The ‘Anna Karenina’ on Your Shelf

Two new translations add to a crowded shelf. But which version of Tolstoy’s novel should you read?

Translations are like recipes: We tend to think that the best one is whichever we encountered first. That’s why, amid the ever-growing list of versions of Leo Tolstoy’s “Anna Karenina,” I will remain partial to Louise and Aylmer Maude’s. It was through their 1918 version that I discovered the novel—in the Oxford World’s Classics edition, the mass-market paperback with the bright yellow spine and sturdy, laminate covers. This fact alone would give them pride of place.

Those of us on Team Maude also have more objective reasons for our boosterism,
since the husband and wife were friends of Tolstoy and had a close appreciation of his beliefs and intentions. But the truth is that excellent translations of his greatest books are nearly as numerous as his characters, and many readers have come to love “Anna Karenina” by way of Constance Garnett (whose 1901 translation is enshrined in the Modern Library), Rosemary Edmonds (1954 and until a decade ago the Penguin Classics edition) or David Magarshack (1961 and still the Signet Classic). A 2000 translation by another husband-and-wife team, Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, introduced thousands of newcomers to the novel after it was chosen for Oprah’s Book Club. Now two attractive new translations, by Marian Schwartz (Yale, 754 pages, $35) and Rosamund Bartlett (Oxford, 847 pages, $29.95), arrive and will gain their own adherents.

Such a plenitude of editions can coexist happily because, for Tolstoy, clarity was paramount. The verbal nuance and subtle syntactical effects so crucial in a writer like Proust, for instance, mean that two translations will render two different, essentially irreconcilable versions of every page. But Tolstoy wanted to be understood easily and immediately. As Constance Garnett herself put it: “Tolstoy’s simple style goes straight into English without any trouble.” His writing abounds in habits that are traditionally thought to be hallmarks of poor prose in English—insistent word repetitions, lengthy periodic sentences and almost sententiously explanatory metaphors. Look how many times some variation of “life” is jammed into this passage, in which Anna’s husband, Karenin, an emotionally timid civil servant, awakens to the truth of his wife’s adultery (the version is Ms. Schwartz’s):

All his life, Alexei Alexandrovich had lived and worked in official spheres, dealing with reflections of life. And each time he came into contact with life itself, he shrank away. Now he was experiencing an emotion similar to that which a man would feel who was calmly crossing a chasm by bridge and suddenly saw that the bridge had been dismantled and there was an abyss. This abyss was life itself, and the bridge was the artificial life which Alexis Alexandrovich had lived.

Tolstoy could write in such an overt manner without becoming didactic because he always closely inhabited the minds of his characters. Biographers have noted that he stopped keeping a diary while writing “Anna Karenina,” and much of the novel takes the form of interior monologue—a kind of stream of moral consciousness—in which these figures gropingly try to make sense of the vicissitudes of “life itself.”

The attempt to understand and be understood is the book’s continuing, underlying drama. It is Anna’s failure to arrive at self-knowledge that is the cause
of her tragedy. Her love for Vronsky is real and passionate but born from disorder. The novel’s less quoted second sentence—“Everything was confusion in the Oblonskys’ house,” as Ms. Bartlett has it—refers to the fallout from her brother Stiva’s infidelity and foreshadows the torturous moral confusion that besets her relationship to her lover, her children and society. In contrast, in his marriage with Kitty, Levin finds a partner who can almost literally read his thoughts. They reflect the Tolstoyan ideal of soulmates who complement each other spiritually and intellectually, to the point of telepathy. Levin becomes used to “blurting out his thoughts boldly, without bothering to put them into precise words,” Ms. Bartlett translates; “he knew that at loving moments such as this one his wife would grasp what he meant to say from a mere hint, and she did.”

I read back and forth between Ms. Schwartz’s and Ms. Bartlett’s translations, and I can honestly say that both are clear and forceful and that both capture the novel’s powerful forward momentum and its signal moments of revelation. Only minor differences separate them—from each other and from earlier editions. Ms. Bartlett, the author of a superb biography of Tolstoy, has produced a more classically elegant translation, which is mirrored in the book’s beautiful packaging, right down to the sewn-in ribbon bookmark. (Her introduction, a tour d’horizon of Tolstoy’s life and work, is also excellent.) Ms. Schwartz stresses Tolstoy’s artless, intuitive side by retaining his repetitions (whereas Ms. Bartlett deploys synonyms) and eschewing commas in long sentences. Her edition, prefaced by a provocative if pretentious introduction by Gary Saul Morson, feels slightly more academic in tone and presentation.

In a criticism of overly stylized fiction, Jorge Luis Borges once wrote that “the page that becomes immortal can traverse the fire of typographical errors, approximate translations, and inattentive or erroneous readings without losing its soul.” It is central to Tolstoy’s genius that his writing—so direct and so instantly penetrating—is accessible to such a broad spectrum of readers. These two new versions are creditable additions to an already healthy surplus, and I hope they find readers. But if you’ve got a beloved old copy on your shelf, the sentimental favorite will not let you down this holiday season.

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