Leo Tolstoy · *Anna Karenina*

What English novel is Anna reading?

If Tolstoy's novel *Anna Karenina* had ended a fifth of the way through, at the end of Chapter 29, we would have a bittersweet short story with a happy ending. In this chapter Anna is returning from Moscow to her home, her beloved son Seriozha, and her less-than-beloved husband, Alexei, in Saint Petersburg. She has been in the capital to sort out the marriage problems of her hapless sister-in-law, Dolly.

In Moscow, Anna has fallen under the spell of the dashing cavalry officer, Count Vronsky. But she has not surrendered to temptation. She is still a virtuous wife and matron. By no means entirely happy: but virtuous.

She now travels back to St Petersburg by train, at night, accompanied by her maid, Annushka. 'Well, that's all over, thank Heaven!' Anna thinks as she enters her 'dimly lit' carriage: 'Thank Heaven, tomorrow I shall see Seriozha and Alex Alexandrovich again and my good accustomed life will go on as of old':

With the same preoccupied mind she had had all that day, Anna prepared with pleasure and great deliberation for the journey. With her deft little hands she unlocked her red bag, took out a small pillow which she placed against her knees, and locked the bag again; then she carefully wrapped up her feet and sat down comfortably. An invalid lady was already going to bed. Two other ladies began talking to Anna. One, a fat old woman, while wrapping up her feet, remarked upon the heating of the carriage. Anna said a few words in answer, but not foreseeing anything interesting from the conversation asked her maid to get out her

reading-lamp, fixed it to the arm of her seat, and took a paper-knife and an English novel from her handbag. At first she could not read. For a while the bustle of people moving about disturbed her, and when the train had finally started it was impossible not to listen to the noises; then there was the snow, beating against the window on her left, to which it stuck, and the sight of the guard, who passed through the carriage closely wrapped up and covered with snow on one side; also the conversation about the awful snow-storm which was raging outside distracted her attention. And so it went on and on: the same jolting and knocking, the same beating of the snow on the window-pane, the same rapid changes from steaming heat to cold, and back again to heat, the gleam of the same faces through the semi-darkness, and the same voices,—but at last Anna began to read and to follow what she read. Annushka was already dozing, her broad hands, with a hole in one of the gloves, holding the red bag on her lap. Anna read and understood, but it was unpleasant to read, that is to say, to follow the reflection of other people's lives. She was too eager to live herself. When she read how the heroine of the novel nursed a sick man, she wanted to move about the sick-room with noiseless footsteps; when she read of a member of Parliament making a speech, she wished to make that speech; when she read how Lady Mary rode to hounds, teased her sister-in-law, and astonished everybody by her boldness—she wanted to do it herself. But there was nothing to be done, so she forced herself to read, while her little hand played with the smooth paper-knife.

The hero of the novel had nearly attained to his English happiness of a baronetcy and an estate, and Anna wanted to go to the estate with him, when she suddenly felt that he must have been ashamed, and that she was ashamed of the same thing,—but what was she ashamed of? 'What am I ashamed of?' she asked herself with indignant surprise. She put down her book, leaned back, and clasped the paper-knife tightly in both hands. There was nothing to be ashamed of. (pp. 99–100)

It's a wonderfully evoked scene—familiar to anyone who has travelled through the night by train, yet strange, in many of its physical details, to a non-Russian reader

(how should we visualize that movable 'reading lamp', for example, hung on the arm of Anna's seat?). Vladimir Nabokov, when a lecturer at Cornell University, used to give a whole lecture to his American undergraduates based on this passage. 'Any ass can assimilate the main points of Tolstoy's attitude toward adultery,' Nabokov asserted, 'but in order to enjoy Tolstoy's art the good reader must wish to visualize, for instance, the arrangement of a railway carriage on the Moscow–Petersburg train as it was a hundred years ago.'[1]

The passage is shot through with omens—trains will not be lucky for Anna. But the attention of the English-speaking reader will be particularly drawn to the 'English novel' whose pages Anna is cutting and reading. We are given precise and detailed descriptions of its narrative. What, then, is it? Surely we can identify it by title? A. N. Wilson, in his life of Tolstoy, is in no doubt that Anna has in her hands a novel by Anthony Trollope.[2] Tolstoy wrote *Anna Karenina* between 1873 and 1878, and it is known that during this period he read and admired Trollope's equally massive novel of parliamentary life, *The Prime Minister*. That novel, published in England in June 1876 (although it cannot have been translated into Russian until a few months later), had a momentous influence on *Anna Karenina*. Trollope's narrative climaxes, brilliantly, with the suicide of the villainous Ferdinand Lopez, in front of a speeding train. There are other such deaths in Victorian fiction (notably Carker's in *Dombey and Son*). But it is likely that the climax of Tolstoy's novel—Anna's self-immolation at Nizhny railway station—is directly indebted to *The Prime Minister*.

There is, however, no scene in *The Prime Minister* in which Lopez makes a speech in Parliament. That episode seems to belong to an earlier Trollope novel, *Phineas Finn, the Irish Member* (1869), whose narrative revolves

around the hero's initial failure to make a good maiden speech to the House, and his eventual success in doing so. And the business about Lady Mary riding to hounds and teasing her sister-in-law seems to allude to still another Trollope novel, *Is he Popenjoy?* (1878), where the spirited heroine, Lady Mary Germain (née Gresley), outrages her husband's straitlaced sisters by dancing and hunting. Mary Germain's husband, however, attains his Englishman's idea of happiness not in the form of a 'baronetcy and an estate', but the unexpected legacy of a marquisate and an estate. Tolstoy's 'baronetcy' seems to be a recollection of Trollope's *The Claverings* (1867), in which the hero, Harry, unexpectedly inherits a baronetcy, an estate (and some of the attendant guilt which Tolstoy mentions) when his distant cousins are drowned sailing. As for the business of the heroine nursing a sick man—that would seem to be an allusion to a quite different novel—Charlotte Yonge's sensational best-seller of 1853 *The Heir of Redclyffe*, in which the Byronic hero, Guy, is nursed on his lingering deathbed by his young wife Amy, and gradually repents his wild ways under her tender ministrations.

What, then, is Tolstoy aiming at with this mélange of bits and pieces of English fiction? What the Russian writer is doing, I suggest, is something rather chauvinistic. It was Virginia Woolf who claimed that there was only one 'adult' novel written in Victorian England—*Middlemarch* (a novel that Tolstoy seems not to have read). The mass of English Victorian novels, particularly with their sugar-stick endings and generally optimistic view of life, were essentially *juvenile*, Woolf thought. Henry James made much the same point when he talked, at the end of the century, of the tyranny of the young reader over the adult novelist.

The point that Tolstoy makes is, I think, that Anna

is not reading an English novel so much as 'English fiction'—with all its falsities and its childish addiction to 'happiness', particularly happy endings. To paraphrase the famous opening of *Anna Karenina*, all happy novels are alike, so it does not really matter *which* particular English novel the heroine is reading. What Anna is reading, we apprehend, is a generic English novel—a novel that never existed, but which typifies the genre. And to represent the quintessence of English fiction Tolstoy amalgamates a variety of works by that most English of English novelists, Anthony Trollope, the 'Chronicler of Barsetshire', with a dash of Miss Yonge. He, Count Leo Tolstoy, will write a different kind of novel: one that is harder, sadder, more realistic—Russian, in a word. A novel that does not succumb to the debilitating 'English idea'. 'Expect no pernicious "English happiness" in this Russian novel,' is the implicit warning.

What English novel, then, is Anna Karenina reading? All of them and none of them.

The Oxford World's Classics *Anna Karenina* is translated by Louise and Aylmer Maude, with an introduction and notes by Gareth Jones.