before humanity, the Corpus Christi. She is inevitably forced to obscure her public, universal character if she dumps the center of her life, the celebration of the mystery, into the bankrupt estate of all the other private items of publication.*—*Translated by Anselm Ramelow.* □

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* Originally published as "Ein Schlüsselloch für die Ungläubigen? Die Öffentlichkeit des Kultes und die Fernsehübertragung der Messe," in *Wort und Wahrheit* 9 (1954): 165–68.

Notes & Comments

THE MANY HOMES OF *ANNA KARENINA*

Agata Rottkamp

The household was in complete uproar. The children ran around unsupervised. Meals were neither prepared nor consumed. The mother, Dolly, had retreated into her bedroom, weeping, raging, and refusing to come out. Her husband Stepan Oblonsky—at a loss of what to do in the face of the general confusion—disappeared and had not been seen for three days. Perhaps his guilt was keeping him at bay? For it was, after all, the discovery of his infidelity—with the children's governess, no less!—that had precipitated all of this. He had tugged too hard and too brazenly at his marriage bonds, and now it seemed they were in danger of snapping irreparably, causing breakdown of the family home.

This is the opening scene of *Anna Karenina*, Leo Tolstoy's epic of love, fidelity and infidelity, city and country, hope and despair. Tolstoy rarely fails to serve up a complete feast in his novels, and *Anna Karenina* too is about the entirety of human experience. I had expected this of the great Russian author, but was surprised at how much the book speaks to the notion of what a home is and how it can flourish, or fail to do so. And I am no stranger to questions about the meaning of home: I am an emigrant twice over, having left Communist Poland as a child with my parents and then, years later, my adopted homeland of Canada to set

up home with my husband in the United States. Home, as author Chaim Potok puts it, is one of my "four-o'clock-in-the-morning" questions. It nags at me and prods me awake at night, as I weigh my own identity and that of my children, and mourn the loss of the many homes I knew as a child. *How best to make a home for my children?* Surprisingly, Tolstoy's cast of Russian aristocrats gives some beautiful insights on the matter.

It is worth noting here that there is indeed a large cast that makes up the novel. The title can be misleading; *Anna Karenina*, told by an omniscient narrator, digs deep into the interior worlds both of Anna and of the philosophically-inclined farmer Levin. It also draws back the veil on the inner workings of three families: the Oblonskys, Anna Karenina and her paramour Vronsky, and Levin and Kitty. The aphorism with which Tolstoy famously begins the novel—"All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way" (1)[1]—refers to their struggles. As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that, despite the growing pains in the early part of their marriage, Levin and his wife Kitty embody the greatest happiness. The warmth and comfort of their home is held up as a model and foil to the hapless homes of the others, especially that of the tragically-fated Anna and Vronsky.

Before we look at the Levins in their happiness, however, let us return to the Oblonskys' misfortune, and consider an important distinction it helps us to make. The Polish word for home is *dom*, which is the same as the word for a brick and mortar house. In my mother tongue, then, there is no difference between where you happen to be staying and the place where you belong. The English insistence on the distinction, however, is well-grounded and Stepan and Dolly's falling out makes this clear enough: while their *house* is intact, their *home* is in shambles. Home is not merely a physical place—a town, an apartment, a bedroom—but also, and just as importantly, it is the people that are interwoven into the fabric of that place.

A home in the former sense—i.e., in the sense of a physical place of shelter that is familiar, that is *mine*—is the more intuitive of the two. Told to imagine home, I call to mind our small Communist-era apartment, gooseberry bushes in our garden, wax cloth on a white kitchen table: places and things steeped with memories. Because I left Poland with my immediate family when I was young, these memories of my childhood home are inevitably coupled with a sense of rupture, an ache for what was lost. There was a certainty of belonging in that place, and a contrasting lack of belonging to the places that followed in my life: an immigration camp in Germany, an old farmhouse in a Canadian town, a rented room in Washington, DC. New places grow familiar after a time, of course, but how long before one has the feeling that the place you live in belongs to you and you belong to it? Essayist and farmer Wendell Berry calls this feeling a "mutuality of belonging," and insists that to be true, this belonging must be a "settled and unthreatened fact" that will continue to one's children's and grandchildren's generations.[2] Tolstoy would have felt a great affinity with Berry on this point: his supposedly autobiographical Levin is the very incarnation of what Berry describes. Levin's love for his old family home at Pokrovskoe defines him and he only feels truly like himself when he is there. He works assiduously and with pleasure to "produce income" and to "maintain the family land in such condition that when his son inherited it he would thank his father, as Levin had thanked his grandfather" (790). It is telling that on their wedding night, Kitty and Levin travel to Pokrovskoe instead of abroad, and it is no coincidence that Tolstoy follows this fact directly with an account of Vronsky and Anna's travels through Europe: Venice, Rome, Naples. Vronsky and Anna rent a palazzo, but grow bored of it, of every city, every pastime. They have no responsibilities, no ties. When Vronsky takes up management of his estate, it is merely a "role he had chosen" (644), not a constitutive

1. Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina: A Novel in Eight Parts*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Penguin, 2000). All page references to the novel will be indicated within the text in parentheses. All emphases are mine.

2. Wendell Berry, "Conservation and Local Economy," in *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry*, ed. Norman Wirzba (Washington, DC: Shoemaker and Hoard, 2002), 196.

relationship to the land as is the case with Levin who believes in the importance of doing the farming personally, and not renting out his fields. On several occasions, he goes so far as helping the muzhiks with the mowing, scythe in hand. Throughout the novel, Levin grapples with questions about the whys of existence and about God. The search torments him to the point of considering suicide. Notably, though, he never questions where he belongs. Pokrovskoe is his, and every fiber of his being is anchored in its ancestral lands.

Levin's firm attachment to his home is as enviable as it is rare in the Western world. While my family emigrated in the 1980s to escape an oppressive political regime, most of us are only a better job offer away from another move. And yet a healthy home needs stability, a sense of continuity. If we have no ancestral lands to speak of, what can we depend on? Let us return to the lessons of the Oblonskys' marital dispute, and, this time, focus on the *people* that make up a home. In the case of the three couples in Tolstoy's crosshairs—the Levins, the Oblonskys, and Anna and Vronsky—only two are intact come the last page of the novel, and the message contained therein is unmistakable: the biblical admonition to build a house on rock must be taken seriously. And when it comes to human relationships, the closest to a rock is a vow, here the marriage bond. It is only the sacramental "'til death do us part" that can serve as a foundation solid enough for a home to withstand the furies of the metaphorical wind and rain. Anna Karenina's unabashed infidelity, an overt rejection of her marriage vows, first makes life unbearable for her husband, driving him to stay away from home except on occasions where he makes a polite show for the sake of the servants, and eventually causes her to abandon her husband and son altogether. When it comes to the relationship with Vronsky that follows, health, wealth, youth, and even passionate love do not suffice; they have no ground on which to build a home. Arguably, Anna never even gets as far as trying to make a home with Vronsky. Her sole focus is to "her own self—herself, *in so far as she was dear to Vronsky*" (643). A mysterious ellipsis during a conversation between Dolly and Anna seems to suggest that the latter has gone as far having

been sterilized in order to prevent future pregnancies. These would make her too ill to be a friend or companion to Vronsky: "Understand, I'm not a wife," she says to her friend Dolly. "He loves me as long as he loves me. And what then, how am I to keep his love?" (638). Without the freedom given by promises of fidelity through marriage vows, Anna becomes a slave to a constant need for affirmation. Vronsky cannot convince her of his dedication and their unstable union must be re-established at every turn.

Kitty and Levin are the clear foil to Anna and Vronsky on this score. Marriage is the "chief concern of life" (95) for Levin and—despite his painful searching for purpose—all he does is at the service of his family and home. More interesting, however, is a comparison between Anna and Vronsky and the Oblonskys. We began our reflections with the chaos that follows the discovery of Stepan's infidelity. Ironically, it is at Anna Karenina's urging that Dolly forgives him. She "could not get out of the habit of considering [Stepan] her husband and of loving him" (10), even though "he could never remember that he had a wife and children" (260). This is not blindness on Dolly's part. She is well aware of Stepan's shortcomings, chief among them the fact that he does not love her, but *she* chooses to remain faithful. Because of Stepan's dissipation, money is continuously in short supply in the Oblonsky household, and without the Levins' help, they would have trouble making ends meet. All that said, however, the nest that Dolly weaves for her children is one where "joys were . . . like gold in the sand" (262). She clings to her marriage despite the difficulties it presents, and it is only after a difficult *tête-à-tête* where Anna lays bare her own position that Dolly truly recognizes how "precious and dear" her own home and children are. The Oblonskys' home is, in many ways, dysfunctional, and yet, just one of the spouses holding fast to their marriage means that there even is a home to speak of.

The parents' relationship is the bedrock of every child's existence, the ground on which their little world is built. Even though my parents have told me of the strains that emigration created in their marriage, they went through the process together. My father did not "go ahead" to

the New World to prepare the way, as so many sons of Poland did; at my mother's insistence we emigrated as a family. She had seen too many marriages founder and crumble after years of separation, the husband abroad, the wife and children in Poland. With childlike faith, I never even considered the possibility that my parents would *not* be together, and wherever they took our family, there we made a home. And, more than anything, my parents' home was a place where I experienced love. For every home, with all of its little details, its singular traditions, and its own family culture, is the place where love is taught and given to its members. Though the simple things we do in our homes—cooking, playing, entertaining—may seem trifling, all of these small actions, when woven together, make up the tapestry that is the whole of our life. Using the quotidian to cast light on the universal is a great storyteller's prerogative, and Tolstoy uses it throughout *Anna Karenina*, especially as it concerns the home life of his characters. The newlywed Levin is taken aback that his "poetic, lovely Kitty, in the very first, not weeks but days of married life, could think, remember, and fuss about tablecloths, furniture, mattresses for guests, about a tray, the cook, the dinner, and so on" (480). Her concern with what he deems "insignificant trifles" offends him and he is even annoyed at her innocent but frivolous hobby of *broderie anglaise*. How great the transformation, then, when Levin and Kitty arrive at his brother Nikolai's deathbed. Whereas Levin is helplessly frozen in horror by the sick man's condition, his wife gets to work, sweeping, washing, sending for food, a doctor, a priest—in short, taking care of a myriad of details. Even her embroidery is used to brighten up the room. The patient dons a "new expression of hope" (495) and Levin grows in appreciation for his wife. Her attentiveness to the details allows them all to face the great mystery of death more peacefully. Another episode, this time involving the flirtatious visitor Veslovsky, is indicative of the Levins' family culture. As Veslovsky tries to kiss Kitty's hand before retiring, she proclaims that "that's not done in our house" (573). Furthermore, as the same Veslovsky pays court to Kitty—according to Dolly, behaving in a way that would flatter the

average worldly husband—Levin responds by asking him to leave. His behavior is out of place at the Levins'; in their home, the marriage bond is not to be trifled with, not even in jest. In contrast, in Vronsky and Anna's house, Veslovsky's flirtations are dismissed as insignificant, and they are even encouraged by Vronsky himself. Dolly finds Vronsky's country home to be luxurious, but strained, a place where she felt "she was playing in the theatre with actors better than herself" (634). There is ostentatious wealth, but also a miserly refusal to feed the guests' horses anything more than the bare minimum. The nursery is well equipped, but Anna's child is rarely acknowledged. It quickly becomes evident that Anna and Vronsky's home, founded on their forbidden love, happens to lack love for their child, generosity toward guests, and overall decency.

Anna's lack of interest in her daughter stands in particular contrast with Kitty. Despite the help of the nanny and the old family servant Agafya Mikhailovna, Kitty seems to take on the majority of the care for her son herself, running to nurse him as she feels her milk come in, bathing him, walking with him. As a matter of fact, Kitty's intimate care for her Mitya is Tolstoy's concrete way of showing the denouement of Levin's great existential struggle: Levin realizes that the meaning of his life is "to live for God, for the soul," and, furthermore, that up to that point, "he lived (without being aware of it) by those spiritual truths that *he had drunk in with his mother's milk*" (796–97). Levin had already known "of the necessity of loving [his] neighbor and not throttling him" (797) because this truth had simply been *given* to him. He had been immersed in goodness and love, and therefore knew how to love, even when his darkened reason could not yet grasp why. His education in truth and love took place in his home, most likely through the prosaic, daily interactions that make up life in the family: taking care of children, cleaning, entertaining guests, conversing. And this is perhaps the greatest of Tolstoy's lessons about the home, the reminder that life in the home matters, even the small things. And while I have no family estate to leave to my children, I can and will try to see to the trifles that are anything but trifles. □

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