

University of New Hampshire
University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository

Languages, Literatures, and Cultures Scholarship

Languages, Literatures, and Cultures

2007

Review Article: Daniel Rancour-Laferriere's Russian Literature and Psychoanalysis

Ronald D. LeBlanc

University of New Hampshire - Main Campus, ronald.leblanc@unh.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholars.unh.edu/lang_facpub

Recommended Citation

LeBlanc, Ronald, D., "Review Article: Daniel Rancour-Laferriere's Russian Literature and Psychoanalysis" Дениэл Ранкур-Лаферрьер, Русская литература и психоанализ (Москва: Ладомир, 2004). *Tolstoy Studies Journal*, V. 19 (2007) p. 119-123.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Languages, Literatures, and Cultures at University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Languages, Literatures, and Cultures Scholarship by an authorized administrator of University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. For more information, please contact nicole.hentz@unh.edu.

Review Article: Daniel Rancour-Laferriere's *Russian Literature and Psychoanalysis*

Ronald D. LeBlanc
University of New Hampshire

Ранкур-Лаферрьер, Дениэл. Русская литература и психоанализ. Москва: Ладомир, 2004. 1017 стр. Cloth. ISBN 5-86218-440-6.

“Psychoanalysis,” Daniel Rancour-Laferriere writes in a Preface addressed to Russian readers of the new collection of translations of his writings, “is the ability to summon forth and to comprehend so-called free associations” (5). A psychoanalytical approach to literary criticism, he adds, involves making sense of the “free associations” called forth in the mind of the philologist-reader by a fictional character, an author, and/or the images present in a work of literature (7). In this sense, the philologist-reader's relationship to the artistic text closely resembles that of a clinical psychoanalyst to the patient lying on his or her couch. The important difference, however, is that the philologist-reader seeks to make sense of the free associations in order to attain understanding rather than undergo therapy, to provide interpretive literary insights rather than assist psychological healing.

Slavicists in the English-speaking world have long been familiar with the numerous interpretive insights into Russian literary texts, their authors, and the fictional characters who inhabit the created worlds of these texts that Rancour-Laferriere has provided in his rich scholarly output over the past thirty years. In the post-Soviet period, Russian readers are likewise beginning to become ac-

quainted with some of Rancour-Laferriere's psychoanalytical studies through translations of such works as *The Mind of Stalin: A Psychoanalytic Study* (1988) (*Психика Сталина: Психоаналитическое исследование* (1996)), *The Slave Soul of Russia: Moral Masochism and the Cult of Suffering* (1995) (*Рабская душа России: Проблемы нравственного мазохизма и культ страдания* (1996)), and *Russian Nationalism from an Interdisciplinary Perspective: Imagining Russia* (2000) (*Россия и русские глазами американского психоаналитика: в поисках национальной идентичности* (2003)). The book under review here continues this process of acquainting Russian readers with the principal works of this American Slavist famous for his psychoanalytical approach to Russian literature and culture. The opening section of *Русская литература и психоанализ* («Статьи разных лет», 9-282) contains new Russian translations of fourteen articles written by Rancour-Laferriere between 1976 and 1998. They range from interpretations of the dreams of Pushkin's Tatyana Larina and Gogol's Ivan Shponka to psychoanalytic profiles of Stalin (as an actual historical figure as well as a literary character) and from analyses of poems by Pushkin and Lermontov to studies of Formalist theory, Soviet satire, and masochism in Russian literature. What is of especial importance in *Русская литература и психоанализ* for Tolstovedy, however, are the two remaining sections of the book, *Пьер Безухов: Психобиография* (283-

538) and *Лев Толстой на кушетке психоаналитика: женоненавистничество, мазохизм и ранняя утрата матери* (539-856), which provide new Russian translations of two books Rancour-Laferriere published during the 1990s: *Tolstoy's Pierre Bezukhov: A Psychoanalytic Study* (1993) and *Tolstoy on the Couch: Misogyny, Masochism, and the Absent Mother* (1998).

As its subtitle suggests, *Пьер Безухов: Психобиография* provides a psychoanalytic biography—or “psychobiography”—of the famous hero of *War and Peace*, a highly meditative, inner-directed fictional character who is thinking about himself almost constantly throughout the novel. Pierre Bezukhov, as Rancour-Laferriere points out, is a narcissistic personality who “spends much time actually free-associating on a couch” (287). Treating Pierre as if he were a real person and exploring the hero’s self-revealing mental processes (to which Tolstoy gives readers of *War and Peace* such deep and immediate access), the author provides illuminating psychoanalytic explanations for this fictional character’s thoughts, desires, and behavior. *Пьер Безухов: Психобиография* helps us better understand a number of things about the hero: for example, the lingering effect upon Pierre of his “orphan” status (his unresolved relationship with an absent mother and a rarely present father); the attraction the busty Hélène Kuragina holds, as a pre-oedipal self-object, for the infantile Pierre; the similarities between old Count Bezukhov and young Dolokhov, both of whom serve as “father icons” for the hero; the manner in which Pierre’s association with the Masonic brotherhood allows him to “deflect” (or sublimate) his homoerotic urges into a humanitarian impulse to help mankind (to practice brotherly love); and the soothing therapeutic effect that Platon Karatev, as a maternal figure, has on Pierre, launching him on the road to personal autonomy and adult maturity.

Readers are apt to find especially illuminating Rancour-Laferriere’s discussion of how

Pierre, when he rekindles his love for Natasha Rostova near novel’s end, following his epiphanic experiences during French captivity, essentially “backslides” on the independence of self he had managed to achieve under Karataev’s tutelage. Platon, the author explains, had helped Pierre to learn at last how to overcome his infantile narcissism and to treat loved ones as separate, autonomous objects. The re-entry of Natasha into Pierre’s life, however, suddenly presents the hero with a woman who provides an almost unlimited source of what Otto Fenichel calls “narcissistic supplies,” and she very quickly succeeds in taking control over his life. As Rancour-Laferriere puts it, “Tolstoy hands Pierre the perfect self-object on a silver platter, and Pierre can hardly refuse” (498). This precipitous retreat from freedom that the hero experiences in the final sections of *War and Peace* provides, in part, the basis for the life of conjugal bliss and domestic tranquility that Pierre and Natasha are shown to be leading in the controversial Epilogue Tolstoy appended to his epic novel.

In *Лев Толстой на кушетке психоаналитика*, it is not one of Tolstoy’s fictional characters but the writer himself who is placed on the psychoanalytic couch, where Rancour-Laferriere examines at close range, and in a detailed, unflattering manner, a whole series of psychic disturbances and neurotic behavioral patterns that he claims afflicted Lev Nikolaevich during his life and career, including megalomania, moral masochism, grandiose narcissism, depressive anxiety, low self-esteem, chronic masturbation, hypomanic mood swings, and sadistic impulses. Rancour-Laferriere takes a frank and penetrating look at what he calls “the dark, misogynistic side of Tolstoy’s psyche” (541), focusing primarily on what he perceives to be the famous Russian writer’s persistently hostile attitude toward women, which he traces back, ontogenetically, to the death of Tolstoy’s mother when he was still very young. The author’s primary concern in this book, he declares, is to seek a satisfactory explanation for Tolstoy’s ambivalent, at

times contradictory, feelings about women and sexuality, which are expressed most prominently in *The Kreutzer Sonata*. "Tolstoy's repudiation of sex," Rancour-Laferriere explains,

is embedded within a complex of polarized feelings about women and sexuality. Tolstoy both desired women and punished himself for his desire. He both needed to damage a woman with his sexuality, and to refrain from damaging her. He both idealized women in their maternal role and hated mothers. These and other personal ambivalences spawned the many and fascinating ambiguities of his novella on human sexuality. (547)

To discover why and how Tolstoy came to create the disturbingly misogynistic images that dominate *The Kreutzer Sonata*, Rancour-Laferriere examines closely not only the numerous drafts and variants of this bleak novella about an unhappy marriage, but also entries in Tolstoy's personal diaries and his correspondence during the period when he was working on the manuscript. The extreme argument for sexual abstinence that Tolstoy develops in *The Kreutzer Sonata* is shown to have been generated mainly by his troubling sense of guilt over the uncontrollable rage and anger he felt toward the "absent" mother who did not breastfeed him and who abandoned him by her early death. The novella thus constitutes, in Rancour-Laferriere's words, "more an expression of outright hatred of the 'abandoning' mother than nostalgia for her" (609). Tolstoy, according to the author, expresses this repressed animosity indirectly, displacing it onto other women who, in his unconscious mind, bear a resemblance to his actual mother: that is, such maternal icons as his own wife Sonia, his fictional heroine Anna Karenina, and, ultimately, the unnamed wife whom Pozdnyshv murders. After charting the symptoms of Tolstoy's psychopathology that allegedly manifested themselves while he was working on *The Kreutzer Sonata*, Rancour-Laferriere examines the writer's stormy relationship with

Sonia, "Lev's major self-object and his primary maternal icon" (796). Concluding his study on a feminist note, Rancour-Laferriere asserts that Tolstoy essentially drove his poor wife crazy, making her "hysterical" through his intense ambivalence about heterosexual interaction.

The volume concludes with an appendix that includes the republication of the quasi-autobiographical story, *Whose Fault Is It?* (*Чья вина? По поводу «Крейцеровой сонаты» Льва Толстого. Написано женой Льва Толстого* (1895)), a counter-text that represents Sophia Andreevna's artistic response to her husband's controversial novella, a lengthy list of works cited, a list of the original works in English by Rancour-Laferriere that are translated in this volume, and a brief biographical sketch of the author. Some readers in Russia—tolstovedy, in particular—will no doubt be seriously offended by the author's brutally frank psychoanalytic diagnosis of this famous writer and the unflattering picture he paints of the revered sage of Yasnaya Polyana. Moreover, the psychoanalytic approach to literature continues to have its detractors among Slavic literary scholars worldwide. Freud, of course, has come under increasing attack in recent years in the United States as well, where the scientific validity and therapeutic value of his psychoanalytic theories have been questioned, challenged, and in some cases discredited. Not too long ago his picture appeared on the cover of an issue of *Time* magazine accompanied by the question, "Is Freud Dead?" It seems to be the case, however, that Freud is re-emerging in a much more favorable light in the former Soviet Union, where for many years his works had been repressed and his name vilified. It will be interesting, therefore, to see how well Rancour-Laferriere's psychobiography of Pierre Bezukhov and his analysis of Tolstoy's own troubled psyche will be received among readers in post-communist Russia.

Although there is much in *Русская литература и психоанализ* to recommend it

for Russian-speaking tolstovedy, there are nonetheless a few technical shortcomings in this volume, most of which may well reflect more on the publisher or editor than the author. First of all, there is the choice of title. Not only does it fail to indicate that the vast majority of the book (approximately two-thirds) is devoted to Tolstoy and his works; it also could easily mislead some readers, fluent in both Russian and English, into thinking that they will be getting here a Russian translation of *Russian Literature and Psychoanalysis* (1989), the collection of critical essays by various scholars that was edited by Rancour-Laferriere nearly twenty years ago. Secondly, the excessive length of this book (over a thousand pages) makes demands not only on the reader but also on the binding. My copy arrived with the covers already torn away from the binding and scotch-taped back together in a very makeshift way. It seems to me that the "Ladimir" publishing house would have been well advised to publish separate Russian editions of Rancour-Laferriere's two books on Tolstoy or, alternatively, publish translations of the two books together, but without the fourteen articles and essays that are largely unrelated to Tolstoy. It also would have been preferable if the two books on Tolstoy, which are ably rendered into Russian here by Iu. S. Evtushenkov and Iu. N. Maslov, respectively, would have been translated by the same person to ensure consistency

in the rendering of psychoanalytical terminology as well as in preserving the author's voice, style, and manner of expression. Finally, the inclusion of Sophia Andreevna's *Whose Fault Is It?*, immediately following the author's discussion of *The Kreutzer Sonata*, makes for a nice addition to the volume. It should have been accompanied, however, by at least some brief commentary that places Sonia's story in the context of the immediate aftermath of the publication of her husband's controversial novella, when various parodies and pastiches appeared as part of the burgeoning debate over sexual morality that ensued within Russian literature and culture (cf. Peter Ulf Møller, *Postlude to The Kreutzer Sonata: Tolstoj and the Debate over Sexual Morality in Russian Literature of the 1890s* (1988)).

These technical quibbles are minor in nature, however. All in all, the "Ladimir" publishing house is to be highly commended for bringing out in Russian translation the important and insightful works of scholarship that Daniel Rancour-Laferriere has written on Tolstoy. Whether Russian readers will, in the end, mainly agree or disagree with the author's analyses, *Русская литература и психоанализ* is likely, nonetheless, to have quite a profound impact on Tolstoy studies in post-communist Russia for the foreseeable future.