

Marshall University
Marshall Digital Scholar

Modern Languages Faculty Research

Modern Languages

1-2017

Review of The Gift of Active Empathy: Scheler, Bakhtin, and Dostoevsky, by Alina Wyman

Slav N. Gratchev

Marshall University, gratchev@marshall.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://mds.marshall.edu/languages_faculty



Part of the [Classical Literature and Philology Commons](#), and the [Comparative Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Gratchev, Slav. Review of The Gift of Active Empathy: Scheler, Bakhtin, and Dostoevsky, by Alina Wyman. *The Russian Review*, Jan. 2017, p. 140.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Modern Languages at Marshall Digital Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Modern Languages Faculty Research by an authorized administrator of Marshall Digital Scholar. For more information, please contact zhangj@marshall.edu, martj@marshall.edu.

Wyman, Alina. *The Gift of Active Empathy: Scheler, Bakhtin, and Dostoevsky*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2016. xiv + 323 pp. \$39.95 (paper). ISBN 978-0-8101-3336-5.

There are certain writers that literary scholars of all times will study again and again, and there are certain literary works that are too important to be examined only once. Reading Dostoevsky is always an “excruciatingly visceral experience” not only for us, the readers, but also for scholars like Max Scheler and Mikhail Bakhtin (p. 230). Alina Wyman’s book makes a major contribution to this experience.

Wyman’s argument is both original and elegantly simple: for Bakhtin and Scheler the concept of loving empathy is fundamental in both their respective models of being and in the particular structure of their careers. The investigation of this fundamental emotional phenomenon remains relevant to both thinkers’ inquiries throughout their philosophical careers. There are, of course, some fundamental differences; if for Scheler the loving empathy “unifies the world,” for Bakhtin the answerable empathy is “a way into the unity of Being” (p. 6). This is, in a nutshell, the argument Wyman so elegantly develops throughout her interesting book.

According to Wyman, the essential question that Dostoevsky poses throughout his major works—*Notes from the House of the Dead*, *The Idiot*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*—falls into the realm of the philosophical inquiries of both thinkers: find out to what extent can One become part of the Other’s inner life and how One can make this emotional immersion in the Other spiritually enriching for both. Wyman tries to answer this question by analyzing Dostoevsky’s works through the optic of the philosophies of two seminal thinkers whom she regards as Dostoevsky’s philosophical neighbors—Max Scheler and Mikhail Bakhtin.

The introduction offers us a concise overview of Scheler and Bakhtin, who reacted to the Nietzschean critique of “empathy as a secondary, reactive feeling” (p. 7). In chapter 1, the author focuses on the early works of Bakhtin that, as the author believes, are permeated by theological motifs. While this chapter provides a theoretical definition of Active empathy, chapter 2 reflects on the means of concrete realization of this concept in the real world through ethical action. In turn, chapter 3 considers the applicability of this new Scheler-Bakhtin concept by skillfully applying it to Dostoevsky’s fictional world. Wyman convincingly shows us how Active empathy fails in *Notes from the Underground*, the novel where Dostoevsky, perhaps for the first time in world literature, introduces a specifically Dostoevskian type of “dialogist.”

The dialogical challenge that this type of new literary hero posed to literature is analyzed through quite an original reexamination of *Notes from the House of the Dead* and *The Idiot* in chapter 4, which also discusses the literary victories of loving empathy—the alternative to underground aggression. Chapter 5 continues with a critical look at the spiritual journey of Prince Myshkin, the principal character of *The Idiot*, and ends with quite an original analysis of one of the most unusual of Dostoevsky’s novels. The proposition of the author that “the challenges faced by Myshkin are precisely those of Christ” is very relevant to philosophical views of Dostoevsky, and it is discussed and beautifully argued in light of the Schelerian-Bakhtinian theory (p. 12). Chapter 6 discusses Dostoevsky’s most celebrated novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, and puts in the center of this discussion the problem of “*imitatio Christi*.” Through this analysis, Wyman demonstrates for us the power of loving empathy, a concept that is found throughout Bakhtin’s and Scheler’s philosophical works.

Wyman’s book is a perfectly constructed circumference, where three major dots—Scheler, Bakhtin, and Dostoevsky—are connected in an intrinsic manner by a scholar who thoroughly examined all major psychological novels by Dostoevsky and did so through the magnifying optic of the two most prominent thinkers of the twentieth century. I am delighted to see such a book published; in our constant efforts to think transnationally while rethinking and reevaluating Dostoevsky’s works, this new book is certainly a magnificent asset.