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21L.472 Major European Novels
Fall 2008

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Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*

The narrative voice that Tolstoy perfected for his major novels offers a fine example of what is meant by "the omniscient narrative". The phrase is sometimes taken to mean that the narrative voice knows everything, with the implication that it can know what is going on in the minds of his characters, a capacity denied to us with respect to our fellows in life. The idea of the omniscient narrative is better understood, however, in connection with the notion of the *style indirect libre*. As we have seen, the narrative voice can associate itself with the emotions, perceptions and thoughts of a character without adopting the first-personal "I" it can confine itself for the duration of a scene or an episode to the information that would be available to one character alone, creating the illusion that everything is "seen" from that character's "viewpoint", even though the account of it is not expressed in phrases that the character might have chosen. Or it may choose to confine itself only for some part of an episode to the information available to one character and for the rest provide information available to no character.

A good example is provided by a scene that bridges chapters xiii and xiv in Book One of the novel. Levin has come to St. Petersburg to propose to Kitty, who senses this and dreads the moment, for she has become infatuated with Vronsky. At last the moment arrives; Levin has come early to a dinner-party, expressly to catch Kitty alone and propose to her. In a few, brief paragraphs, we move back and forth repeatedly, from the viewpoint of one to the other. Levin proposes, Kitty refuses. At that moment, Kitty's mother, who dislikes Levin and favors Vronsky, comes into the room:

There was a look of horror on her face when she saw them alone, and their disturbed faces. Levin bowed to her and said nothing. Kitty did not speak or lift her eyes. "Thank God, she has refused him," thought the mother, and her face lighted up with the habitual smile with which she greeted her guests on Thursdays. She sat down and began questioning Levin about his life in the country.

The look of horror can be seen only by Levin, but since Levin has just averted his gaze from Kitty, the fact that his face and Kitty's are disturbed must be the perception of the mother. We have moved to her viewpoint, but are moved out of it midway in the third sentence on by the description of the mother's smile: "the habitual smile with which she greeted her guests on Thursdays". Levin would see the smile but would not know that it was her Thursdays smile. We have moved to the omniscient narrative voice, who knows that the mother has a distinctive smile for each social evening, presumably determined by the sorts of people that she invites to each *soirée*, as fit company for each other. An entire categorization of social distinctions is involved in that smile, and an immense judgement upon the triviality of those, like the mother, who make them-distinctions which lie behind the mother's sense that Vronsky is a superior choice for a husband and that the loss of happiness to Levin and Kitty involved in Kitty's refusal is something to be grateful for.

Tolstoy has mastered to perfection the knack of moving from the viewpoint of one character to another in a single episode, encompassing the viewpoints of several at a time, all the while admitting information available to none of them. The apparent seamlessness of these transitions creates the impression that we see everything that the characters see and more; we penetrate the depth of their souls as far as they do, and further. Paradoxically, the technique allows Tolstoy to create the impression that the characters see very far into their souls themselves, that they have depths that they are capable of plumbing, and that when they fail to see as much as we do, they have knowingly shied away from properly knowing themselves. Tolstoy provides an explicit instance of someone who shies at knowing himself in the character of Sviazhsky, introduced about half-way through the book. Sviazhsky is a minor character, of no particular importance to the plot; he seems deliberately introduced to provide a pure instance of a general condition, a character summed up simply by the fact that he shies at knowing himself. The sharpness of Tolstoy's characterizations-the sense felt across the literate world that his novels seem to transcribe life itself-has much to do with the extent to which the narrative voice locates the point where characters in the fiction cease to be as aware of what the narrative sees as the narrative is itself; each character of importance to the plot will fail at points or in ways particular to the character in question, distinctive from the failure of the others. The character receives its distinction from the others largely by this means-not, as in the works of other novelists, by quirks of speech or by description of conduct or surface features.

1. Tolstoy affixed an epigraph to the novel: *Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord*. Is it appropriate? How does it apply to the novel.
2. We meet one of the two main characters, Levin, by first becoming acquainted with Stepan Oblonsky, who is involved in a serious crisis in his life and who is described more extensively than any other character in the book shortly after his introduction. What is the point of introducing Levin in this way? What judgment would you make of Oblonsky on the basis of the description.
3. Kitty's mother does not like Levin because he makes people feel uncomfortable. Why does he? The contrast between Levin and Oblonsky is understood by both of them: where Levin makes people feel uncomfortable, Oblonsky knows exactly how to put them at ease. Why does the book value Levin more than Oblonsky? Do you agree with the judgment?
4. We are given two descriptions of the ways of in which people may be categorized by their place in society—one by Anna, one by Vronsky. Do they match up? What is the point of observing the distinctions represented by these ways of categorizing people?
5. Illicit sexual liaisons among married people are quite public and accepted by the highest levels of St. Petersburg society, but Anna's affair with Vronsky is not. Why is their affair publicly condemned?
6. There are lengthy episodes, often widely separated from each other in the text, which stand in apparently deliberate contrast with each other. Among them: Vronsky's losing the race and Levin's mowing with the peasants, Vronsky's doing his *lessive* (French for "doing your washing") and Levin's final account of the principles by which he lives, Levin's night of inarticulate joy after Kitty has accepted his proposal of marriage and Anna's day of judgement, in which she marks the odiousness of all people and their enterprises as she goes her way to suicide. What is at issue in each of these contrasts?
7. It has been remarked that *Madame Bovary* must have provided a part of Tolstoy's inspiration for this book. In what respects is Karenin like Charles Bovary? How does he differ?
8. Midway in the story, Vronsky tries his hand at suicide and fails. What is his motive for the attempt? Is the state of mind depicted convincing? Does the attempt mark him as a more serious or a more trivial character than the reader might otherwise think?
9. Kitty meets and admires someone called Varenka. How would you describe her? The book judges her an unfit role-model for Kitty. How is this judgment conveyed? What are the grounds of it and do you accept them?
10. Near the end of the book, the Levins are visited by someone named Vasenska Vesslovsky, whom Levin ultimately throws out of the house. Why does he do so? Was he right?
11. The capacity of the novelist to "enter the mind of his characters" extends at one point to Levin's dog, Laska. What is the point of endowing the animal with human perceptiveness?
12. The two protagonists, Levin and Anna, do not meet until nearly the end of the book. What passes between them? What does the encounter contribute to the narrative as whole?