

Anna A. Berman, The Family Novel in Russia & England, 1800-1880. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. Appendix. Works Cited. Index. x + 262 pp.

As Anna A. Berman states at the very outset of the introduction to her new book, 'family is at the heart of the nineteenth-century novel' (1). If that sounds like a potentially obvious or normative claim, then there is nothing obvious or normative about Berman's analysis of more than one hundred novels written between 1800 and 1880 in Russia and England. If scholars of reception and translation have pointed to the creative impact of English literature on the Russian novel (and, slightly later, vice versa), then Berman takes a rather different tack. Rather than comparing the two traditions from the perspective of style, genre or psychology, she turns instead to aspects of 'law, social customs, inheritance and property rights, and domestic ideology' (1) in order to explain the different ways in which Russian and English authors emplotted the family narrative in fictional form. Despite the chronological range and thematic heterogeneity of texts under consideration, Berman's study proposes a simple and striking thesis, namely that 'the family can be conceived upon two axes' (2). The first of these is 'a vertical, diachronic axis', whereas the second is 'a lateral, synchronic axis' (2). The vertical axis, according to Berman, emphasises 'the family's movement through time, the succession of generations', whereas the lateral axis prefers to see the family as 'extending outward: from the nuclear core, to extended kin groups, to chosen kin' (2). As Berman demonstrates, the English novel's preference for linear, vertical chronology derives from the English legal system's commitment to primogeniture, 'with single sons carrying on their family names and estates' (3). It is a tradition in which happy endings seemingly prevail and marriage underpins a largely conservative social order dominated by the gentry and the bourgeoisie. By contrast, the absence of primogeniture in Russian law and its commitment to a 'partible model of inheritance' (20) meant that the emphasis fell on messier and more extended family structures, and the family itself was often treated as 'a backward institution [...] in desperate need of reform' (3). It wasn't just the Russian literary imagination itself that gave rise, in Henry James' famous formulation, to 'large loose baggy monsters with their queer elements of the accidental and the arbitrary'. It was the Russian family itself.

After a detailed theoretical and historical introduction, Berman structures her study as a series of expanding concentric rings that exemplify different ways of conceptualising family relations and social structures. The three chapters that make up Part I focus on consanguineal relations within the nuclear family itself, and in particular on the contrasting treatment of brotherhood in the English and Russian novel. Part II turns to 'the historical factors that shaped the marriage plot' (21), with three chapters devoted to ideas about gender roles, the nature of courtship, and a particular Russian interest in the shortcomings of marriage as an institution. The two chapters constituting Part III sets aside conventional understandings of the family to address alternative models of kinship that go beyond blood and marriage, embracing instead 'new kinds of family configurations' (23).

If Berman's overarching methodological claims lend her work its heuristic clarity, then her individual readings evince greater complexity and nuance. Alongside adroit and thoughtful readings of canonical family novels by Austin, Dickens and Trollope on the English side, and Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Turgenev on the Russian, there are discussions of less familiar authors, particularly women. If female novelists have long been central to the English novel and its reputation, then Berman – generously building on the work of earlier generations of pioneering feminist critics – continues the important task of restoring writers such as Khvoshchinskaya and Tur to the canon. Some of the most productive readings proposed by

Berman are those in which she draws on queer theory in order to arrive at a more complex and reflective understanding of relationship within and beyond the nuclear family. As she writes in her conclusion, 'the nineteenth-century family novel can be a conservative story of marriage and reproductive fertility, but it can also be a story of breaking with the past and embracing the messy and unfinalizable present' (233). It is, perhaps, this gently disruptive spirit that best characterises *The Family Novel in Russia & England, 1800-1800*. At a time when 'traditional values' are vigorously promoted by politicians around the globe and the nuclear family is vaunted as the essential building block of stable societies, Berman's study reminds us of the messy contingency of human relations and the power of fiction to allow us to imagine alternative ways of understanding what really constitutes fellow feeling.

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