

# WILEY

---

The Unity of Anna Karenina

Author(s): Gary R. Jahn

Source: *The Russian Review*, Apr., 1982, Vol. 41, No. 2 (Apr., 1982), pp. 144-158

Published by: Wiley on behalf of The Editors and Board of Trustees of the Russian Review

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/129669>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Wiley is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Russian Review*

JSTOR

# The Unity of Anna Karenina

By GARY R. JAHN

Although Lev Tolstoi's *Anna Karenina* has long been universally acknowledged as a literary masterpiece, it continues to be the subject of vigorous debate.<sup>1</sup> The periodically resuscitated controversy over the significance of the novel's epigraph is, perhaps, the most striking facet of this continuing discussion, but it is by no means the only one. It is merely the most familiar symptom of an unassuaged sense of uneasiness which the novel seems always to produce in matters of interpretation.

No point has been more disputed and yet remains more crucial to the appreciation of *Anna Karenina* than its artistic unity. As early as 1878 Tolstoi was publicly reproached for "promising us one novel but giving us two."<sup>2</sup> S. A. Rachinskii, in a letter to Tolstoi, expressed his disappointment at the novel's lack of architecture: "Two themes are developed side by side, and developed beautifully, but there is nothing holding them together."<sup>3</sup> Tolstoi rejected these criticisms out of hand. He explained to N. N. Strakhov that the unity of the novel was inherent in its being "a collection of thoughts which I linked together in order to express myself."<sup>4</sup> Responding to Rachinskii, Tolstoi wrote that he took pride in the novel's "architecture" and that the work was unified by an "inner linkage."<sup>5</sup>

Despite the vagueness of Tolstoi's remarks there seemed, by and large, to have been a general acceptance of his assurance that the novel was a unified artistic whole. In 1954, however, B. V. Rozhdestvenskii wrote: "In *Anna Karenina* we have not one, but two main characters: Anna and Levin. Accordingly, there are two main-line plots (*siuzhethnye magistrali*) running through the novel . . . This method of organization provided one of Tolstoi's critics the opportunity of reproaching the author for the novel's lack of internal unity." Rozhdestvenskii concluded that this criticism was "more or less justified."<sup>6</sup> More recently,

<sup>1</sup> Parts 1-7 of the novel were published serially between 1875 and 1877 in M. N. Katkov's *Russkii vestnik*. Part 8 appeared as a separate booklet, published independently by Tolstoi after Katkov refused to print it in *Russkii vestnik*, in 1877. The novel was first published in book form (in three volumes with numerous revisions) in 1878. A. V. Knowles' *Tolstoy: The Critical Heritage* is a handy guide to the intense debate which greeted the novel's first publication.

<sup>2</sup> A. Stankevich writing in *Vestnik Evropy*, 1878, no. 4, p. 785.

<sup>3</sup> Letter to Tolstoi (6 January 1878), cited in L. N. Tolstoi, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, ed. V. G. Chertkov et al., 90 vols. (Moscow, 1928-58), 62:378.

<sup>4</sup> Tolstoi, PSS, 62:269.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 62:377.

<sup>6</sup> B. V. Rozhdestvenskii, "O kompozitsii romana L. N. Tolstogo *Anna Karenina*,"

Edward Wasiolek has concurred: "Anna Karenina is two novels: Anna's and Levin's."<sup>7</sup>

All of these responses arise from the apparent lack of a developed connection or a genuine comparability between Anna and Levin. Approximately the same amount of space is accorded to each of them in the novel and their appearing before the reader by turns is fundamental to the book's organization. Yet, it is easy to sympathize with the reader who finds the two characters oddly disconnected from one another. Rachinskii was quite right to say that while the scene in which Anna and Levin confront one another directly (part 7, chapter 10) provides a suitable basis for linking their separate paths through the novel together, the author, both in that scene and in the sequel, made but little use of the opportunity which he had created. Furthermore, the lack of comparability between Levin and Anna is symptomatic of a broader problem: her apparent lack of integration with any of the characters who surround her. Her extraordinarily harsh fate is often explained in moral terms, but this leaves unanswered the question of why Anna is condemned while Stiva and Princess Betsy, who are also adulterers, escape unscathed and even manage to prosper. It is also difficult to envision Anna and Levin as, in any sense morally comparable, for the fact is that the specific situations which they confront are morally diverse. Any cogent conception of the novel's unity must deal with these problems above all. Anna's story must be explained in such a way that it can be seen as interrelated with, coherent with, and comparable to the stories of the other characters, especially Levin's. It is the purpose of the present paper to offer such a conception.

In defining artistic unity Tolstoi paid scant attention to the traditional methods of linkage for which his critics were perhaps looking. In his "Preface to the Works of Guy de Maupassant" ("Predislovie k sochineniam Giui de Mopassana," 1894) he wrote:

People who have little artistic sensibility often think that the unity of a work of art depends upon its portraying the actions of a single set of characters or being organized around a single set of complicating circumstances or describing the life of a single person. This is unjust . . . The cement which joins any work of art into a unified whole and thus produces the illusion of life is not the unity of characters and situations but rather the unity of the author's own moral relationship to his subject . . . Therefore, a writer who lacks a clear, definite, and original (*novyi*) view of the world . . . cannot produce a work of art.<sup>8</sup>

---

*Uchenye zapiski Moskovskogo gorodskogo ped-instituta* 11, vyp. 4 (1954): 198. Cited in E. Babaev, *Anna Karenina L. N. Tolstogo* (Moscow, 1978), p. 108.

<sup>7</sup> Edward Wasiolek, *Tolstoy's Major Fiction* (Chicago, 1978), p. 129.

<sup>8</sup> Tolstoi, *PSS*, 30:18-19.

As is so often the case, this pronouncement of the old Tolstoi has roots in his youth. Already in 1853 he had written:

In reading a composition, especially a purely literary one, the main interest is the author's character as revealed in the composition. There are compositions in which the author makes an affectation of his view or changes it several times. The best are those wherein the author tries, as it were, to conceal his personal view while always remaining true to it wherever it shows through. The most colorless are those in which the view is so inconsistent as virtually to be lost.<sup>9</sup>

The "character of the author," his "view," is his understanding of reality. It is this understanding which determines his moral relationship to his subject.

For Tolstoi art was primarily a means of communicating the author's understanding of the nature of reality. The "reality" in which the characters live and act is devised by the author to reflect his understanding of the nature of the reality in which *he* lives and acts. The unifying effect of the author's consistency in applying his insight to the separate fates of the diverse creations of his imagination is the basis of the wholeness of the literary work of art; matters of organizational technique and artistic device are of secondary importance. In part 5 of the novel Anna and Vronskii call upon the painter Mikhailov in his studio. A true artist, Mikhailov echoes Tolstoi's impatience with questions of technique and is compared very favorably with the dilettante Vronskii, who is a master of such matters. Mikhailov's portrait of Anna displays her as she really is by "removing the covers" (*sniatie pokrov*) which obscure her true nature.<sup>10</sup> The mission of art, for Tolstoi, is to express reality as it has been revealed to the artist.<sup>11</sup>

The substance of Tolstoi's remarks about the unity of *Anna Karenina*, then, is that it is to be found on the thematic level. Its form will be that of an underlying conception of the nature of reality and its function will be to unite the diverse and occasionally contradictory fates of the characters as they participate in that reality. It would be short-sighted, however, to ignore other factors which contribute to the novel's unity. To say that Mikhailov does not understand the value of technique in art is not to say that his work lacks technical mastery. A brilliant example of Tolstoi's technical skill is the organization or "architecture" of the text, an aspect of *Anna Karenina* of which the author was, as we have seen, particularly proud. Elisabeth Stenbock-Fermor has discussed this matter in great detail and described the design of the work as a

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 46:182.

<sup>10</sup> Tolstoi, *PSS*, 19:42.

<sup>11</sup> This topic is discussed in exhaustive detail by E. N. Kupreianova in "Vyrashenie esteticheskikh vozzrenii i moral'nykh iskanii L. Tolstogo v romane *Anna Karenina*," *Russkaia literatura*, 1960, no. 3, pp. 117-36.

series of "arches" which are supported by "columns" in the form of key chapters which have to do with the image of the railroad in the novel.<sup>12</sup>

In the passage quoted above Tolstoi wrote that the author's view could appear either directly or indirectly in his work. In *War and Peace*, for example, Tolstoi used the direct method. Besides the numerous digressions in the text of the novel proper, he added a "Second Epilogue" in which he expounded his understanding of the nature of historical reality in elaborate detail. In *Anna Karenina* he took the other (and in his opinion, superior) course of revealing his "view" indirectly, through the use of image, symbol, and the technique of allowing the events of the narrative to speak for themselves. No overt mention is made of the particular aspect of his understanding of reality which informs the novel and, as Tolstoi believed, gives it its unity, but he "strives to remain true to it" wherever its manifestations appear.

Tolstoi's intention to reveal while concealing is suggested by a comment which he made to A. D. Obolenskii: "I've noticed that anything, any story, makes an impression only when the reader can't make out whose side the author is on. And that's how it [*Anna Karenina*] all had to be written, so that that couldn't be felt."<sup>13</sup> Tolstoi was referring to the scene (part 5, chapter 1) wherein Levin attends confession prior to his marriage, and he assured Obolenskii that the writing of this passage had been made very difficult by his resolve to conceal the fact that he sided throughout with the priest.

Despite Levin's disinclination to be shriven and his belief that the confessional was merely a tiresome ritual, he eventually becomes aware of "a vague feeling that what the nice, kind old man [the priest] had

<sup>12</sup> Elisabeth Stenbock-Fermor, *The Architecture of Anna Karenina* (Lisse, 1975). In an earlier paper I presented my interpretation of the thematic and symbolic function performed by this ubiquitous and, consequently, not to be ignored image. I offered the hypothesis that the railroad is a symbol of "the concept of the social," i.e., a symbol not of a particular society or social code, but rather of a social dimension which is inherent in the lives of individuals and which makes demands on the individual which require satisfaction. Bowing before these demands is shown to have both positive and negative implications in the lives of individual characters. Among the former are security and protection from the loneliness of alienation; among the latter, its depressing effect on the desire for freedom, independence, and the spontaneous gratification of individual passions. The railroad is intimately involved at many stages in the development of Anna's conflict with her society and functions symbolically within that conflict as the representative both of society's norms and power and of her own social needs. Ultimately, of course, it is the agent of her death. Gary R. Jahn, "The Image of the Railroad in *Anna Karenina*," *Slavic and East European Journal*, 25 (1981): 1-10. For an analysis of Tolstoi's conscientious organization of part 1 of the novel see Gary R. Jahn, "Note on the Organization of Part I of *Anna Karenina*," *Canadian-American Slavic Studies*, in press.

<sup>13</sup> Cited in F. D. Reeve, *The Russian Novel* (New York, 1966), p. 236.

said to him was not as stupid as it had seemed at first, and that there was something in it that ought to be elucidated.”<sup>14</sup> The priest had begun by inquiring about Levin’s personal spiritual state, treating him as an individual unencumbered with responsibilities. This approach had confirmed Levin in his prejudice. He admits to the sin of doubt but is unwilling to pursue the topic, feeling that “it would be improper to enter into a philosophic discussion with a priest.”<sup>15</sup> Levin is brought up short, however, when the priest suggests that an attitude of disdain will not suffice when his questions are asked by Levin’s future children. The questions will be the same, but the context in which they are asked will be that of Levin’s social obligations as a father rather than that of his obligations to himself as an individual. “This time Levin did not reply, not because he did not wish to enter upon a discussion with a priest, but because no one had ever put such questions to him.”<sup>16</sup>

Before confession Levin had been in a condition of “madness,” imagining that “he and his joy were the chief or only purpose of all existence, and that he need not now think or bother about anything.”<sup>17</sup> Marriage to Kitty was to be the realization of the ideal of his imagination, an exact but living copy of his carefully crafted mental picture of it. The priest, however, points out the social reality of the condition in life on which Levin is preparing to embark. Levin had earlier been “surprised . . . to find that Kitty had definite ideas of her own about their future life”<sup>18</sup> which he had not anticipated in his dreams; now the priest points out that marriage will involve still other unexpected features of collective life. “Levin felt more than ever before that there was a kind of vagueness in his soul,” but he decides to think it over later on: “before his little one could begin asking such questions, there would be plenty of time to consider what the answers should be.”<sup>19</sup>

If Tolstoi’s being on the side of the priest throughout this scene is an example of the artist’s remaining “true to his view wherever it shows through,” then it seems that the understanding of reality which provides the thematic basis of the novel’s unity has to do with the conflict between the desires and imaginings of the individual (a form of madness) and the ineluctable pressures and requirements of the social context in which the individual exists. In his confrontation with the priest Levin takes a step toward becoming aware that he is not independent of his social context, that he is not “the chief or only purpose of all existence.” At the same time the need to participate socially, to

<sup>14</sup> Tolstoi, *PSS*, 19:8.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 19:7.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 19:8.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 19:3.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 19:4.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 19:8.



found and raise a family, remains an indispensable part of his nature as an individual. It is the novel's consistent awareness of the tension in the individual between the freedom and excitement of his or her own passionate imaginings, on one hand, and the need to be part of a social context which cannot but be unmanageable and difficult, on the other, that makes *Anna Karenina* a unified artistic whole. Despite their different situations and diverse fates, all the major characters of the novel participate in this tension, attempt to resolve it in their various ways, and are thereby made comparable to one another.

The character of Anna is the novel's clearest model of the human personality as a divided entity which yearns for the adventure and feeling of self-worth that comes with the gratification of the individual and yet cannot exist without the security and sense of belonging that come with acknowledgement of and submission to the internal and external pressures of the social. Her highly attractive naturalness and spontaneity, the genuineness of her passion, and her desire for freedom and dignity are associated with her nature as an individual. In order to manifest these qualities in her life she forsakes the restraint, suppression, and reasonableness which are required by the social dimension of her personality and which are characteristic features of her initial portrait in the novel. The perfunctory concealment and hypocrisy which enable those involved in illicit love affairs to maintain their status as social beings are abhorrent and unacceptable to Anna. She requires more than the gratification of the flesh with which such characters as Betsy and Stiva are content. She desires also a gratification of the spirit, a sense of openly declared individual dignity which she is able to achieve only at the cost of divorce between herself and society. Unable to harmonize the two antagonistic components of her nature, she responds by choosing the individual and rejecting the social. As she learns, however, it is one thing to reject the social and quite another to live without it.

Having fled from the Petersburg society of which they had been part prior to their affair, Anna and Vronskii travel to Italy where they establish the first of the pseudo-societies, as they might be called, to which they resort in an attempt to retain some semblance of social context for their lives.<sup>20</sup> Part 5 of the novel shows their gradual disillusionment

<sup>20</sup> The association between freedom and Anna's and Vronskii's love as well as the contrast between these and the requirements of the social are suggested in the following passage: ". . . they were living abroad in complete freedom, outside that circle of social conventions which had taken up their time in Petersburg" (Tolstoi, PSS, 19:32). Furthermore, their European tour is called "the first period of her liberation" (ibid., 19:30).

Anna's need for society is suggested by her attitude toward Vronskii: "She loved him both for his own sake and for his love of her. To possess him entirely was a continual joy to her. His nearness was always pleasant . . . She dared not let him see

with both this society of two and the invented occupations, such as Vronskii's painting, with which they fill their days. On returning to St. Petersburg, Anna is emphatically rejected by society in the scene of her visit to the opera (part 5, chapter 33), and it becomes clear that her divorce from society is complete.<sup>21</sup> The flight to Italy is re-enacted in their removal to Vronskii's estate. Their activities here are more various (construction, modernization of agricultural methods, philanthropy, the education of their child) but to Anna they seem equally trivial, boring, and false. Vronskii, indeed, attempts to resume his place in real society (his dabbling in politics), but it is clear that his continued relationship with Anna is detrimental to his prospects.

Still, Vronskii is able to find a measure of acceptance outside of the narrowly enclosed pseudo-society of the estate, the result of his good fortune in being a man in an age which concentrates its opprobrium on the woman in the case of such affairs as his with Anna.<sup>22</sup> She, however, continues to have only a single permanent contact with which to satisfy the needs of the social dimension of her being—that with Vronskii. He is the only barrier between her and the total alienation which lies beyond the security of society. Thus, her anguish when she senses Vronskii's attraction to the real society beyond the estate is justified. Anna's perception of the magnitude of Vronskii's desire to return to real society may be exaggerated, but her logic is impeccable. If he does leave she will be quite alone; in such a state of isolation a fully human life would be impossible. Therefore, she ends her life.<sup>23</sup>

---

her consciousness of her own inferiority. To her it seemed that if he knew of it he would the sooner cease to love her, and there was nothing she now feared more . . ." (ibid., 19:31). Again, "The pleasures of a bachelor's life, enjoyed by Vronskii on his previous travels abroad, were not to be thought of now, for one attempt of that kind had produced in Anna an unexpected fit of depression quite disproportionate to the offense of a late supper with some acquaintances. Intercourse with local society or with the Russians was, in consequence of the indefiniteness of their relation, likewise impossible" (ibid., 19:32).

<sup>21</sup> Even the infamous Princess Betsy is unwilling to receive Anna, and she regards her decision to visit Anna as an act of high courage (Tolstoi, PSS, 19:100).

<sup>22</sup> This very point is anticipated in part 4, chapter 12.

<sup>23</sup> Shortly before she kills herself Anna thinks: "My love grows more and more passionate and egotistic, and his dwindles and dwindles, and that is why we are separating . . . And there is no remedy. For me everything centers in him, and I demand that he should give himself up to me more and more completely. But he wants more and more to get away from me . . . He tells me I am unreasonably jealous, and I have told myself that I am unreasonably jealous; but it is not true. I am not jealous, but dissatisfied" (Tolstoi, PSS, 19:343). A bit later: ". . . I cannot imagine a situation in which life would not be a torment; . . . we all have been created in order to suffer, and . . . we all know this and try to invent means of deceiving ourselves. But when you see the truth, what are you to do. . . . Yes, it troubles me very much, and reason was given us to escape; therefore I must escape! Why not put out the candle if there is nothing more to look at? If everything is repulsive to look at?" (ibid., 19:346).



The dilemma of the human personality is expressed not only in the fate of Anna but in most of the novel's other characters and situations as well. Karenin, for example, responds to it in just the opposite way. Where Anna had rejected the social in favor of the individual, her husband turns away from what Tolstoi here calls "real life" and loses himself in the artificial world of his social function.

Karenin was being confronted with life—with the possibility of his wife's loving somebody else, and this seemed stupid and incomprehensible to him, because it was life itself. He had lived and worked all his days in official spheres, which deal with reflections of life, and every time he had knocked up against life itself he had stepped out of its way. He now experienced a sensation such as a man might feel who, while quietly crossing a bridge over an abyss, suddenly sees that the bridge is falling to pieces and that he is facing the abyss. The abyss was real life; the bridge was the artificial life Karenin had been living. . . . For the first time he vividly pictured to himself her personal life, her thoughts, her wishes; but the idea that she might and should have her own independent life appeared to him so dreadful that he hastened to drive it away. That was the abyss into which he feared to look.<sup>24</sup>

So deeply in thrall to the social self has Karenin become that he has lost virtually all concept of himself as an individual independent of his social function, and it is just such an independence and interest in one's own wishes and desires which he observes in Anna and finds so distressing.

Stiva Oblonskii exemplifies a third approach to the problem. He is a character who ultimately submits to the pressure of the social but who yet remains conscious of himself as an individual and seeks to fit whatever personal gratification he can into, as it were, the loopholes of the social law. At the very beginning of the novel Stiva is made to choose between his own desires and the conduct required by his need to remain a social being (that is, that he attempt to make amends to Dolly and repair the rift between them).

"To go, or not to go?" he asked himself; and his inner consciousness answered that he ought not to go: that it could only result in hypocrisy; that it was impossible to restore their relations because it was impossible to render her attractive and capable of exciting love, or to turn himself into an old man incapable of love. Nothing except hypocrisy and falsehood could now result—and these were repugnant to his nature. "Nevertheless it will have to be done sooner or later. After all, things can't remain as they are," he said, trying to brace himself.<sup>25</sup>

Like his sister Anna, Stiva dislikes pretense, and, as his dream of the dancing tables in part I, chapter 1 shows, he finds the fantasy of unrestrained gratification of his desires extremely attractive. Yet, when

<sup>24</sup> Tolstoi, *PSS*, 18:150–51.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 18:12.

the moment of decision comes, he is unequal to the task of disregarding the pressure of the social dimension of his being, and he does what the entire household expects of him. Even though he has and will continue to seize pleasure where he can, we cannot but note that he has ultimately abandoned his claim to freedom, individuality, worth, and dignity. Consequently his affairs are comic rather than tragic, he himself more a jovial and charming buffoon than a hero. Unlike her brother, Anna declares her love openly. Once her passion and sense of individuality are aroused and loosed she is no longer able to stop short with a conventional affair. It becomes for her a question of her individuality against the pressure of society which would, were she to give way, demean her love in her own eyes.

The application of the theme of the tension between the individual and the social to other characters in the novel seems equally clear. Princess Betsy and the rest of her set come readily to mind as examples of those middle-grounders epitomized by Stiva. Sergei Ivanovich Koznyshev, Varen'ka, and Dolly remind us of that sacrifice of the individual self in favor of one's social needs and responsibilities which we see most clearly in Karenin. Nikolai Levin is a counterpart of Anna in his open rejection of society, in society's rejection of him, and in his death.<sup>26</sup>

We may now revert to the character of Konstantin Levin and his relation to the theme of the individual and the social in the novel. The thorny problem of the connection of his story to Anna's is the crux of any discussion of the novel's unity. An interpretation of *Anna Karenina* which finds no satisfactory ground for comparison between these two main lines of the novel fails, in my view, to make an adequate case for the unity of the work. The linkage between Anna and Levin, then, is a test of the hypothesis that the theme adumbrated here is central to the wholeness of the novel.

At the beginning of the novel Levin is represented as one at odds with his society. His social clumsiness, the uncompromising strength of his ideals as an individual, and his preference for a life of isolated rustication are all indicative of this. Yet, he never puts himself beyond

<sup>26</sup> In "The Dialectic of Incarnation: Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*" R. P. Blackmur offers a similar categorization of the novel's characters according to whether the social or the individual predominates in them. He, however, understands the tension to be one between the individual and the institutions of society, rather than an internal tension between the competing social and individual dimensions of the human personality. ". . . manners are the medium in which the struggle between the institutions of society and the needs of individuals is conducted . . . When in imagination or dogma the institutions are seen to triumph the manners become hollow, cold, and cruel. When the needs of the individual triumph the manners tend to disappear, so that life together becomes impossible." (Reprinted in Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina: A Norton Critical Edition* [New York, 1970], pp. 903-904.

the pale of society. Although isolated, his country estate is nonetheless a social framework and one that is a genuine subdivision of the society inhabited by the other leading characters. Levin's desire to marry and found a family is at first more a matter of the gratification of his personal ideals than of attraction to Kitty as an individual.<sup>27</sup> He soon discovers, however, that marriage represents an increased acknowledgement of the social dimension of his being and entails an increased acceptance of external social pressures. Despite his disinclination, he endures the confessional, the marriage ceremony with its bustle and attention to fashion, and the obligatory calls which must be made following the honeymoon.

In short, just as Anna is beginning to discover the flaws of a decision to flee from society (her sojourn with Vronskii in Italy), Levin discovers the implications of his increased commitment to society. Both Anna and Levin pursue courses which were dictated by their desires as individuals and both learn as a result something more than they suspected about the attendant social implications of their acts. Both become keenly aware of the dilemma that they face, and both are eventually driven to despair by their meditations on that dilemma. We must remember, however, that they view their mutual difficulty from different points of view: Anna as one who has turned her back upon her social self in all respects but one (her relationship with Vronskii); Levin as one who has ventured forth from relative isolation to a broader participation in the social.

For all his independence and pride, Levin manages to remain within the bounds established by the code of the society in which he lives and by the pressure exerted by the social dimension of his personality to conform to that code. What must be done, he does. What makes him different from Stiva is his perception of his situation as one in which he has no value as an individual and his inability to funnel his discontent into oblivion. He regrets (part 6, chapter 1) the loss of "his own—the Levin—order of things" which is gradually submerged by the influx of "the Shcherbatskii element." His life seems to have lost its individuality, and he sadly reflects: "Without knowing what I am, and why I am here, it is impossible to live. Yet I cannot know that, and therefore I can't live," he said to himself. "In an infinity of time,

<sup>27</sup> "Strange as it may seem, it was the Shcherbatskii family—especially the feminine half of it—that Levin was in love with. He could not remember his mother, and his sister was much his senior, so that in the Shcherbatskii's house he saw for the first time the family life of a well-educated and honorable family of the old aristocracy—a life such as he had been deprived of by the death of his own father and mother. All the members of that family, especially the women, appeared to him as though wrapped in some mystic poetic veil, and he not only saw no defects in them, but imagined behind that poetic veil the loftiest feelings and every possible perfection" (Tolstoi, *PSS*, 18:24–25).

matter, and space, a bubble organism separates itself, maintains itself awhile, and then bursts, and that bubble is—I!"<sup>28</sup>

While Levin and Anna face a comparable dilemma, Anna responds by attempting to ignore one of its horns and thus forecloses the possibility of resolving it. Levin, on the other hand, has remained within society and thus retained the possibility of resolving his position.<sup>29</sup> His resolution of the dilemma takes the form of a retreat within himself where he segregates his individuality as a spiritual function from the exterior and physiological expression of his socialness.

The general terms of this idea are by no means something new for Levin at the end of the novel. The germ of it is already present in the conversation between his half-brother Sergei Ivanych and the visiting professor from Khar'kov, the subject of which is the possibility of any sort of life outside of the physiological context. Levin's story in the novel contains frequent echoes of this discussion in terms of an inward life of ideal individuality and freedom combined with an outward life of submission to physiological, particularly social, necessity. Levin makes repeated efforts to realize his individuality in a visible form as, for example, in his agricultural projects, his participation in local government, and his marriage. These efforts fail or become, to some degree, impure, as when he realizes that his hoped-for ideal of marital bliss is not fully satisfactory in practice.<sup>30</sup>

He falls back again and again on his inner resources. At the end of the novel he contemplates a future of alternating social activity (with his attendant disgust at its imperfections and his inability to realize his individual ideals fully in practice) and periods of reflective inwardness, with the comfort they supply of a consciousness of individuality, selfworth, and purpose. This idea is stated directly in the concluding chapters of the novel. Levin, the victim of a despair which

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 19:370.

<sup>29</sup> It is surely no accident that Levin is the central figure of a triad of brothers: himself flanked by Nikolai, who rejects and is rejected by society, and Sergei Ivanych, who defends it. That Nikolai is Levin's whole brother and Sergei Ivanych only a half-brother draws Levin closer to the former and serves as a further evidence of the comparability between Levin and Anna, for no character in the novel is in a position of social ostracism more closely akin to Anna's than Nikolai.

<sup>30</sup> "Levin had been married three months. He was happy, but in quite a different way from what he had expected. At every step he met disillusionments in his old fancies and new and unexpected enchantments. He was happy, but having embarked on family life he saw at every step that it was not at all what he had anticipated. At every step he took he felt as a man would feel who, after admiring the smooth happy motion of a little boat upon the water, had himself got into the boat. He found that besides sitting quietly without rocking, he had to keep a lookout, not for a moment forget where he was going, or that there was water under his feet, and that he had to row, although it hurt his unaccustomed hands; in short, that it only looked easy, but to do it, though very delightful, was very difficult" (Tolstoi, *PSS*, 19:47-48).

is fully as intense as that of Anna, experiences a moment of great joy following a conversation with one of his peasants. Almost immediately, however, his sense of inner happiness and harmony is shattered.

He was glad of this opportunity to be alone and recover from reality, which had already so lowered his spiritual condition. He remembered that he had already gotten angry with Ivan, treated his brother coldly, and spoken heedlessly to Katavasov. "Can it possibly have been but a momentary mood that will pass without leaving a trace?" he wondered. But at that instant returning into that mood, he felt with joy that something new and important had occurred within him. Reality had temporarily veiled the spiritual tranquility he had found, but it remained with him.<sup>31</sup>

The final words of the novel are much in the same vein.

I shall still get angry with Ivan the coachman in the same way, shall dispute in the same way, shall inopportunately express my thoughts; *there will still be a wall between my soul's holy of holies and other people*; even my wife I shall still blame for my own fears and shall repent of it. My reason will still not understand why I pray, but I shall still pray, and my life, *my whole life*, independently of anything that may happen to me, is every moment of it no longer meaningless as it was before, but has an unquestionable meaning of goodness with which I have the power to invest it. [Emphasis added.]<sup>32</sup>

Levin has resolved the dilemma. He has found a way to gratify the individual while yet controlling it, to submit to the social without becoming lost in it.

Levin's joy at this discovery is one of a series of such moments which he experiences in the novel, beginning with the scene in which he performs a difficult skating trick (part 1, chapter 9), and including the famous mowing scene (part 3, chapters 4 and 5).<sup>33</sup> The final moment, however, supercedes and clarifies the others. In this moment he is not only fully aware of himself as an individual: independent, in control,

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 19:385-86. It is of interest to note that "reality" in this passage refers to the social context in which Levin passes his daily life. In the passage quoted above in discussing the character of Karenin (see note 24), reality ("real life") was the life of the individual. Yet there need be no contradiction here. Reality, in the novel, is both of these. Both the social and the individual are real and both must be given their due, however difficult and unsatisfactory a task this may be.

<sup>32</sup> Tolstoi, PSS, 19:399.

<sup>33</sup> The notion of taking refuge from the disappointments of reality by falling back on the resources of inwardness and imagination has a symbolic referent in Levin's pleasure in his return to his estate and especially to his own room after his unsuccessful proposal to Kitty in Moscow in part 1. The connection between Levin's ability to retreat into his inner self and his comfort in the familiar surroundings of his study is the more significant in comparison with Anna's lack of a place of her own. She feels at home neither in Italy nor on Vronskii's estate and her room in Karenin's house in Petersburg is also not really her own, subject as it is to her husband's uninvited incursions. One might usefully compare Dolly's taking refuge in her room at the beginning of the novel and forbidding Stiva to enter it.



not subject to his surroundings, yet intimately a part of them (his observation of the labors of the insects in the grass); but he also comes to understand that this condition is necessarily inward, that it is at odds with what he calls "reality." Furthermore, this reality is conceived in social terms and so there remains "a wall between his soul's holy of holies and other people." Yet, his awareness of the fragility and inwardness of his individuality does not cause him to reject the reality which is so inimical to it.<sup>34</sup> He feels that his individuality is proof against "anything that may happen to me."

Thus, Levin ultimately accepts his dilemma, rather than capitulating to it as do Stiva and Karenin in varying degrees, or defying it in the manner of Anna.<sup>35</sup> Insofar as he is able, he tries to be above society as well as in it.<sup>36</sup> By a somewhat different path, then, we have arrived at an understanding of Levin's role in the novel very like that expressed by Boris Eikhenbaum. He explained Levin's character as mainly distinguished by a sort of double vision which allowed him both to follow a course in "real" (i.e. social) life and yet to look beyond the bounds of that reality.<sup>37</sup> As Tolstoi wrote to Fet in 1876:

Precious and joyful is my communion with people who, while involved in this life, yet look beyond its bounds. And you and those other, rare, *real* people whom I have run across in my life, despite your common-sense relationship to life, stand always on the very edge and see life so clearly precisely because you look now into nirvana, now into samsara ["everyday life"] and this view of nirvana strengthens your sight.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>34</sup> He could not, of course, be allowed to reject this reality successfully any more than Anna could be allowed to reject it. This would have destroyed the unity which had been so subtly wrought. As though to make clear that the social context is a real and necessary requirement of human nature we are offered the description of Levin's concern for Kitty and their child when they are caught outdoors by a sudden and dangerous storm. It is surely not accidental that in this scene from the last part of the novel, a storm is used to suggest to Levin the fear of the painful loss of his loved ones just as in the first part of the novel, another storm (part 1, chapter 30) had emerged as a symbol of the isolation which would eventually kill Anna. Nor does it seem fortuitous that for both Anna and Levin the most poignant attraction of the social is their children. In the scene under discussion Levin makes much of the fact that the danger of losing Kitty and the child had finally made him aware of the depth of his feeling and his need for his son.

<sup>35</sup> Further discussion of the comparability of Anna and Levin may be found in Blackmur, "Dialectic of Incarnation," p. 901; Reeve, *Russian Novel*, pp. 270-71; and in V. G. Odinkov, *Poetika romanov L. N. Tolstogo* (Novosibirsk, 1978), p. 115.

<sup>36</sup> B. M. Eikhenbaum, *Lev Tolstoi: Semidesiatye gody* (Leningrad, 1974), pp. 177 ff. A notable example of this type of behavior is Levin's conduct during the lengthy scene of the elections (part 6, chapters 26-30). His repeated escapes from the chamber wherein his social obligations are to be performed are climaxed by a remarkable visualization of his ability to be in and above the social simultaneously: in chapter 30 he leaves the election hall and ascends to the spectators' gallery whence he, for a while, watches the proceedings from above.

<sup>37</sup> Eikhenbaum, *Tolstoi*, p. 179.

<sup>38</sup> Tolstoi, *PSS*, 62:272. In a letter from the same period to N. N. Strakhov,



Levin, in fact, has this ability to be in society and yet above it throughout the novel.<sup>39</sup> Even in his darkest moments “he lived, not knowing or seeing any possibility of knowing what he was or why he lived in the world, and he suffered so much from that ignorance that he was afraid he might commit suicide, while at the same time he was firmly cutting his own particular definite path through life.”<sup>40</sup> Following his conversation with the peasant, however, this unconscious ability is realized as the conscious double vision of which Eikhenbaum wrote.

Anna, on the contrary, lacks the ability to live in and out of society simultaneously. She insists upon the outward (social) realization of her inner ideals, even if this means that she must throw down the gauntlet to her society.<sup>41</sup> She even gives up her beloved Serezha for the sake of being true to her individual self. In the terms of Tolstoi’s letter to Fet, Anna insists on “nirvana” at the expense of “samsara,” not realizing that in the world of the novel the functions of both are equally indispensable parts of the human condition. Unlike those people whom Tolstoi considered exemplary, Anna does not stand “on the very edge” but passes over it into the abyss. She abandons the context she knows and attempts to replace it with a society of her own design consisting only of herself and Vronskii. She represents the human desire to make, rather than be made by, the social dimension. The very fact that an alternate society is required, however, bespeaks her inability to survive without a social context.

Anna’s suicide gives her a measure of the heroism of the martyr which is fully consonant with her highly attractive role as the representative of fidelity to one’s own self and individuality. Anna is properly speaking a tragic figure. She perishes because of her insistence upon the purity and actuality of her nature as an individual, a quality which Tolstoi himself and surely many of his readers consider the positive essence of humanity. In short, Anna did what seemed to her a good

---

Tolstoi distinguished between his “real self” (the writer) and his “non-real self” (the country squire). Cited by Stenbock-Fermor, *Architecture of Anna Karenina*, p. 11.

<sup>39</sup> It is as though Levin is able to do what Serezha tells Stiva is not allowed in the game of “Railroad”; the passengers are not allowed to ride on top of the train but must remain inside it.

<sup>40</sup> Tolstoi, *PSS*, 19:373.

<sup>41</sup> The distinction between Anna and Levin with respect to their separate modes of dealing with the tension between the individual and the social is suggested by the names assigned to their respective country estates: *Vozdvizhenskoe* and *Pokrovskoe*. The name of Vronskii’s estate is derived from *vozdvigat’*, “to erect, as a monument or other notable structure.” Just so does Anna insist upon the physical and visible realization of her individual passion. Levin’s estate, on the other hand, bears a name derived from the verb *pokryvat’*, “to cover.” Accordingly, the lesson that experience teaches him is of the need to conceal his most private self and to nurture his sense of uniquely significant individuality within “his soul’s holies.”

and heroic thing in challenging society for the sake of her love for Vronskii and, because of the nature of reality, she died for it. She did not know and perhaps never learned that there were other forces within her that also demanded their due. Like Oedipus, she did wrong unknowingly, firmly convinced that it was right and necessary.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>42</sup> See also Blackmur, "Dialectic of Incarnation," p. 911 and M. M. Burkina, "Problema viny v romane *Anna Karenina*," *Iasnopolianskii sbornik*, vyp. 11 (Tula, 1976), pp. 46–47.