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Andrew R. Durkin *

LACLOS'S *LES LIAISONS DANGEREUSES* AND TOLSTOJ'S *ANNA KARENINA*: Some Comparisons

To arrive at a full understanding of the nineteenth-century Russian novel one must also understand its relation to the European novel as it had developed in the preceding century. As relative latecomers to the form, Russian novelists were faced with the necessity of both imitating and modifying an already complex tradition. While avoiding mechanistic and ultimately trivializing attempts to ascertain "sources," critics need to explore Russian novels' continuities with and divergences from their European antecedents. In particular, the eighteenth-century French novel, with its close and often explicit links with philosophical speculation and moral theory, seems particularly pertinent to the discussion of nineteenth-century Russian fiction. The importance of Diderot for Dostoevskij, and of Rousseau for Tolstoj (a debt Tolstoj freely admitted), has been partly explored. What needs to be looked at in more detail is the relation of Russian novels to the eighteenth-century French novel *qua* novel, including works other than those by the most renowned of the *philosophes.*

With this end in mind, I would like to compare *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782), the only novel of Pierre Choderlos de Laclos, and Tolstoj's *Anna Karenina* (first complete edition 1878). This presents an evidence problem in that there seems to be no direct indication that Tolstoj knew Laclos's work. There is no reference to it in Tolstoj's works or letters; whether it was in his library at Jasnaja Poljana is uncertain, as a catalog of non-Russian books in Tolstoj's library has not been published. However, it seems unlikely that Tolstoj would have been unaware of *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, given its status throughout the nineteenth-century as a notorious novel. That very notoriety in turn may explain Tolstoj's reticence concerning it.

Although the question of Tolstoj's direct knowledge of Laclos's novel must remain a question at least for the present, there seems to be sufficient evidence in the texts of *Les Liaisons dangereuses* and *Anna Karenina* to suggest that, if Tolstoj did not know the earlier novel directly, he had a clear grasp of the novelistic pattern of which it is an outstanding exemplar. Thus comparison between the two novels on typological grounds may be feasible. Here, the differences are as significant as the similarities in that each culminates a specific novelistic tradition, the eighteenth-century epistolary novel and the nineteenth-century realistic novel; each is a limit after which new departures begin.

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Obviously, the two novels differ in many elements (notably, there is no equivalent to the Kitty-Levin side of Tolstoj's novel in Laclos's, where all plots end badly and are much more closely interwoven), but certain characters and features of plot do present parallels, that at some points are rather close. Both novels are, at least in part, accounts of the consequences of passion in a society in which outward social form is of uppermost importance. In the two novels, the affinities in character traits and general development of the Valmont/Présidente de Tourvel and the Vronskij/Anna relationships are fairly clear. In both cases, the beautiful, rather conventionally virtuous wife of an older and colder bureaucrat (symbolically absent throughout *Les Liaisons dangereuses*) is attracted to a dashing, somewhat rakish military man to her ultimate destruction, as well as to his; in *Les Liaisons*, this action takes four months, in *Anna Karenina*, four years. In this process, three crucial incidents occur which are analogous in each novel in a number of specific points. The initial encounter between the two, its climax (the physical seduction itself), and its resolution, the death of the Présidente de Tourvel or of Anna Karenina.[1]

In the initial incident in each novel, the heroine is attracted to the hero by an act of charity on his part. In *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, this scene is carefully staged by the libertine Valmont, whose more conventional overtures to the Présidente de Tourvel have not met with success. As he describes it in letter 21, he arranges to be observed giving a destitute peasant family the money (56 livres) necessary to keep them from eviction and arrest. The Présidente de Tourvel (who has sent a spy, attesting to her own unacknowledged interest in Valmont) takes this act of generosity at face value and finds Valmont's behavior admirable. Valmont, in ironic collusion with his correspondent, the Marquise de Merteuil, and ultimately with the reader, reveals to her his real motives, the diametric opposite of what the Présidente de Tourvel infers from his outward actions. She wrongly assumes that outward virtue can not be conjoined with inner vice.

In *Anna Karenina*, the analogous incident occurs in Part I, chapter 18, when Anna and Vronskij meet for the first time. The chapter takes place at the Moscow train station where Oblonskij and Vronskij are meeting their sister and mother, respectively. A railway worker is crushed to death by a freight train. This is taken by Anna as a bad omen, and most comment on the scene has been limited to its foreshadowing of Anna's own death, but its role in characterizing Vronskij in relation to Anna is also important. Vronskij gives the assistant stationmaster two hundred rubles to aid the dead man's family. Whereas Valmont's action is a carefully planned demonstration of supposed religiously inspired charity, carefully designed to appeal to the Présidente de Tourvel's pious and sentimental principles, Vronskij's gesture is more fortuitous, but not spontaneous. In fact, he offers the money only in response to Anna's plea, "can't something be done"; his generosity is obviously an act of civic philanthropy calculated to appeal to Anna's notion of *nobless oblige*, just as Valmont's calculated concealment of his generosity conforms outwardly to

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pious notions of self-effacement in virtue. Both acts are vitiated by the character's intentions rather than by the action itself, though in Vronskij's case those intentions are still obscure even to himself.

Vronskij must always take his cues, as he does here, from Anna; he lacks the independence that complete mastery of social code would permit. Because the third person narrative technique prevents the direct and detailed entree into the character's motives that an epistolary novel permits, Tolstoj carefully includes in the scene a "control" on Vronskij's apparent altruism. Stiva Oblonskij shows something closer to charity in the etymological sense in that he expresses anguish over the accident and sympathy for the victim's family. Although, in true Stiva fashion, he fails to follow through with material help, his compassion is clearly to be preferred to Vronskij's impersonal largesse.

In each of these incidents, the hero deliberately aspires to a perfect form of behavior, while simultaneously disqualifying himself by the very consciousness of his aspiration. However, the admiration he receives from others provides, in René Girard's terms, the mediated love that makes it possible for the heroine to begin to see him as that ideal, emblematic figure that her culture and her reading, in particular, have predisposed her to regard as an ideal.[2]

If this "charity" scene forges the first link between the hero and heroine in both novels, the seduction scene makes the relationship between them irrevocable and determines further action. Valmont finally conquers the Présidente de Tourvel at the end of October (letter 125), nearly three months after the opening of the novel and three-quarters of the way through the text. Although Vronskij's seduction of Anna requires nearly a year (II, 11), it occurs less than one-fifth of the way through the text, and in the period leading up to it none of the events is recounted in detail. Tolstoj is much more interested in the process by which adultery leads to denouement than in the events prior to seduction.

Despite this difference in plot emphasis, the seduction scene of Anna by Vronskij is much briefer than Valmont's description of his seduction of the Présidente de Tourvel; nevertheless, Tolstoj's scene echoes certain features of *Les Liaisons dangereuses.* Valmont carefully reconnoiters the room where the seduction is about to take place, singling out an ottoman as a likely "theater of operations" but then rejecting it because a portrait of Tourvel's husband is visible from it; the divan from which Anna slips to the floor would seem to be an analogue to this prop. More important is the reaction of the heroine to what has happened. In both cases, the heroine commits her existence to the man who has just seduced her, even though this entails the renunciation of her own happiness. The Présidente de Tourvel asks Valmont whether he is happy, and receiving assurances that he is, comments: "That thought I find is a solace and a comfort to me." (letter 125). She goes on to add, "I can no longer endure my existence unless it is of use in making you happy. I devote myself entirely to that. From this moment on I am yours, and you will hear neither refusals nor regrets from me." (letter 125).

The Présidente de Tourvel elaborates these ideas in letter 128 to Madame

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de Rosemonde, so there can be no question of Valmont's distorting her words; she declares to Madame de Rosemonde that her dedication is to the death. Anna is more laconic, but explicitly rejects Vronskij's appeal to what is the cliché of his happiness; these is also little sense of any happiness in Anna at all, as there might be in the Présidente de Tourvel's deliberate embracing of suffering. Rather, there seems to be a submission to an inevitable nemesis:

> — Все кончено,—сказала она,— У меня ничего нет, кроме тебя. Помни это.
>
> — Я не могу не помнить того, что есть моя жизнь. За минуту этого счастья...
>
> — Какое счастье! — с отвращением и ужасом сказала она, и ужас невольно сообщился ему.— Ради бога, ни слова, ни слова больше.

The inner moral certainties that sustain the Présidente de Tourvel at this point are no longer available to the heroine of the nineteenth-century novel, cast adrift by passion in a sea of uncertainty, in which commitment to her seducer may be either a curse or a blessing.

In both cases, however, the heroine's commitment, whether to an ideal of self-sacrifice or to an obscure fate, helps to reveal the limitations of her seducer. In *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, the Présidente de Tourvel's words awaken in Valmont a belated and flickering realization of the possibility of love. True to the role she expects of him, he kneels to swear eternal love, and admits to the Marquise de Merteuil: "One must admit everything; I thought that which I was saying" (letter 125). The automatized, rationalized, and depersonalized craft of the libertine has met a reality and a moral intensity that its system cannot contain. Valmont used the military metaphor in his account of his final assault on the Présidente de Tourvel in order to estrange and conceal any real feeling, but the metaphor breaks down here. Valmont's victory over the Présidente de Tourvel is at best a Pyrrhic one. We glimpse Valmont transcending himself,"out of character," but the pressure of the Marquise de Merteuil's opinion forces him back into it, only to his destruction, perhaps psychologically and certainly physically, in his duel with Danceny.

In *Anna Karenina*, Vronskij's response also reveals his inadequacies. The literary patness of the phrase that Anna interrupts suggest his inability to do more than impose conventions upon what seems to be a conventional situation, but which is not, both because of Anna's attitude and the tendency toward moral singularities in the nineteenth-century novel. Like Valmont, Vronskij falls to his knees, but this is even more certainly a literary cliché. Valmont's system of libertinage (a product of both literature and life) and the persona he has created for himself are challenged by Tourvel's true passion and spiritual commitment. Similarly, Vronskij's conception of himself as an emblematic Romantic figure is called into question by Anna's reaction to his attempt

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to neutralize the situation by assimilating it to established codes. Anna's rejection of words and her inability to formulate her new situation present Vronskij with an unknown. In *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, Valmont realizes the challenge to his system of love; it is a kind of love he has previously rejected and continues to resist, although he cannot define it. For Vronskij and Anna, the rest of the novel will be spent—in St. Petersburg, Italy, on Vronskij's estate, and in Moscow—in an attempt to comprehend their new experience and keep up the impossible tasks of working out new definitions of self and form for their relationship. Every form they try rests on and leads back to the abolition of form that has occurred here, and thus comes to naught. This abolition of form is suggested by Anna's dream of having two husbands. At this stage, the situation in *Les Liaisons dangereuses* is much clearer. Each character still understands self and other in a definite way; the Présidente de Tourvel may be mistaken about Valmont, but she does perceive the potential in him for valid experience, a potential he himself has denied and will ultimately reject.

The final point of similarity between the two novels occurs at the end of the affair, a mere month later in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, several years later in *Anna Karenina*. Both end with the death of the heroine, who is unable to resolve the contradictions of her situation in any other way. One dies from "delirium," and the other by suicide in a state close to delirium. Direct comparisons are more difficult here, partly because technique varies so greatly at this point in the two novels. The Présidente de Tourvel takes refuge in a convent and her state is mainly reported and refracted in someone else's letter, while Anna's final day is presented in several chapters in a "stream of perception," if not stream of consciousness. Still, certain parallels can be noted. In both cases, the heroine sees the "true" nature of her seducer—for the Presidente de Tourvel, "the veil is stripped away" from Valmont (letter 143) after he sends her a cynical letter of rejection provided by the Marquise de Merteuil. For Anna, her love for Vronskij turns entirely to hatred when she receives his telegram after which she becomes certain he is abandoning her for Princess Sorokina. The telegram, the technological descendant of the letter, also assumes the conduct of life by established codes, codes which Anna no longer acknowledges.

In both novels, the dominant imagery from this point on is that of darkness. The Présidente de Tourvel insists that her true habitat is now darkness, ending in the darkness of the grave; Anna sinks deeper and deeper into shadow, with only a final flickering of light and spiritual illumination in the moment before the final extinction. The Présidente de Tourvel's plea, i.e., "even in this abode of shadows where ignominy has driven me to bury myself, is there no release from pain, is hope a delusion?" (letter 161), in her last delirious letter could easily stand as an epigram to Anna's final descent into the night. In her final letter, the Présidente de Tourvel confuses both the loved and hated aspects of Valmont, as well as the figure of her husband. This is paralleled by Anna's tormented vision of Vronskij and her inability to distinguish her two Aleksejs, her husband and Vronskij.

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The crucial difference between the two heroines lies in the circumstances of their deaths. The Présidente de Tourvel's moral superiority and her inability to exist in a world where such baseness as Valmont's betrayal of both of them can exist leads her to "ascend" out of the conventions of the world and its society. Her suffering reveals, and even creates, her true moral depth. Anna, of course, descends as Tolstoj makes only too literally clear. She may have perceived the contradictions of her society and her novel, but she must follow their logic in the absence of the transcending vision of another order (moral, social, and aesthetic) and another scenario (granted by Tolstoj only to Levin).

The respective fates of the seducers parallel the nature of the heorines' ends. The Présidente de Tourvel succumbs of the anguish of her own conscience. Valmont, in turn, is cut down in a duel with Danceny. The very rules he had lived by and that have prevented him from fully accepting the Présidente de Tourvel's challenge to transcendence bring about his end. His further existence would be redundant; he dies as much the emblematic figure of the libertine as he was at the start.

Tolstoj is less kind to Vronskij; his flight to the Balkan wars is a complete regression into the cliché of a Romantic hero. Vronskij is an ambiguous hero, in a long greatcoat, suffering the pangs of remorse. He admits he is a ruin, and Tolstoj's savage irony is patent. Valmont is allowed to perish by the rules he lived by. Although he had been granted a glimpse of an alternative existence, Vronskij is condemned to revert to literary sterotype, to recede from life back into the hackneyed plots from which Anna's love had briefly drawn him.

In addition to the parallels between Anna and the Présidente de Tourvel, one other scene in *Anna Karenina* may echo, though less distinctly, one in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*. The analogies between the two central characters in these scenes are less important than the scenes' function. The scenes are the moment at which Anna challenges St. Petersburg society at the opera (Part V, chapters 32 and 33) and the Marquise de Merteuil's confrontation with Paris society at the Comédie Italienne, as reported by Madame de Volanges, near the end of the novel (letter 173). These scenes do not so much lay bare the devices of the two novels as lay bare the implicit ethics of their worlds.

Theater as setting in *Les Liaisons dangereuses* is revelatory; the proximity of a theater forces the characters most expert in dissimulation, Valmont and Merteuil, into dropping their masks. A chance encounter outside the Opéra between the carriages of the Présidente de Tourvel and Valmont provides the Présidente with a glimpse of Valmont's true nature before the final unveiling.

The Marquise de Merteuil at the Comédie Italienne is likewise unmasked. Her self-compromising letters have been circulated by her erstwhile lover, Danceny. She must now face the same court of society which she had previously not only deceived concerning her own virtue but had also manipulated against another of her lovers, Prévan. Society takes its revenge, not so much out of moral outrage over her cynical behavior as out of a sense of having been deceived. She is shunned by the women and even booed by the men.

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One should bear in mind that Laclos in no way suggests the moral superiority of society in its repudiation of the Marquise de Merteuil; indeed its prior willingness to accept surface for substance ironically vitiates any claim to judge it may now attempt to exercise. The Marquise is certainly no better and probably no worse than her present persecuters and former dupes. All play roles in a comedy, but she has failed. Because of her own hyperconscious selection and development of her part, and the attempt to maintain it to the end, she is hissed from the stage. Given her nearly flawless performance of such a complex and difficult role, the implication that all social activity involves self-perverting role-playing seems inevitable. The theater scene, by exposing one role-player, merely demonstrates the equivalence in hypocrisy of all personae.

The opera scene in *Anna Karenina* comes much earlier in the course of the novel and marks not Anna's complete downfall, but her definitive break with St. Petersburg society. Immediately after the scandalous scene at the opera, Anna and Vronskij leave for the country. Like the Marquise de Merteuil, Anna refuses to react to the taunts and feigned outrage of her former peers, but Tolstoj's moral rhetoric differs radically from that of Laclos. Merteuil is simply an ironic metonym of the society that now rejects her; Anna deliberately confronts the opera audience with a moral order different from its own. Using the mask of her beauty as a weapon, Anna challenges a morally shallow society whose approval or disapproval matters little. She is superior to it in her recognition of the truth of her passions and her total commitment to that truth, whatever its consequences. It is the audience, summed up in the absurd Kartasova, that is unmasked, not its supposed scapegoat. Anna briefly assumes a conventional mask, but this only emphasizes the inadequacy of masks, and of all conventions, for her experience.

Thus, similar scenes reveal divergent moral universes. The incident at the Comédie Italienne exposes and expels one player who has let her mask slip, a fatal error in a world of deceptive surfaces concealing pervasive lust for control. In the scene at the opera in *Anna Karenina*, Anna, who deliberately assumes a role, is ironically the only one to evince moral superiority over the hypocrites and mediocrities who blindly and viciously adhere to their scripts and the dead codes of moral convention. Tolstoj retains the right to judge Anna, but he contrasts her existential profundity with society's triviality and superficiality, and thus damns it doubly. With a subtler irony, Laclos shows vice exposed and exposed to ridicule by vice itself still masquerading as virtue. True moral depth is absent, for it has disappeared from *Les Liaisons dangereuses* with the death of the Présidente de Tourvel. Theater, like the society it mirrors, does not distinguish good from evil, but only good acting from bad.

Given the various affinities or parallels between *Anna Karenina* and *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, how does *Anna Karenina* modify or transform the tradition represented by Laclos's novel, or the "Novel of Worldliness" in Peter Brook's phrase?[4] If we agree with Ian Watt's assertion that formal realism is the novel's basic technique, we are led, like Watt, to disregard works such as

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Les Liaisons dangereuses in the history of the novel in favor of the more "realistic" English novel, and by Tolstoj's time, the Russian novel as well.[5] Fortunately, novelists do not heed critics. The echoes of *Les Liaisons dangereuses* in *Anna Karenina*, whether direct or mediated, suggest that we must consider *Anna Karenina* as a summation, not only of the novel of formal realism, such as the English novel that Anna reads, but also of the older novel of analysis, as exemplified by *Les Liaisons dangereuses. Anna Karenina* presents the reader with a *sceplenie* (Tolstoj's term, and, perhaps, an analogue of *liaison*)[6] not only with regard to plot, characters, and moral theme, but technique as well. It attempts to reintegrate those traditions, and thus to create a new novel and a new, more complete, model of human experience.

NOTES

1. I have use the following editions: Pierre Cholderlos de Laclos, *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion pb., 1964) and L. N. Tolstoj, *Anna Karenina*, ed., V. A. Ždanov and E. E. Zajdenšnur (Moscow: "Nauka," 1970). References to *Les Liaisons danereuses* are to the specific letter (the letters comprising the novel are numbered consecutively), and to *Anna Karenina* to part and chapter.

2. René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966), p. 17.

3. On the Marquise de Merteuil's manipulative use of language, see Janet Gurkin Altman, "Adressed and Undressed Language in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*," Lloyd R. Free (ed.), *Laclos: Critical Approaches to Les Liaisons dangereuses* (Studia humanitatis, No. 10) (Madrid: José Porrua Turanzas, 1978), pp. 223-58.

4. Peter Brooks, *The Novel of Worldliness* (Princeton: Princeton Univerisity Press, 1969). Discussion of *Les Liaison dangereuses* can be found on pages 172-218.

5. Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962). Watt asserts that "French fiction from *La Princesse de Clèves* to *Les Liaisons dangereuses* stands outside the main tradition of the novel. For all its psychological penetration and literary skill, we feel it is too stylish to be authentic" (p.30). As the product of a society in which style reigned supreme, the stylistic brilliance of the French psychological novel may, in fact, be the strongest indication of its authenticity. In any case, the novel, from its origins and by its nature, has exhibited a greater variability than any other genre.

6. L. N. Tolstoj to N. N. Straxov, letter of April 23 and 26, 1876, in L. N. Tolstoj, *Polnoe sobranie sočinenij*, LXII(1953), 268-9.

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