciseness, coherence, relevance, complexity, interest—again, qualities which most readers will value. Among many other points, Olsen tries, unsuccessfully I think, to face the fact "that certain literary forms have by necessity a limited complexity because of their conventional scope." Indeed, should we expect a single theory flexible enough to guide us in interpreting and evaluating "The Solitary Reaper" and *A la recherche du temps perdu*? The purpose of evaluation, Olsen insists, is "recommendation," a point which may be true but also jejune. In his concluding chapter, "The Evaluation of Literary Practice," he considers "the status of literary art within a culture," particularly the relationship between the study of literature and "specific mental faculties," and the kind of satisfaction literature yields.

Some of the values and strategies sponsored by Olsen are widely accepted and practiced; and what he says about individual works of literature seem conventional and sensible (he usually comments on brief passages). But, in the long run, I fear that his book is another dream of order, another example of extreme systematizing, which perhaps could not be supported by truly cogent practical criticism, particularly of novels. Olsen offers a personal poetics, and he probably will not convert as followers those critics already committed to eclecticism. Finally, though the wording is trite, the point is true: I did find the central chapters of the book truly stimulating, more so than works by, say, Roland Barthes and J. Hillis Miller.

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