



OXFORD JOURNALS
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Anna Karenina : Thought and Significance in a Great Creative Work

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Source: *The Cambridge Quarterly*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1965 - 1966), pp. 5-27

Published by: Oxford University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42964989>

Accessed: 04-02-2019 16:57 UTC

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Anna Karenina : Thought and Significance in a Great Creative Work

IN ADDRESSING the Cambridge University Slavonic Society I felt acutely conscious of the fact that I know no Russian. I have been assured, however, by those familiar with Tolstoy's use of the language that it would be a mistake, as a critic, to feel altogether disqualified by a dependence upon Aylmer Maude, and I have permitted myself to accept the assurance. The real formidableness of my undertaking is constituted by the magnitude of *Anna Karenina* — the greatness and the largeness; the greatness that entails largeness. There is a necessary point made in that last phrase; or not necessary, you may prefer to say, since it hardly needs making. It is the range and variety of human experience going with the depth and vividness in the rendering that one would point to and start to comment on if, having ventured (as one might) that *Anna Karenina* was the greatest of novels, one were challenged to give one's grounds for expecting assent. The triad, 'range', 'depth' and 'vividness', however, doesn't satisfy one as an intimation of the nature of the greatness; one is left looking for a way of conveying another essential emphasis, and this way doesn't immediately present itself — doesn't present itself at all if what one is looking for is a word, or a phrase, or even two or three sentences. The emphasis regards the nature of the concern for significance that characterizes this art — an art so unlike that of Henry James. The cue for this comparative reference is given by what James himself (in a letter to Hugh Walpole of 1913) said about Tolstoy:

Tolstoy and Doistoeffsky are fluid pudding, though not tasteless, because the amount of their own minds and souls in solution in the broth gives it savour and flavour, thanks to the strong, rank quality of their genius and their experience. But there are all sorts of things to be said of them, and in particular that we see how great a vice is their lack of composition and their defiance of economy and architecture.

It is 'him', of course, I'm concerned about; the 'them' and the 'their' are in any case unacceptable. The confident censure might seem astonishing, coming from so intelligent, and so intensely serious, a student of the novelist's art. When, writing in 1887, Arnold, having noted that there are 'many characters' in *Anna Karenina*, says 'too many, if we look in it for a work of art in which the action shall be vigorously one, and to that one action everything shall converge', and makes his intention plain by pronouncing that we are not to take Tolstoy's masterpiece as a work of art, but as a 'piece of life', we recognize the naïveté as inevitable in a critic of Arnold's education at that date (though *Little Dorrit*, *Great Expectations* and *Middlemarch* had appeared — as had also *Madame Bovary*, and the novels of Jane Austen). But James, who hadn't Public School Classics and Aristotle and Oxford behind him and didn't take it for an axiom that 'the crown of literature is poetry', is known for his concern to vindicate for the novelist's art its right to the fullest attention that sophisticated intelligence can devote to it. The explanation, of course, is what I pointed to in making the reference to James. The sense of the possibilities of the novel that informed his criticism was determined by his own creative preoccupations, and his conception of the art was personal and his own in a limiting way that (significantly for the criticism of his own achievement) he failed to realize: it is not without some implicit prompting from him that we are offered his collected Prefaces as 'the novelist's *vade-mecum*'. My concern in saying these obvious enough things is with the distinctive nature of Tolstoy's genius; I want to insist that the relation between art and life it exemplifies for us is the characteristic of the highest kind of creativity — a higher kind than James's. If Tolstoy gave no heed to any Jamesian canons it was not because he failed to give the most intelligent kind of attention to the demands of art. To confute James's critical censures and show what is the nature of the 'composition' that makes *Anna Karenina* superlatively a great work of art is to illustrate what D. H. Lawrence had in mind when he wrote:

The novel is a great discovery: far greater than Galileo's telescope or somebody else's wireless. The novel is the highest form of human expression so far attained.

It is a large claim, but Lawrence made it with full intention; he was not talking loosely. He was prepared to say that by the 'highest

form of human expression' he meant the highest form of thought, the thought in question necessarily being, for him, thought about the nature, the meaning and the essential problems of human life. He didn't the less, of course, think of the novel, whenever it should answer to his account, as supremely art. Thought, to come at all near truth and adequacy, must engage the whole man, and relate in a valid way — such a way, that is, as precludes and defeats the distorting effects of abstraction and selection (both inevitable) — all the diverse elements of experience.

The organization of *Anna Karenina* expresses an intense devotion of this kind to the pursuit of truth, and Lawrence might have had the book in front of him when he wrote: 'The novel is the highest form of subtle inter-relatedness that man has discovered.' It was a significant lack of responsiveness to the given devotion that enabled James to find *Anna Karenina* lacking in 'composition' and defiant of economy and architecture. His ability to use the word 'architecture' betrays the difference between the idea of 'art' that informs his own work and that implicit in Tolstoy's. A limited and clearly conceived interest determines the 'composition' and economy of a Jamesian novel. A firm plan, expressing a definitive and masterful purpose and excluding all that doesn't seem necessary in relation to this, determines the perfection that James aims at. An addiction to 'art' in this sense entails a severe limitation in regard to significance — to the nature of the significance the artist's concern for which is the principle of organization that controls his creating. James's significances are those which, in relation to each given enterprise, he can bring, he feels, into the critical consciousness for thorough analysis, discuss with himself exhaustively, and provide for in relation to firmly grasped criteria.

The relation of art to life in Tolstoy is such as to preclude this kind of narrowly provident economy. It is an immensely fuller and profounder involvement in life on the part of the artist, whose concern for significance in his art is the intense and focused expression of the questing after significance that characterizes him in his daily living. This, of course, amounts to saying that Tolstoy is a different kind of man from James — he is the kind of man the greatest kind of artist necessarily is. Tolstoy might very well have answered as Lawrence did when asked, not long before his death, what was the drive behind his creating: 'One writes out of one's moral sense; for the race, as it were.' 'Moral', of course, is an ambiguous word, but Lawrence was thinking of that manifesta-

tion of his own vitality of genius, the distinctive preoccupation with ultimate questions — those which concern the nature of one's deepest inner allegiances and determinations, the fundamental significances to be read in one's experience of life, the nature and conditions of 'fulfilment' (a word for what is to be sought that he finds more apt than 'happiness'). An artist of this kind will have strong didactic impulses. But it will be a certainly not less important characteristic of his to be, in the essential spirit of his art, intent on ensuring, with all its resources, that the didactic impulses shall not get out of hand.

'In a novel,' writes Lawrence, 'everything is relative to everything else, if that novel is art at all. There may be didactic bits, but they aren't the novel . . . There you have the greatness of the novel itself. It won't let you tell didactic lies and put them over.' What Tolstoy has to guard against is the intensity of his need for an 'answer'. For the concern for significance that is the principle of life in *Anna Karenina* is a deep spontaneous *lived* question, or quest. The temptation in wait for Tolstoy is to relax the tension, which, in being that of his integrity, is the vital tension of his art, by reducing the 'question' into one that *can* be answered — or, rather, to one a seemingly satisfying answer to which strongly solicits him; that is, to simplify the challenge life actually is for him and deny the complexity of his total knowledge and need.

While what makes itself felt as we read *Anna Karenina* is decidedly a positive or creative *nisus*, it affects us as an exploratory effort towards the definition of a norm. It necessarily, then, concerns itself everywhere — or is never long felt not to be concerning itself — with the relations between men and women: love in its varieties, marriage in its varieties, the meaning of marriage. The essential mode of the book carries with it the implication that there *could* be no simple statement of a real problem, or of any 'answer' worth having. It is the very antithesis of a didactic mode. The book says in effect, 'This is life' — which is a different thing from saying as Arnold does, 'It is not a work of art, but a piece of life.' The greatness of *Anna Karenina* lies in the degree to which, along with its depth, it justifies the clear suggestion it conveys of a representative comprehensiveness. The creative writer's way of arriving at and presenting general truths about life is that which Tolstoy exemplifies with such resource, such potency, and on such a scale, and there is none to replace or rival it. Only a

work of art can say with validity and force, as *Anna Karenina* does, 'This is life.'

There is of course a character in the book particularly close to Tolstoy himself — Levin; and, apart from biographical facts, we know this because Levin, we recognize, is the focus of what I have called the 'deep, spontaneous, lived question'. That, however, is not the same as saying that he *is* the author, the artist, directly present in the book; a point that can be enforced with the observation that Levin is *not* a great novelist. It is an essential difference. Taken together with the perceived intimacy of relation, it is important for the understanding of *Anna Karenina* as a great creative work, and it has its bearings (as I shall suggest) on the development of the author into the Count Leo Tolstoy who wrote *What then must we do?*, was tragically at odds with his wife, and died at Astapova railway station.

Levin, in fact, while being a great deal more besides, is the focal presence of the temptation (that essential element in the creative vitality). It is dramatized in him. Not that we think of him as a dramatized temptation — or tend to use the word at all (unless at the end of the book) in relation to him. The Constantine Levin whom we know with such intimacy is so much more than an earnest 'seeker', addicted to intense pertinacities of meditation on death, the meaning of life, and the behest (if only one could be sure what that was) of the living clear-sighted conscience. We have no difficulty in thinking of him as a Russian aristocrat, or believing that, different as he is from Vronsky and Oblonsky, he has had as such a normally 'immoral' past. It is as a matter of immediately acceptable fact that we see him finding Oblonsky, when he meets him at the club, a warmly *sympathique* old friend, and joining happily in the epicure-choice of an expensive meal. He is a paternal but businesslike landlord, a modernizing farmer, a writer on agricultural economy, and a sportsman with the proper pride of a first-class shot. We almost inevitably credit him with Tolstoy's own very knowledgeable delight, which the account of the steeplechase conveys so powerfully, in the functional and vital beauty of thoroughbred horses. When in the book he first encounters Kitty it is on a winter's day at the Zoological Gardens, where he has a reputation he proceeds to justify of being the 'best skater'.

And here, of course, in this episode of the drama of his relations with Kitty, we come to what, in a brief post-Arnoldian account of *Anna Karenina* as a closely-organized whole, would figure as the

essential main part that Levin plays in its significance — plays together with Kitty. Love, courtship and marriage: it seems reasonable to say, harking back to the word 'norm' as I used it earlier, that Kitty and Levin have, for that crucial matter of the relations between men and women, a clear normative significance — that they represent, at any rate, the especially clear affirming presence of the normative spirit that informs the whole work. They certainly provide a foil to Anna and Vronsky.

When, however, we think of the way the book closes we may very well draw back from suggesting that a confident normative prescription has, in sum, been offered. The strong deep current of Levin's meditating on life, death and the peasants moves, beyond question, towards consequences in regard to marriage that Kitty, if they should really threaten, couldn't do anything but fight. Nevertheless, the consequences lie outside *Anna Karenina*; and there is no sign that Tolstoy, the highly and subtly conscious artist, could have recognized the novel's significance as being anything but what the tragedy of Anna, implicitly commented on by the context in general and the Levin-Kitty theme in particular, conveys. Yet some inner prompting made him bring into the context, as the close of the whole organization, that quite other-than-clinching effect of Levin's later development.

It is a close in full keeping with the creative mode of the work; with the delicate wholeness of the 'sincerity' (the inverted commas a reminder that every great creative work compels us to reconsider the meaning of that word) with which Tolstoy pursues his aim of inducing life to propose and define the 'questions' — a process that is at the same time a conveying of such 'answers' as life may yield. There is in *Anna Karenina* no suggestion either of the controlled-experiment convention that the conditions of the theatre compelled upon Shakespeare for the treatment of his theme in *Measure for Measure* (where Angelo is the victim of a frankly contrived demonstration) or of the writing-up of findings and significances that forms the close of that play. Tolstoy, great creative power in the tradition of the novel that owes so much to Shakespeare, is great enough to vindicate, by showing it marvellously realized, the conception of the novel and of its supreme advantages I have adduced from Lawrence. That conception enforces the maxim: 'Art-speech is the only speech.' And by 'speech' Lawrence means the utterance of thought — thought of the anti-mathematical order.

It no doubt seemed to James as well as Arnold an instance of a characteristically large casualness in respect of form in *Anna Karenina* that the book, though committed to the two main actions (Arnold's phrase), each of which in Tolstoyan treatment entails a generous abundance — redundancy, for James — of wide-ranging specificity, should open, not with either, but with the trouble in the Oblonsky household. We, of course, see here the rightness and sure command of the great artist in terms of his own undertaking, and don't need explanations of the part played by the Oblonsky theme in relation to 'form' and significance. We aren't prompted to say that the 'normal' distinctively unideal and not happy married relations (though the marriage remains 'successful') between the goodnatured, life-loving and irresistible Stephen Oblonsky and the wholly admirable Dolly provides a third main action. But the theme nevertheless continues, through the book, to keep us reminded of itself and of its relevance to the main action. And, unmistakably of the first importance for the significance we are to have seen, at the close, in Anna's fate, there are the married relations of Anna and Karenin, which are evoked with such pregnant economy and, for the evaluative response of our deepest moral sense, our innermost sense for what ultimately and essentially offends against life and what makes for it, such decisive power.

It will be an economy at this point, the title-theme being in question, the significance of which depends on the reader's full sense of the Tolstoyan ethos of art, to make a brief use of Arnold. And it will bring out by the way the force of Lawrence's contention that the discovery of the novel was a great advance for human thought. For Arnold was a man of distinguished intelligence, who didn't in general tend to slight the importance of literature, its place and function in life. And of the sequel to the episode of the steeplechase and of Anna's avowal to Karenin of her relations with Vronsky he writes,

Hard at first, formal, cruel, thinking only of himself, Karénine, who, as I have said, has a conscience, is touched by grace at the moment when Anna's troubles reach their height. He returns to find her with a child just born to her and Vronsky, the lover in the house and Anna apparently dying. Karénine has words of kindness and forgiveness only. The

noble and victorious effort transfigures him, and all that her husband gains in the eyes of Anna, her lover Wronsky loses.

Having quoted from the painful scene at the bedside of the delirious Anna, Arnold goes on:

She seems dying, and Wronsky rushes out and shoots himself. And so, in a common novel, the story would end. Anna would die, Wronsky would commit suicide, Karénine would survive, in possession of our admiration and sympathy. But the story does not always end so in life: neither does it end so in Count Tolstoi's novel.

But not only does it not *end* so; we find ourselves exclaiming: 'But that is *not* the story!' 'Karénine has words of kindness and forgiveness only. The noble and victorious effort transfigures him' — who would divine from that the disturbing subtlety of the actual presentment? The state of feeling actually produced in us is very different from that which Arnold suggests with his 'in possession of our admiration and sympathy'. The way we take the scene, its moral and human significance for us, is conditioned by all that goes before, and this has established what Karenin is, what Anna is, and what, inexorably, the relations between them must be. We know him as, in the pejorative Laurentian sense, a purely 'social' being, ego-bound, self-important, without any spontaneity of life in him and unable to be anything but offended and made uncomfortable by spontaneity of life in others. This is conveyed to us, not by statement, but in innumerable ways: mode of speech, for instance — so rendered by Tolstoy as to give us the tone and inflection. The same subtle power has suggested the effect, even before her 'awakening' by Vronsky, on Anna.

It is the effect conveyed with something like violence when, back at Petersburg after that first fatal encounter with Vronsky, she is persuading herself that nothing has happened, that her profound sense to the contrary was an illusion, and that she has towards her husband the proper feelings of a wife:

He pressed her hand and again kissed it.

'After all, he is a good man: truthful, kind and remarkable in his own sphere,' said Anna to herself when she had returned to her room, as if defending him from someone who accused him and declared it was impossible to love him. 'But why do his ears stick out so? Or has he had his hair cut?'

In the scene of Anna's delirium (Part IV, Chapter XVII) this inner conflict takes on, when Karenin comes into the bedroom, a nightmare intensity, the disturbing power of which as Tolstoy evokes the scene it would take a long quotation to suggest: 'With one hand she held him, while with the other she thrust him away' — what is summarized there is a prolonged dramatic immediacy that keeps us in acute discomfort through several pages. The reader, even at the moment when Karenin seems most noble and most commands sympathy and Anna's self-abasement is deepest, can hardly falter in his certainty that revulsion from Karenin is basic and invincible in Anna.

As for the 'noble and victorious effort that transfigures him', when (as Arnold puts it), 'he is touched with grace', the effect of the episode on us, even before we know that this is the way his admirer and consoler, the Countess Ivanovna will put it, is so embarrassingly painful because it is so much more complex than such an account suggests. Karenin's inability to bear the spectacle of acute distress and suffering (especially, we have been told, in a woman) doesn't impress us as an unequivocal escape from the ego: that disconcerting fact is what, added to Vronsky's repellent and horribly convincing humiliation, makes the scene so atrociously unpleasant. And it is in place to note again that the question, 'What is sincerity?' represents for us, as we enquire into the organization and significance of *Anna Karenina*, a sense we recurrently have of the nature of the creative energy in Tolstoy's art. As for the way the later relation between the Countess Lydia Ivanovna and Karenin reflects back on Karenin's 'noble and victorious effort', that is a clear instance of the kind of significant 'relatedness' (Lawrence's word) that Arnold ignores.

We are in no doubt about how we are to take the Countess's 'spirituality' or 'pietism', and it is plain beyond all question that she establishes and confirms Karenin in his 'religious' nobleness, the refuge he finds from self-contempt, by playing on his egotism, his conceit, and his self-deceiving animus. I must add at once that, if we are disposed to come at all easily to general conclusions about the nature, according to Tolstoy, of ostensible saintly goodness — of states of being 'touched with grace' — we had better consider Madame Stahl and Varenka and the episode of Kitty's temporary 'conversion'. The discrimination between the three is firmly and finely made — done in dramatic presentation. That Madame Stahl's spirituality is bogus, a compensation for the denial of more direct

and ordinarily feminine self-satisfaction, becomes quite plain. Kitty's revulsion passes an unequivocal judgment on her own fit of dedicated Christian 'goodness': she recognizes that it wasn't sincere — that it falsified the reality of herself and was something to be ashamed of. 'I cannot live but by my own heart, but you', she says to Varenka, 'live by principle.'

But Varenka, Madame Stahl's companion and *protégée*, who herself has been disappointed in love, is really good. Yet — yet the whole affair of the proposal that didn't come off, Koznyshev's failure to decide ('Won't bite,' says the disappointed Kitty) and the relief felt by both of the mutually attracted pair as if they had escaped something, conveys a suggestion of critical reserves about both of them. What these amounted to we suspect that Tolstoy himself ('Never trust the artist, trust the tale') would not have been ready to say much about analytically. But we know well enough that we have an example of the characteristic significant organization of the book when, in the next chapter, the attitudes of Levin and his visiting half-brother, Koznyshev, towards the peasants are contrasted.

Had Constantine been asked whether he liked the peasants he would not have known what to answer. He both liked and disliked them, just as he liked and disliked all human beings.

Of Koznyshev, the intellectual, on the other hand, we are told that 'his methodical mind had formed definite views on the life of the people', and it is made plain to us that he likes the peasants on 'principle' (to use Kitty's word).

Constantine considered his brother to be a man of great intellect, noble in the highest sense of the word, and gifted with the power of working for the general welfare. But the older he grew and the more intimately he came to know his brother, the oftener the thought occurred to him that the power of working for the general welfare — a power of which he felt himself entirely destitute — was not a virtue but rather a lack of something, not a lack of kindly honesty and noble desires and tastes, but a lack of the power of living, of what is called heart . . .

— 'Heart' was Kitty's word.

We can't help relating the whole exploration of 'sincerity' in religion that we find in *Anna Karenina* with Levin's own religious

preoccupation — I am thinking in part of the way (there is an irony in it) in which the book leaves him identifying the idea of being 'good' with peasant-like Christian belief, inspired as he is by his intimate contacts with the peasants to feel, with that tense and pertinacious tentativeness of his, that he has almost grasped a saving certitude and prescription for his own use.

But to return to the main theme: whatever the old Leo (as Lawrence calls him) would have pronounced, the book confronts us with the impossibility, the sheer impossibility, of Anna's going on living with Karenin. How pregnant, and right (we feel), her diagnosis is when she says: 'If he had never heard people talk of love, he would never have wanted that word.' We too feel directly the revulsion she feels. The fact that we know the life-history that has made him like that doesn't make the revulsion less: *tout comprendre* is not *tout pardonner* — emotionally it can't be. Positive sympathy does indeed enter in for us, to render the full complexity of life in that marvellous way of Tolstoy's, when we suddenly have to realize that even in this repellently 'social' being the spontaneity can come to life, and something unquestionably real assert itself. There is the tenderness that takes him by surprise in his feelings towards the baby, Vronsky's child.

In that smile also Karenin thought he saw himself and his position ridiculed.

'Unfortunate child!' said the nurse, hushing the baby and continuing to walk up and down with it. Karenin sat down on a chair and with a look full of suffering and despondency watched the nurse as she paced the room. When the child was pacified and laid in her deep cot, and the nurse after smoothing the little pillow went away, Karenin rose, and stepping with difficulty on tiptoe approached the infant. For a moment he stood silent, regarding the child with the same despondent expression; but suddenly a smile, wrinkling the skin on his nose, came out on his face, and he quietly left the room.

He rang the bell in the dining-room and told the nurse to send for the doctor once more. He was vexed with his wife for not troubling about the charming baby . . .

But even if Anna had been aware of this development in Karenin, it could hardly have tended to make living with him seem less impossible. The stark fact of impossibility — that is immediate

and final and inescapable for her. No one who had been fully exposed to Tolstoy's evocation of life, to the work of his creative genius, could question it. To say that, however, is not to take D. H. Lawrence's line: 'No one in the world is anything but delighted when Vronsky gets Anna Karenina.' 'O come!' — that gives my own reaction as I read the opening sentences of Lawrence's commentary on the book. What he is recognizing, of course, is the impossibility of Karenin for Anna, and that it is in her relations with Vronsky that she has come to life. But he ignores all the tormenting complexity — the shame-feelings that Anna, inevitably, can't escape, her sense of guilt, her perception of irreconcilable contradictions, Vronsky's sense that the son (Karenin's), so dear to Anna, is a nuisance. Lawrence asks 'what about the sin?', and answers: 'Why, when you look at it, all the tragedy comes from Vronsky's and Anna's fear of society . . . They couldn't live in the pride of their sincere passion, and spit in Mother Grundy's eye. And that, that cowardice, was the real "sin". The novel makes it obvious, and knocks all old Leo's teeth out.'

It is astonishing that so marvellously perceptive a critic as Lawrence was could simplify in that way, with so distorting an effect. What the novel makes obvious is that, though they might live for a little in the 'pride of their passion', they couldn't settle down to live *on* it; it makes it plain that to live on it was in the nature of things impossible: to reduce the adverse conditions that defeated them to cowardice is to refuse to take what, with all the force of specificity and subtle truth to life, the novel actually gives. Anna, we are made to see, can't but feel (we are considering here an instance of the profound exploration of moral feeling enacted in the book) that, though Karenin is insufferable, she has done wrong. The dreadful contradiction is focused for her in Serezha, her son. It is given in the dream of hers in which he has two fathers. Further, what would be involved in getting her husband's necessary collaboration in the obtaining of a divorce is something that, for shame (nothing to do with Mrs. Grundy), she can't face. She shrinks from analysing the dreadful *impasse* that torments her, but we are made to share her state, and we know the meaning of the curious withdrawal and the knit look between the eyes with which she meets Vronsky's attempts to start a discussion of the necessary steps towards the divorce that will put everything on a decent footing ('We can't remain like this'). She doesn't want to think about it; at the upper level she can half believe she hopes,

but underneath she knows that there is no issue. He, not understanding, and, moreover, impatient, underneath, of the part played in her essential life by Serezha, inevitably senses in her an indocile force of perverse and dangerous will. This phase of paralysis they suffer, this being held up in a perversity of cross currents and undertows, is wonderfully done in the novel — done (it had to be in order to convey its significance) as something long drawn out.

Lawrence, in a letter of an appropriate date in his own life, writes that Frieda 'had carefully studied *Anna Karenina* in a sort of "How to be happy though livanted spirit"'. Whatever he may be implying as to the lesson that Frieda might have learnt, he is referring, of course, to Anna's finally going off undivorced with Vronsky, and to the absence of any cheering example of happiness so won. We don't, I have suggested with some confidence, accept Lawrence's account, implicitly given in the later-written passage on *Anna Karenina* I have quoted, of the reasons for the Russian Livanters having been decidedly, and in the end disastrously, *less* successful than he and Frieda. We can use the challenged comparison as a way of bringing out the significance of Anna's and Vronsky's case as Tolstoy's art evokes it.

Anna was not an amoral German aristocrat — that seems to me an obvious opening comment. Frieda didn't give up *her* children without some suffering (*Look! We Have Come Through*), but she got over that, and attained a floating indolence of well-being as, placidly undomesticated, she accompanied Lawrence about the world (we always see *him* doing the chores). There are delicacies in the way of offering to push further our divinations from such evidence concerning Frieda as we have, but we can see that what Tolstoy makes present to us in Anna is certainly something finer. Frieda's vitality and charm, in fact, have close affinities (she being as decidedly feminine as he is masculine) with those of Stephen Oblonsky — Stiva, Anna's brother, who 'can't believe that anything is wrong when it gives him so much enjoyment'. But the vitality that makes Anna's beauty irresistible manifests itself in a distinction of spirit that it is her brother's charm to be without. She has a delicate inner pride, a quick proud sense of responsibility towards life, that puts the easy accommodations of amoral 'realism' out of the question for her.

As for Vronsky, he is altogether unlike Lawrence. There is nothing of the artist in him. We are prompted to make the point in this way by the very fact that, in Italy, he tries to persuade

himself, with some success for a while, that he *is* one. If we ask why he, the aristocrat ex-Guardsman (to *be* a Guardsman being his vocation) should have cultivated that illusion, we find ourselves inquiring into the whole problem that Lawrence, with his too simple diagnosis, dismisses. Why aren't Vronsky and Anna happy in Italy? Why don't they settle down to their sense of a solved problem? They have no money troubles, and plenty of friends, and, if happiness eludes them, the explanation is *not* Mrs. Grundy or Society, at any rate in the simple way Lawrence suggests. All this part of the significance of *Anna Karenina* Lawrence ignores; he refuses (for I think it *is*, at bottom, that) to see the nature of the tragedy. And this is a serious charge, for the book gives the compelling constation of a truth about human life. The spontaneity and depth of Vronsky's and Anna's passion for one another may be admirable, but passion — love — can't itself, though going with estimable qualities in both parties, make a permanent relation. Vronsky, having given up his career and his ambition for love, *has* his love, but is very soon felt to give out (and it is marvellous how the great novelist's art conveys this) a vibration of restlessness and dissatisfaction.

Lawrence *was* an artist — superlatively one. The conditions of his life with Frieda were the reverse of uncongenial to that extraordinary, inexhaustible and endlessly inquiring intelligence of his. It ensured that he should never feel disorientated, vaguely lost, hanging in the wind. And yet — the point can't be made briefly with the proper delicacy — it is impossible (I think) not to feel that his work reveals a loss, a certain disablement, entailed by those conditions: the life of nomadic, childless, improvised, and essentially impermanent domesticities. Could he have written *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, written it as the vehicle of that didactic earnestness, if he hadn't lost his sense of what normal human life was like? The pamphlet, *Apropos of Lady Chatterley's Lover*, with which he followed the book up, implicitly admits the criticism — makes it; for the emphasis that, writing in ostensible vindication of the notorious novel, he now (with some inconsequence, one would think) lays on marriage and the family — and the whole manifesto is immensely impressive (it's a classic, I think) — can't but be taken by the reader as coming from a profound *corrective* impulse in Lawrence.

Vronsky's discovery of *his* vocation as an artist expresses merely his need of what, now he has left the army, he hasn't — a purpose,

a sense of function, a place in life, a meaning. What he takes for the artist's vocation is what Lawrence in his tales deals with so well, the vocation of 'being an artist', and the pages of *Anna Karenina* that expose the bogusness of that should have appealed to the author of *St. Mawr* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Vronsky is too much of a man to find the lasting satisfaction in it that Lawrence's gentlemen-pseudo-artists find, and the way in which the reality drops out of it for Vronsky is done with the insight and astringent power of a novelist who is himself a real and great artist. There are the contacts with Mikhaylov, the *ungentlemanly* and unurbane genius, whose discomfort — his embarrassment when expected to take Vronsky's vocation and its products seriously — comes painfully home to us but brings no enlightenment to Vronsky, though the experience has its effect. Vronsky can derive satisfaction from the reassuring flatteries and complacencies of his friends, but the impulse to work at his own portrait of Anna lapses after he has seen Mikhaylov's. The vocation of 'being an artist' lapses with it.

We then see Vronsky and Anna back in Russia. Vronsky is trying to find a place and meaning in life as a landowner and public-spirited local magnate. But the new vocation — its factitiousness is conveyed to us by means that brief quotation can't really suggest — is still not one that can give Vronsky what he lost when he left the army and the familiar milieu, the friends and comrades with whom he had lived in his old career.

And this is the point at which to say that *Anna Karenina*, exploring the nature of the moral sense and of sincerity, explores also, with an intimately associated subtlety, the relation between the individual *qua* locus of moral responsibility and his social context. It's all very well for Lawrence to talk of thumbing one's nose at society — that is what he says Vronsky should have done. *Anna Karenina* compels us to recognize how much less simple things are than Lawrence suggests. The book, in its preoccupation with the way — the ways — in which the individual moral sense is socially conditioned, leaves us for upshot nothing like a simple conclusion. We have in the treatment of this theme too the tentative, questing spirit. There is a good deal in the book that we can unhesitatingly take for ironic commentary on the way in which moral feeling tends to be 'social' in the pejorative sense; that is, to express not any individual's moral perception and judgment, but a social climate — to be a product of a kind of flank-rubbing. But on the other hand there is no encouragement given to think

of real moral judgment (and I have in mind Tolstoy's normative concern) as that of the isolated individual. It is necessarily individual, yes; but not merely individual. That, however, is no simple conclusion — which is what *Anna Karenina*, in its range and subtlety, makes so poignantly clear to us. A study of human nature is a study of social human nature, and the psychologist, sociologist and social historian aren't in it compared with the great novelists. Tolstoy's perception is infinitely fine and penetrating, and is inseparable from his sense of relatedness (Lawrence's term). You recall how Levin's, Vronsky's, Anna's, Oblonsky's sense of things — their sense that things are right or not right, in resonance or not with their moral feeling — changes with the shift from the familiar to the unfamiliar milieu: Moscow to Petersburg, town to country, one social world to another.

Levin feels sure of his judgment and his criteria only when he is at home on his estate, engaged in the duties and responsibilities and interests that are his real life. Vronsky, intense and serious as we know his passion for Anna to be, lapses naturally into the tone and ethic in which he has been brought up and that fit the society to which he belongs, when talking with his cousin, the Princess Betsy, at the Opera.

'And how you used to laugh at others!' continued the Princess Betsy, who took particular pleasure at following the progress of this passion. 'What has become of it all? You are caught, my dear fellow.'

'I wish for nothing better than to be caught,' replied Vronsky with his calm good-natured smile. 'To tell the truth, if I complain at all, it is only of not being caught enough. I am beginning to lose hope.'

'What hope can you have?' said Betsy, offended on her friend's behalf: '*entendons nous!*' But in her eyes little sparks twinkled which said she understood very well, and just as he did, what hope he might have.

'None whatever,' said Vronsky, laughing and showing his close-set teeth. 'Excuse me!' he added, taking from her hand the opera-glasses, and he set to work to scan across her bare shoulder the row of boxes opposite. 'I am afraid I am becoming ridiculous.'

He knew very well that he ran no risk of appearing ridiculous either in Betsy's eyes or in the eyes of Society

people generally. He knew very well that in their eyes the rôle of the disappointed lover of a maiden or any single woman might be ridiculous; but that the rôle of a man who was pursuing a married woman, and who made it the purpose of his life at all costs to draw her into adultery, was one which had in it something beautiful and dignified, and could never be ridiculous; so it was with a proud glad smile lurking under his moustache that he put down the opera-glasses and looked at his cousin.

Anna, after the fatal meeting with Vronsky in Moscow (where she had gone on her mission of reconciliation to the Oblonsky's), returns to Petersburg:

The feeling of causeless shame she had felt during the journey, and her agitation, had quite vanished. In her accustomed condition of life she again felt firm and blameless.

She thought with wonder of her state the day before. 'What had happened? Nothing! Vronsky said some silly things, to which it will be easy to put a stop, and I said what was necessary. It is unnecessary and impossible to speak of it to my husband.' She remembered how she had once told her husband about one of his subordinates who had very nearly made her a declaration, and how Karenin had answered that every woman living in society was liable to such things, but that he had full confidence in her tact and would never disgrace himself and her by being jealous. 'So there is no need to tell him! Besides, thank Heaven, there is nothing to tell!' she said to herself.

Anyone who has read the book can, in twenty minutes, find a dozen further examples, larger and smaller, of great diversity. Not that any suggestion emerges tending to qualify personal responsibility. A normative search after the social conditions the individual needs for happiness, or fulfilment, and for the individual responsive moral sense that serves it — that is the preoccupation. Vronsky, in the country-gentleman phase, for all the impressive outward show, has found neither the vocation nor the social context that can restore his sense of purpose in life or of rightness. Anna knows this, and even if she weren't tormented by yearning for her son, it would make an established happiness with Vronsky impossible. Her response is to be jealous, and her jealousy has the inevitable effect on him: it makes him feel cramped and

tethered. The terrible logic or dialectic moves, like an accelerating mechanism, to the catastrophe.

'Vengeance is mine; I will repay' — we remember Tolstoy's epigraph. And there is Karenin's own orthodox formulation, 'Our lives are bound together not by men but by God,' which closes in terms that come to have meaning for Anna: 'that kind of crime brings its punishment.' All the book is a feeling out, and a feeling inwards, for an adequate sense of the nature of life and its implicit laws, to break which entails the penalty. And to say this is not to pass any naïve moralistic judgment on Anna — any simple moral judgment such as was made either by Lawrence ('sincere passion') or by the old Leo.

The significance is brought out by the contrasting Levin case-history. Does Tolstoy, or the 'tale', offer this as presenting the 'norm'? Not quite that; the case-history — the case — is not so clear or conclusive. *Anna Karenina* is a work of art, and Levin (who, of course, compels our full respect) is in it the self-distrusting, ever-exploring 'seeker'. He is after happiness — as is also (we may add here, by way of noting the characteristic play of contrast) Oblonsky — which prompts us to substitute the word 'fulfilment' when thinking of Levin. For Levin marriage is a matter of love, and love of marriage. Involved in his problems of farming, religion and relations with the peasants, he knows that (as Agatha Mikhaylovna tells him) he needs a wife, but we are in no doubt that it is love — the kind into which one falls — that in due course unites him and Kitty.

We are left with *him* as the book closes. And if, as we share his sense of what are the great problems, we seem very close to the author, we note also that Levin is content for the time being with some inconsistencies (he feels them to be) and a certain tentativeness. His sense of problems to be solved focuses on the one hand (in terms of social responsibility) on the peasants, and on the other on his own need of religious belief. Or can we say that the peasants have become, at the close of the book, something like a comprehensive focus? He is still troubled by the problem of the right relations with them. But there is now a very much strengthened tendency to associate the solution of that problem in an ominous way with the solution of what, for Levin, must surely be a very different problem — that of the good life. An ominous way? — there is a clear intimation that, as Levin broods, he finds himself identifying them: the problems seem merging into one.

The solution is to live with the peasants, to be a peasant among peasants. His problem of 'belief' (associated with his intense inner response to the fact of death¹ — we don't forget the grim evocation of the dying Nicholas, his brother) he sees as to be solved by his achieving the naïve 'belief' of the peasants. And this, in a curiously simple way, he identifies with being 'good'.

My summary has, as of course any summary of theme and significance in *Anna Karenina* must have, an effect of grossness from which one shrinks. The actual creative presentment is infinitely subtle, and comes as the upshot of an immense deal of immediately relevant drama and suggestion in the foregoing mass of the book. For example, I will point to chapters XI and XII in Part III, which give us Levin's visit, while still a bachelor, to his sister's village in order to look after farming interests of hers that need attention. He suspects that the peasants are cheating her over the hay harvest, and it turns out that his suspicions are well founded. Nevertheless, that matter settled, the deceits and grudges are forgotten, and he finds himself contemplating the peasants with warm idealising sympathy as they cart the hay. The power of the episode depends upon a kind of sustained and typically Tolstoyan poetic life such as I had very much in mind when I spoke of what Tolstoy must lose in translation. This, with some cuts, is a passage of it:

Levin had often admired that kind of life, had often admired the folk who lived it; but that day, especially after what he had seen for the first time of the relations between Vanka Parmenich and his young wife, it struck him that it depended on himself to change his wearisome, idle and artificial personal life for that pure delightful life of common toil.

The old man who had been sitting beside him had long since gone home . . . Levin . . . still lay on the haycock, looking, listening and thinking. The peasants who were staying in the meadow kept awake almost all the short summer night . . . The whole long day of toil had left upon them no trace of anything but merriment.

Just before dawn all became silent. The sounds of night —

1. 'If you once realize that tomorrow, if not today, you will die and nothing will be left of you, everything becomes insignificant.' See the whole context, Part IV, chapter VII.

the ceaseless croaking of frogs, the snorting of horses through the morning mist over the meadow — could alone be heard. Awaking to reality, Levin rose from his haycock, and glancing up at the stars, realized that the night was nearly over.

Well, then, what shall I do? How shall I do it? he asked himself, trying to find expression for what he had been thinking and the feelings he had lived through in that short night. All his ideas and feelings separated themselves into three different lines of thought. The first was, how to renounce his old life and discard his quite useless education. This renunciation would afford him pleasure and was quite easy and simple. The second was concerned with his notion of the life he now wanted to lead. He was distinctly conscious of the simplicity, purity and rightness of that life, and convinced that in it he would find satisfaction, peace and dignity, the absence of which was so painful to him. But the third thought was the question of how to make the change from his present life to that other one . . . Should he have a wife? . . . 'but I'll clear it up later. One thing is certain: this night has decided my fate. All my former dreams of a family life were nonsense — not the right thing. Everything is much simpler and better than that . . .'

'How beautiful!' he thought, looking up at a strange mother-of-pearl-coloured shell formed of fleecy clouds, in the centre of the sky just above his head. 'How lovely everything is, this lovely night! And how did the shell get formed so quickly? A little while ago when I looked at the sky all was clear, but for two white strips. My views of life have changed in the same unnoticeable way.'

Leaving the meadow, he went down the high road towards the village.

He hears wheels and bells, and a coach comes by. In it, looking out as she wakes up, he sees Kitty. 'She recognized him, and joyful surprise lit up his face.'

This is before his marriage; it is in the period of disappointed love, and the last sentence makes the dawn for him, suddenly, that of a new hope. The hope proves no vain one, and in the close of the book, when the brooding on peasant-faith as a personal solution recurs, and so insistently, the dream he had dismissed as foolish has been achieved: Kitty is his wife, and they have a family. He

doesn't say now that the dream was all nonsense. The assurance of an inner peace, a firm possession to be won of the saving truth, if only he can take the decision and put it into effect, has for context the incongruous preoccupations of family life, enlightened farming, his own developed interests as one of the intelligentsia, and the intellectual talk of his half-brother Koznyshev and Katavasov about Pan-Slavism. But the suggestion on which the novel ends is that the assurance, the half-grasped faith, is henceforward to be the central reality of Levin's life.

And the cogent force of the whole great work makes it plain that the answer he threatens to commit himself to with all the force of his will is a desperately simplifying one; that is, not an answer at all — unless a rejection of life is an answer. Levin's peasant solution gets no countenance from the preceding book; quite the reverse. I will allow myself a final extract, from a passage (Part III chapter XXX) that gives something like a summary, or paradigm, of the refutation conveyed by the novel as a whole. Agatha Mikhaylovna, Levin's old nurse, is the maternal ideal-peasant housekeeper of his bachelor establishment.

Having written for some time, Levin suddenly with particular vividness remembered Kitty, her refusal, and their last meeting. He rose and began to pace up and down the room.

'What is the use of fretting?' said Agatha Mikhaylovna. 'You should go to a watering-place now that you have got ready.'

'So I shall: I am going the day after tomorrow, Agatha Mikhaylovna, only I must finish my business.'

'Eh, what is your business? Have you not done enough for the peasants as it is! Why, they are saying, "Your master will get a reward from the Tsar for it!" And it is strange: why should you bother about the peasants?'

'I am not bothering about them: I am doing it for myself.'

Agatha Mikhaylovna knew all the details of Levin's farming plans . . . But this time she quite misunderstood what he said.

'Of course one must think of one's soul before everything else,' she remarked with a sigh. 'There was Parfen Denisich, who was no scholar at all, but may God grant everyone to die as he did!' she said, referring to a servant who had died recently: 'He received Holy Communion and Extreme Unction.'

'I am not speaking about that,' he said, 'I mean that I am doing it for my own profit. My gains are bigger when the peasants work better.'

'But, whatever you do, an idler will always bungle. If he has a conscience he will work, if not, you can do nothing with him.'

'But you yourself say that Ivan looks after the cattle better now.'

'I only say,' answered Agatha Mikhaylovna, evidently not speaking at random, but with strict sequence of thought, 'you must marry, that is all!'

She herself may be said to represent peasant wisdom — anti-intellectual sanity, and profundity of intuitive insight and judgment. Her view of the peasants has incomparably more authority than Levin's. The disconcerting felicity of her 'you must marry, that is all' has for context something like a comprehensive insight into Levin's complexities of preoccupation — the passage makes that plain enough. 'Of course, one must think of one's soul before anything else.' — Of course, and Parfen's end was edifying; but when one says that, how much is said, peasant-life and reality being the question? She knows that any peasant would, with complete conviction, prescribe as she does — realizing with her what responsibilities, not to be shed, marriage would entail upon Levin. In so far as she glimpses Levin's religious-social ideas as they relate to the peasants, she knows that the peasants themselves would deride them. And it is impossible to believe that Tolstoy in writing this chapter had any sense of dissociation from *her* knowledge — that it wasn't for him at the same time his own. But Levin, married to the admirable Kitty, now the mother of his child, is shown once more cultivating a resolution that denies such knowledge — or defies it.

We may tell ourselves that he is merely a character in the book, and that the book makes its implicit comment on Levin. The significance of the book is what is conveyed by the whole, and the suggestion of the whole doesn't in the least encourage us to think of Levin as anything but ill-judging, ill-inspired, and in for disillusionment. With the advantage of hindsight, however, we can see that the breakdown of Tolstoy into the old Leo is here portended.

The later Tolstoy — a significant consistency, if you like —

refused to see anything impressive in *Anna Karenina*. 'What difficulty is there,' he said, 'in writing how an officer fell in love with a married woman? There is no difficulty in it, and, above all, there is no good in it.' But we, most of us, have to recognize a higher authority in the art, the creative power, of *Anna Karenina* than in the wisdom of the sage and prophet. The later Tolstoy — the prophetic and tragic Tolstoy — insisted on a simple answer.

Anna Karenina one of the great European novels? — it is, surely, the European novel. The completeness with which Tolstoy, with his genius, was a Russian of his time made him an incomparably representative European, and made the book into which his whole experience, his most comprehensive 'relatedness', went what it is for us: the great novel of modern — of our — civilization. The backwardness of Russia meant that the transcendent genius experienced to the full, taking their significances with personal intensity, the changes that have produced our modern world. In a country in which serfdom has been recently abolished, the characters of *Anna Karenina* travel as a matter of course by railway between the two capitals. The patriarchal landowner participates in a cosmopolitan culture, and, using French and English in intercourse with members of his own class, is intellectually nourished on the contemporary literature and thought of the West. Anna herself, having had at the outset of the book the shock of the fatal accident that marks her arrival at Moscow, ends her life under the iron wheels. The apparition of the little peasant with the sack who horrifies her, and is so oddly associated with the wheels and the rails, acts on our imagination as a pregnant symbol and a sinister augury (he is seen, too, later in a nightmare by Vronsky).¹ The disharmonies, contrasts and contradictions are challenging in a way that makes the optimisms of Progress impossible for Tolstoy — as the inability of Levin, the earnest and public-spirited, to see a duty in Zemstvo-attendance very characteristically intimates. *Anna Karenina*, in its human centrality, gives us modern man; Tolstoy's essential problems, moral and spiritual, are ours.

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¹See Part IV, chapter III. And see also Part III, chapter IV.