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THE IMAGE OF THE RAILROAD IN *ANNA KARENINA*

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The motif of the railroad recurs so frequently in Lev Tolstoj's *Anna Karenina* that the conclusion that it is somehow integral to a full understanding of the novel is inescapable. According to a recent study the railroad is mentioned at least thirty-two times in the book,[1] and every reader will remember that Anna and Vronskij first meet at a railway station, that Levin intensely dislikes the railroad, and that Anna commits suicide by leaping under a train.[2]

M. S. Al'tman once asked why Anna, having decided to do away with herself, should have selected such a gruesome method. The question is flippant only in its formulation, and a great deal of scholarly effort has been devoted to answering it. A searching of the extensive biographical data on Tolstoj has amply attested his personal aversion for the railroad. He wrote Turgenev in 1857 that "the railroad is to travel as a whore is to love,"[3] and it is known that he was discomfited to the point of nausea by the swaying of railway carriages. These facts provide a credible physiological basis for the standard, although not unanimous,[4] Soviet view that Levin's dyspeptic attitude toward the railroad is the correlative of Tolstoj's, that the highly autobiographical Levin was expressing Tolstoj's belief that the railroad served only to pander to and further inflame the already monstrous appetite of the idle and privileged for foreign luxuries, and that this belief overlies their mutual resentment of the forces tending to displace the landholding nobility from its position of inherited privilege: forces which the railroad is said to symbolize. The railroad is present in the novel so that it can be attacked, and this is precisely what Levin does in the book which he writes about contemporary Russian life.[5] There is an indubitable measure of truth in this understanding of the railway motif. It does account for Levin's view of the railroad and it is also true that for him the railroad symbolizes forces harmful to the traditional style of life of

the class of which he is "proud to count himself a member." It does not, however, account for the frequency of the railroad's appearance or shed much light on its significance in terms of the numerous other characters with whom it is associated.

Western criticism has looked into the matter from rather more diverse perspectives. It has, for example, been shown that the railway motif is a crucially important factor in the architechtonics of the novel. Anna's first appearance is at a railway station, as is her last. The last scene in which Anna is the center of attention (albeit posthumously) is also set at a railway station and includes, except for Anna herself, the same participants as the first scene in which she appears. The numerous details of this type make it possible to argue persuasively that the major railway scenes are the "pillars" supporting the structure of the novel as a whole.[6] As to the thematic significance of the railway motif—what the image means as opposed to what it does—Western criticism has offered a wide variety of conjectures.[7]

This multiplicity indicates that the railroad in *Anna Karenina* has proven to be a diversely suggestive image which augments the understanding of the novel in various and sometimes even contradictory ways.[8] One should, perhaps, expect no less in dealing with an artist of Tolstoj's stature and gift for pluralism. At the same time, however, his predilection for the monistic should not be forgotten, and the aesthetic satisfaction which the book indubitably provides could be better understood if it were possible to find a referent for the image which underlies and organizes its evidently diverse evocative potential. This paper will argue that a unifying referent of this type is discoverable in the novel, that it is capable of suggesting a variety of emotional and interpretive responses, and that it provides a common ground for the ordering and understanding of these responses, much as the railroad itself functions physically in the novel to connect the various characters and settings one to another. The railroad is a multi-faceted vehicle of meaning which is not only central to the organizational plan of the novel but also provides a nexus linking its various thematic lines as well.

The railroad has been variously described as signifying death, illicit passion, upper-class society, and the power of public opinion, as well as the brute intrusion of the modern into a traditional way of life. None of these suggestions can be dismissed out of hand for there is for each of them some basis in the text; the most familiar are the ideas that the railroad suggests death or is a symbolic correlative of upper-class society. These interpretations may be harmonized to the extent that the tonal function of the image in all of them is to suggest the negative, the destructive, the evil, and the powerful. The impression of a strong

textual basis for seeing the image in this uniformly dark light is easily given; it seems, indeed, to "form itself." It is, nonetheless, an impression which relies upon a certain selectivity in the accumulation of the relevant data from the text. There is, of course, no interpretation of which this could not be said, but the exclusions in this case seem particularly striking. First, on at least two occasions, the railroad is mentioned in the context of children and their games (I, 3; VII, 19; AK, 7, 658).[9] The disposition to regard children as the representatives of innocence, naturalness, and purity is as obvious in *Anna Karenina* as it is everywhere else in Tolstoj, so that it seems odd that so negative an image as the railroad has been alleged to be is specifically associated with them. There are, to be sure, complicating factors. In one passage the children's game is part of the context of a distraught household and in the other it is noted that Sereža is no longer completely "innocent." Second, Stiva Oblonskij is closely associated with the railroad. Not only is he a frequent traveller from one *locus* of the story to another by train, but, later in the novel, he even obtains a post in an agency having to do with the operation of the railways. This may seem only natural since Stiva is part of, perhaps even the epitome of, that upper-class society whose evil ways are said by Levin to be so intimately dependent on the railroad. It nevertheless remains true that it is difficult to regard Stiva himself as an evil person. He is made out to be a relatively attractive character in general (and certainly by contrast to others who occupy a similar moral and social station—for example, Princess Betsy), and even the hypercritical Levin calls him friend and loves him. Third, in the scene which develops the image most fully (Anna's return from Moscow to St. Petersburg; I, 29), the railroad is shown to possess some attractive characteristics, notably warmth and security, especially as compared to the chaotically tempestuous conditions raging outside the carriage in which Anna is riding.

The idea that the main function of the railroad is to suggest or symbolize death in general may also be criticized on grounds specific to itself for, in fact, the railroad is the agent only of Anna's death. Many characters in the novel are associated in one way or another with the railroad, but only Anna perishes. That the railroad symbolizes upper-class society also seems, upon examination, to be problematical. Logic leads to the conclusion that Anna was killed by (or, more accurately, made herself the victim of) upper-class society, but, as has often been noted, the novel contains many representatives of that very sector of society who, in the morally objective sense, conduct themselves in the same manner as Anna with Vronskij and yet suffer no ill effects therefrom. Stiva Oblonskij, as we have seen, is even portrayed as attractive

rather than repellent. It has been argued that there is a qualitative difference between Anna and these other characters which explains why her fate is different from theirs. This difference is said to reside in Anna's much greater genuineness and sincerity as opposed to the hypocrisy and conventionalism of the other characters.[10] If this very cogent idea is applied only in the moral sphere, however, it leads to a fragmentation of the novel's unity. The different fates of the various characters must then be seen as the result of individual differences, as a simple capturing of the diversity of reality without any attempt at finding an underlying unity in the understanding of that reality on a conceptual level; while not unthinkable, this would, at least, be unlikely from the point of view of Tolstoj's usual practice. Moreover, if this principle is applied to the overtly parallel stories of Anna and Levin, we are left with a novel in which the two central characters are after all simply different types, involved in different stories, and the links between them (for example, their similar experiences,[11] the slow growth in Levin from his absolute aversion to "fallen women" to his ultimate attraction to Anna) are a failed attempt to unify two stories that are in fact comparable only as opposite poles of the moral compass. The contrast between them becomes evident, but there seem to be no solid grounds for comparison. The novel is not one story with two facets, but two stories connected rather crudely at a single moral interface. Criticism has tended to resist this conclusion, but it seems inevitable in the light of the reasoning just presented.

The difficulties inherent in the interpretation of the railroad as an image of the Russian high society of the time may be overcome by taking the railroad to represent instead the much broader concept of the social aspect of human existence. The railroad is not, after all, uniformly identified with any particular sector of society in the novel, the remarks to the contrary in Levin's book notwithstanding. At the very first appearance of an actual train in the novel (Anna's arrival in Moscow; I, 17) the disembarking passengers demonstrate that the railroad is not the exclusive preserve of the idle rich: a guards officer, a merchant, and a peasant are the first to descend (AK, 55). In addition, the railroad is the connecting link among all the various particular societies presented in the novel: Moscow, St. Petersburg, Levin's estate, the German spa, Italy, Vronskij's estate, and so forth.[12] Each of these individual societies is developed in some detail and discussed as to its workings, for example, the enumeration and description of the various subdivisions of Petersburg society in II, 4 (AK, 115). This close attention to the structure and operation of various concrete social entities suggests that all human activity presupposes a social framework, that the social is an integral

and necessary adjunct to the individual. The railroad, as the physical link among the various societies, is an eminently suitable means for the representation of the generalized or abstract link among them also.

If the railroad is the image of the concept of the social, it is no surprise to find that the novel's most social character, Stiva Oblonskij, who is specifically stated to have friends at every level of society and who is at home in any social context (I, 5; AK, 15), is also the character most closely associated with the railroad. He shares with the railroad the operative function of connecting the various social *loci* of the novel (for example, Moscow and Levin's estate, when he goes to sell his wife's forest land [II, 14; AK, 145], Moscow and Petersburg, when he goes to plead Anna's case for divorce to Karenin [VII, 18; AK, 654]). He is present at both the first railway scene and the last (Vronskij's departure for the Balkans; VIII, 2; AK, 701). He is the witness of both episodes involving the children's game of "Railroad." Finally, as though realizing his metaphorical function, he seeks and finally obtains a post in an agency which superintends the operation of the railways.

This interpretation of the railroad image and Stiva's close connection with it explains the anomaly of his belonging to upper-class society and yet remaining relatively free from the stigma of his membership therein. In the same way the association of the children with the railroad may be explained. The railroad, as the symbol of the social, represents a morally neutral force which is the foundation of all actual societies. Particular social groups may, on the whole, be morally better or worse, and, from Levin's point of view, a dependence on the railroad does signify moral laxity. At the same time, however, the railroad is connected to the broader concept of the social in general, and in this respect its function is to illustrate rather than to condemn.

Princess Betsy and her coterie are clearly no more than targets for Tolstoj's invective against the moral shortcomings of a particular social entity. Stiva's function is more broadly conceived. Through the railroad he is associated with the general concept of the social and he thus escapes, in some measure, the opprobrium heaped upon the others even though his conduct is not, in the objective sense, far different from theirs. Turning to the children, it would seem that in their game of "Railroad" they become familiar with the pressure of the social.[13] As they mature, they gradually leave the spontaneous, self-centered, and natural world of childhood and begin to contend with the inevitable constraints of the social. Thus, although the naturalness and spontaneity of the children is highly attractive, it is also not destined to be fully developed by the adult. Anna, who attempts to indulge the individual, spontaneous, and natural force within her, perishes beneath the train.

Several particular qualities of the "social" are suggested by the use of the railroad as its sign. First, the social involves rules and orderliness as suggested by the tracks along which the train must run and in the mechanical (that is, also, logical) nature of the object. Second, the social is an inevitable part of life. In the children's game passengers are not allowed to sit on top of the train. All must remain inside because it is too dangerous for the passengers to take a position outside the train. If they attempt to ride on top of the train (that is, to be above society) they will surely end by being crushed beneath it, as, in fact, the fate of Anna demonstrates. It seems to be a case of acceptance of the social or death. Third, the social is a powerful force, as suggested by the earth-shaking strength of the engine and the great speed of the train. Fourth, it must be remembered that the social also has its attractive features. These are suggested by the warmth, comfort, and security inside the carriage on Anna's return journey to Petersburg in I, 29 (AK, 91 ff.). These are especially emphasized by contrast with the cold and howling winds of the storm outside. Furthermore, the interior of the train is associated with the idyll of conventional happiness represented by the novel of English life which Anna reads in the carriage. Fifth, despite (or perhaps because of) its attractions, the social is also clearly shown to be an affront to the individual. This is suggesed by the fact that in the children's game the passengers in fact want to leave the train, to be above it by riding on its top. Anna, too, experiences this sensation. She finds the interior of the train not only warm, but hot; not only secure, but stifling. Ultimately, in Anna's case at least, the train is the agent of the extinction of the individual: having left the train for good in response to the demands of the individual, she ends by being crushed beneath it.

The passage in which Anna's return journey from Moscow to Petersburg is described (I, 29-30) is the most extended appearance of the railroad in the novel and provides the clearest model of that conflict between the social and the individual with which the image of the railroad is at a deep level connected. Beyond the interior security of the carriage lies an exterior setting which is fraught with discomfort and danger. A winter storm is raging; its foremost characterisitcs are cold, snow, and a driving, howling wind. The natural (the exterior) is contrasted to the artificial (the interior of the train), and, it is important to note, the natural not in its benevolent aspect but wild, uncontrolled, and dangerous. This exterior setting surrounds the first open acknowledgment of the developing illicit passion between Vronskij and Anna. Thus, there is a pointed contrast between the conventional but somewhat tedious marital happiness presented in the English novel which Anna reads in the carriage and which is associated with the comfort and

security of the train's interior and the illicit passion between Anna and Vronskij which develops in the context of the exhilarating danger of the storm and wind.

The wind is the most significant detail of the exterior setting. Immediately following Vronskij's statement of his love for Anna, the text continues: "At that moment the wind, as if it had mastered all obstacles, scattered the snow from the carriage roofs . . . The awfulness of the storm appeared still more beautiful to [Anna] now. He had said just what her soul desired but her reason dreaded." (I, 30; AK, 94). The passage is replete with paradoxical contrasts. The interior of the train is comfortable yet somehow repellent, the exterior is awful but attractive (as shown by Anna's resting her forehead against the cold glass of the carriage window), and these conflicting feelings are bound up with the clearly divided nature of Anna herself: what her soul desires, her reason dreads.[14]

The passage does not suggest that Anna's passion for Vronskij is illicit because it is morally wrong (although there can be no doubt that Tolstoj believed such a passion to be morally wrong), but rather because it is carried on outside of and in defiance of the social. Anna is very quick to realize this as a fact (although not, perhaps, with all its attendant implications) when she tells Vronskij following the consummation of their passion that he is now all that she has (II, 11; AK, 136). She does not at this moment say that she has committed a moral wrong (although she will say this as the novel progresses). Rather, she portrays herself as having forsaken all else, retaining only Vronskij. She has severed her connection with her society, and, on the deep thematic level, she has rejected the claims of the social in favor of the gratification of her individual passion. Her eventual decline and death are clearly and proportionally related to her growing conviction that Vronskij, the single element of the social remaining to her, is tempted to abandon her. Anna's increasing jealousy and possessiveness toward Vronskij are not simply a function of madness. Rather, they signify a recognition of reality: the impossibility of life's continuance in conditions of complete isolation from the general context of the social.

In the scene of her return to Petersburg, Anna's passion is also associated with her often-mentioned characteristic of animation or fullness of life (*oživlennosť*) which had been described as being kept under control and whose presence is bespoken by such superficial characteristics as the recalcitrant curl which continually escapes her coiffure, her shining eyes masked by their heavy lids, and her peculiar, involuntary smile. It is suggested that Anna's suppression of this fullness of life is connected with the feeling of being stifled which she experiences in the

railway carriage. Anna's egress from the train suggests a desire to liberate her suppressed sense of the fullness of life, thus explaining the attractiveness of the seemingly unpleasant exterior conditions. The discomfort and danger outside the train go unnoticed by Anna in her hunger for individuality, spontaneity, and unreasoning, natural, passionate action.

Apparently, then, the passage suggests that this highly attractive quality and desire must be, at least to some extent, sacrificed or controlled in order to remain within the train, that is, within the pale of the social, for its full release begins only when the train has been abandoned. The social appears as an insuperable obstacle to the full and gratifying manifestation of fullness of life which Anna desires. Her passion, like the "wind which mastered all obstacles," is the means of this gratification.

The railroad, then, seems to be an image which is fully capable of supporting the various interpretations which it has evoked. It is connected to Anna's passion and her death; it is bound up with the nature of the particular society in which she lived; but at the hub from which these interpretations diverge and by which they are organized is the railroad as the representation of the requirements and privileges of the social in the context of the thematic exploration of the conflict between the desires of the individual and the restrictions placed upon the gratification of those desires by the social. At this basic level *Anna Karenina* is concerned with the representation of a universal human dilemma which is primarily metaphysical and only secondarily moral in its nature. The human being, in the terms of the novel, must live perpetually in the space between the Charybdis of an inescapable (determined) fate as a social being, with its danger of the ignominious loss of individuality and dignity in the swirling whirlpool of social convention and respectability, and the Scylla of unrestrained gratification of the spontaneous ego, of freedom, and of exalted individual worth, with its attendant dangers, discomforts, and ultimate and inevitable disaster. Thus, Anna truly is, as she says again and again, both guilty and yet not to blame. She is the tragic victim of human nature which calls both for the unhindered expression of the individual and the antithetical acknowledgment of the ultimate dependence of the individual upon the social.[15]

The strength of this interpretation of the railroad in *Anna Karenina* is that it allows for the harmonious coexistence of both the attractive and the unattractive characteristics with which the image is endowed in the novel and that it is capable of expressing in some detail that which it represents. As is so often the case with Tolstoj's major images (the sky in *War and Peace,* the black bag in *The Death of Ivan*

Il'ič, the snowstorm in *Master and Man,* the races in *Anna Karenina* itself), here again the motif is almost allegorically suited to that which it represents and at the same time is capable of evoking a variety of related responses and intuitions arising from its vivid realization as an object of natural experience in the novel. Thus, despite the neatness and artificiality which seem to inform Tolstoj's major images when they are subjected to an analysis such as that attempted here, they retain the quality of true symbols, signposts on the writer's actual arduous way to the truth and not mere reductive allegories of his journey. In 1853 Tolstoj wrote in his diary that "Reading a composition, and especially a purely literary one, the main interest is to be found in the character of the author as it expresses itself in the composition. Sometimes the author makes an open affectation of his view . . . [but] the best compositions are those in which the author, as it were, attempts to conceal his personal view but at the same time remains always faithful to it wherever it does appear."[16] Tolstoj was clearly an author who felt an obligation to express his "views" in his work, and in *Anna Karenina* he appears to have selected the superior mode described in the passage just cited. His view of the truth about the nature of the conflict between the individual as individual and the individual as social being emerges not in the direct address of the author to his readers but in the telling use of image and symbol and, preeminently, in the image of the railroad.[17]

NOTES

1 Sydney Schultze, *Anna Karenina: A Structural Analysis* [Ph.D. Dissertation: Indiana University, 1974], 237.

2 For a discussion of the ubiquitousness of the railroad motif in the novel see M. Al'tman, "Železnaja doroga" in his *Čitaja Tolstogo* (Tula: Priokskoe knižnoe izdatel'stvo, 1966), 111.

3 L. N. Tolstoj, *Perepiska s russkimi pisateljami* (Moskva: GIXL, 1962), 95.

4 See, for example, E. Kuprejanova's "Vyraženie estetičeskix vozzrenij i nravstvennyx iskanij v romane *Anna Karenina*," *Russkaja literatura,* 1960, No. 3, 117-26.

5 Al'tman, 112. A similar view is expressed by S. P. Byčkov (reprinted in Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina: A Norton Critical Edition,* ed. George Gibian (New York: Norton, 1970), 823 ff.; this edition is hereinafter abbreviated as AK.) A recent Western contribution to the literature on this subject is Michael Futrelle, "Levin, the Peasants, and the Land," *Canadian Slavonic Papers,* XXI, 3 (1979), 314-23.

6 This thesis is extensively documented in Elisabeth Stenbock-Fermor, *The Architecture of Anna Karenina* (Lisse: Peter de Ridder, 1975), 72ff.

7 A selective list of the literature on the subject includes Barbara Hardy, *The Appropriate Form* (London: Athlone Press, 1964; reprinted in AK, 895); Elisabeth Stenbock-Fermor, *The Architecture of Anna Karenina* (Lisse: Peter de Ridder, 1975), 65-70; Sydney Schultze, "Notes on Imagery and Motifs in Anna Karenina," *Russian*

Literature Triquarterly, I (Fall, 1971), 366-74; F. D. Reeve, *The Russian Novel* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 272; R. P. Blackmur, "The Dialectic of Incarnation: Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*" in *Eleven Essays in the European Novel* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1950; reprinted in AK); and M. M. Burkina, "Problema viny v romane *Anna Karenina*," *Jasno-poljanskij sbornik*, vyp. 11 (Tula, 1976), 46-57.

8 As suggested by Boris Ėjxenbaum, *Lev Tolstoj: 70-ye gody* (Leningrad: Xudožestvennaja literatura, 1974), 188: "In general, the railroad plays a sort of premonitory or mystic role in the novel. . . . It is a symbol of sorts, incorporating in itelf the wickedness of civilization, the hypocrisy of life, and the terror of passion."

9 The parenthetical citations given in the text refer to parts (Roman numerals) and chapters (Arabic) of *Anna Karenina*. The abbreviation "AK" signifies the Norton Critical Edition of *Anna Karenina* and the Arabic numerals following it refer to the pagination of that edition.

10 Ėjxenbaum, AK, 821.

11 For example, their disillusionment with society, the juxtaposed accounts (in Part V) of their dissatisfaction with the idyll of "honeymoon" love, and their mutual despair.

12 Hardy, AK, 887.

13 The preparatory function of children's games has been noted by Edward Wasiolek (*Tolstoy's Major Fiction* [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1978]) as early as in Tolstoj's first published work, *Childhood* (*Detstvo*, 1852): "The dramas of Nicholas in *Childhood* had to do with the incongruity between what the child found within him and what he saw without him, the contrast between the private world and the public world, between the instinctive feeling within him and the ready-made feelings, perceptions, and conduct that the adult world presented him and the games of childhood prepared him to accept" (48).

14 R. L. Jackson has demonstrated that "contradiction, conflict, tension between opposite elements . . . are evident in Anna's nature from the outset," i.e. from her first appearance in the novel in I, 18. ["Chance and Design in *Anna Karenina*,," *The Disciplines of Criticism*, P. Demetz, T. Greene, N. Lowry, eds. (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1968), 317].

15 J. M. Holquist has detected a similar tension between the individual and the social in Tolstoj's novel *Voskresenie* (see his article "Resurrection and Remembering: The Metaphor of Literacy in Late Tolstoi," *Canadian-American Slavic Studies*, XII, 4(1978), 549-70). Our conclusions are so similar as to have evoked the same rhetorical figure (Scylla and Charybdis) from both of us.

16 L. N. Tolstoj, *Polnoe sobranie sočinenij* (Moskva-Leningrad, 1928-59), XLVI, 182.

17 I hope to show in a future publication the implications of the concept of the social for an understanding of other characters and situations in the novel. In particular I will deal with a question only suggested in the present paper: that of the unity of *Anna Karenina*.