

Tolstoy's American Stepsister: Orthodox Women's Lit in America

Katherine Kelaidis

Nothing dooms literature like dishonesty. Thus, unsurprisingly, it is above all the ability to speak honestly that distinguishes between quality writing and the vast majority of what is produced by contemporary Orthodox Christian women in America. So you might say that what I want to consider here is the kind of courage it takes to tell the truth. Who has it and who lacks it. Of course, I want to understand what we can learn about the ways Orthodox Christian women are encountering the current moment by better understanding the fiction they are producing, and the ways in which those encounters differ when mediated by differences in background and circumstance. But, in the end, as you will see, it all comes down to courage—and the shocking lack of it in our ranks.

Prose fiction is perhaps the natural artistic expression of the Orthodox tradition. At the very least, it is its most well-developed. It is what painting is within the Catholic tradition and music within the Protestant. And like Catholic paintings and Protestant music, Orthodox Christian fiction is set apart by its brutal spiritual honesty. From the moment I cracked the first cover at thirteen, *Anna Karenina* gripped me in such a way that I begged my mother for Russian lessons. Lessons I received and which

urged me on as I read my way through the maze that is Russia's rich literary tradition. What enchanted me in *Anna Karenina*, and in the novels and short stories to which it and the Russian language led me, is the complex—and therefore true—moral landscape they presented.

This nuanced and unflinching view of the world is the common thread that binds what I would call “Orthodox” prose fiction together. The Russian part of this tradition is the best known to the wider world, with Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoevsky first among them all. But there are also the Greek novelists such as Alexandros Papadiamantis and Serbians like Borisav Stanković. The world these men write into being is also a deeply Orthodox world. A morally chaotic world in which we are nonetheless tasked with acting morally, a task we often fail to accomplish. It is a sympathetic, curative view of the human condition, one that seems—to me at least—to flow from Orthodoxy's insistence upon the notion that sin is a disease more than a crime and that the world is more hospital than courtroom. This worldview stands in stark contrast to the more shaming and punitive model traditionally favored by Western Christianity and is perhaps why Orthodox literature has traditionally been the most humane of any literature, the most sympathetic even to its

villains. Interestingly enough, it is often the female characters in these novels who occasion the most complex and substantive reading. Anna Karenina is obvious. But there are other great heroines to discover. There is, for example, Hadoula, the downtrodden “murderess” of Papadiamantis’s *The Murderess*, and Softka in Stanković’s masterpiece *Impure Blood*. These women are not easily recognizable archetypes, and they are far from easy foils on which to project the lazy judgments of Sunday school morality. They are sensitively drawn and elicit our compassion even at their most wicked. They are real human beings, whose lives—like all our lives—defy the facile judgements of moral categories.

And yet this shining glory, this testament to the Orthodox faith and the deep compassion it might be able to cultivate in even its most steely adherents, is altogether absent from the first books I encountered by Orthodox women written in English. To be fair, most of this writing was not fiction but a sort of confessional memoir style that I might have found repellent regardless of its substantive content. The essay collections of Frederica Matthews-Green and Angela Doll Carson’s memoir *Nearly Orthodox: On Being a Modern Woman in an Ancient Tradition* left me feeling hollow. These were not the spiritual reflections of complex creatures living in a complex world. These were the easy “born again” narratives of televangelists and football prayer breakfasts with incense and icons added to good effect. Nothing in what these women wrote resonated with me in the least.

Underwhelmed, I went seeking a novel or two. This is, after all, where our tradition has historically shone. Surely there must be something writ-

ten in my own country and my own language. A handful of Greek women, such as Mary Vardoulakis and Theano Papazoglou-Margaris, did write beautiful and telling prose fiction in the middle of the twentieth century. These women both offer depictions of the Greek-American experience as my grandparents would have known it, painting complex and fearless portraits of Greek-American women. They tell the truth—a truth that, as in reality, sometimes casts the Orthodox Church as malevolent in their characters’ lives. This refusal to flatter is most certainly what gives their work its power, but also makes it dangerous. Dangerous enough I suppose that they do not have any real contemporary heiresses. Perhaps in my own generation, Greek-American women as bold as Vardoulakis and Papazoglou-Margaris have simply left the Orthodox Church.

In the middle of this search I was passed a few novels written by American women who had converted to the Orthodox Church. First was a self-published book by Summer Kinard, *The Stone Pillow*. It is a “chaste” romance novel and so I suppose something that again I probably would not have enjoyed regardless of the source, but this was positively tedious. In *The Stone Pillow*, Ariadne, a successful medievalist who apparently needs to find the right man, is most insistently defined by her virginity. Which is reductive at best and, frankly—and I say this having spent ample time among academics—slightly unbelievable. It also erases from the novel any trace of the raw physicality that is part of life in this world. I was soon to find that *The Stone Pillow* was not alone. Two other books came into my possession around this same time, *Icon: A Novel* by Georgia Briggs (notably marketed as young adult literature), and Cheryl Anne Tug-

gle's *Lights on the Mountain: A Novel*. Why both women (or their publishers) felt the necessity to announce explicitly that their novels were, in fact, novels is a question on which I will not even begin to speculate. What I will speculate on, however, is why both were so terrible. Like Kinard, Briggs and Tuggle seem overly insistent upon repeating the rules to us all, instead of showing us how muddled those rules become in this world: Icons are not only holy, but sort of magical and do not forget it. Romantic love must be chaste and uncomplicated. Just pray a little harder.

"Touching" is a word that seems to fit all these novels. Which should probably tell us something. Touching is an adjective for greeting cards, not literature. Touching describes a painting by Thomas Kinkadee, not Caravaggio. What has marked Orthodox literature as great is that it has been decidedly not touching. I do not know that anyone else can be Tolstoy — nor do I hope many could approach his genius — but at a bare minimum I demand from my fiction some subtlety, to raise it above the level of a child's primer. None of these American Orthodox novels met even that most basic standard. Gone were the complex women. Gone the deep compassion for saints and sinners alike. Vanished a world that feels just like our own with respect to the moral landscape.

Leaving aside the vast treasures found in the literature of traditionally Orthodox cultures, these recent Orthodox authors have pulled nothing of the best of what American women, bathed in their local Protestant and Catholic cultures, have written. Where is the irony of O'Connor? The mystical wistfulness of Dickenson? The inquisitive observations of Dillard? The humanity of the American epic vision of Robinson? While it is only fair to pardon



Gwen John, *Dorelia by Lamplight, at Toulouse, 1903-4*.

these first-time authors the high level of artistic achievement attained by the women listed above, I cannot pardon them the flat moral vision they impose upon the world and the characters who abide it. And I had to wonder: why isn't the experience of Orthodox life inspiring a more complex worldview in the women who encounter it? I suspect I know why. Because the flat moralizing of these books is what has become of Orthodoxy in America in the first part of the twenty-first century. There is much to mourn about what has been lost as we have allowed ourselves to be dragged headlong into the tumultuous winds of the culture wars. The dumbing down of Orthodox discourse to a cheap "good versus evil" dichotomy better suited to cable news than real theological discourse is no small part of the problem. It is a worldview that, though fashionable, is certainly not in keeping with our tradition. Nor is it given to much in the

way of the cultivation of compassion. In fact, it is a paradigm that frequently engenders the opposite. For a simplistic god shares much in common with a cruel god, as do his simple-minded followers. And with such a simplistic god, why bother writing stories about a complex world filled with complex individuals? Such a god makes particularly cruel women. And it is a sort of cruelty (and a uniquely feminine one at that) to douse the world is syrupy sweetness, so that you need never wrestle with the complexities of life that do not fit into nice boxes. In no small part, this is because a saccharine world of simplistic right and wrong makes it very easy to be harsh with those you decide are wrong.

There are so few public spaces for Orthodox Christian women to occupy. Women, systematically excluded from the ranks of our ordained clergy, remain woefully underrepresented among our public intellectuals, our theologians, our thinkers, and our writers. Furthermore, women who wish to occupy any public space in the Orthodox world—in this new, hy-

per-moralizing Orthodox world—do so at personal risk. Spirited women do not fare well in the world of the publicly Orthodox. They also do so frequently with little institutional support, unless (always an unless) they are willing to tow the party line. You do not get a review on Ancient Faith unless you write without any of the moral ambiguity that made Tolstoy great (or Dickenson or O'Connor, for that matter). Such ambiguity is no longer permitted among us.

While women are frequently victims of this severity, they also join in being its enforcers. There is no courage in those novels I was passed, and so there is no truth. So this is a call for brave Orthodox Christian women to write fiction as Orthodox Christian women unbowed by the flat moralism and cruel judgement that has invaded our culture and our lives. I know, because all the world has seen it, that our tradition can write the most beautiful fiction. But only when we answer the better angels of our nature and not our worst inclinations. ✱



Katherine Kelaidis is a resident scholar at the National Hellenic Museum in Chicago. She is a professional historian, trained at the University of California at Berkeley and the University of London.