NOBODY'S LOOKING AT YOU

ESSAYS

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of the divorce and understands "that this decision was based on what the Frenchman had said in his real or pretended trance the evening before."

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It was all real. There has been a great deal written about the preternatural realism of *Anna Karenina*, and about the novel's special status as a kind of criticism-proof text because of the reader's feeling that what he is reading is being effortlessly reported rather than laboriously made up. "We are not to take *Anna Karénine* as a work of art; we are to take it as a piece of life," Matthew Arnold wrote in 1887. "The author has not invented and combined it, he has seen it; it has all happened before his inward eye, and it was in this wise that it happened." In 1946 Philip Rahv elaborated on Arnold's idea:

> In the bracing Tolstoyan air, the critic, however addicted to analysis, cannot help doubting his own task, sensing that there is something presumptuous and even unnatural, which requires an almost artificial deliberateness of intention, in the attempt to dissect an art so wonderfully integrated. . . . Such is the astonishing immediacy with which he possesses his characters that he can dispense with manipulative techniques, as he dispenses with the belletristic devices of exaggeration, distortion, and dissimulation. . . . The conception of writing as of something calculated and constructed— . . . upon which literary culture has become more and more dependent—is entirely foreign to Tolstoy.

Tolstoy—one of literature's greatest masters of manipulative techniques—would smile at this. The book's "astonishing immediacy" is nothing if not an object of the exaggeration, distortion, and dissimulation through which each scene is rendered. Rahv calls these devices belletristic but long before anyone wrote belles lettres, everyone who dreamed was practiced in their use. If the dream is father to imaginative literature, Tolstoy may be the novelist who most closely hews to its deep structures. As we read *Anna Karenina* we are under the same illusion of authorlessness we are under as we follow the stories that come to us at night and seem to derive from some ancient hidden reality rather than from our own, so to speak, pens. Tolstoy's understanding of the sly techniques of dream-creation is at the heart of his novelist's enterprise. Like the films shown in the movie houses of our sleeping minds, Tolstoy's waking scenes draw on a vast repertory of collective emotional memory for their urgency.

Take the famous ballroom scene at the beginning of the novel in which Anna and Vronsky fall in love as if forced to do so by a love potion in a room filled with tulle and lace and music and scent. The scene has inscribed itself on our memories as one of the most vividly romantic scenes in literature. Who can forget the sight of Anna in her simple black gown that shows off her beauty rather than its own and sets her apart from all the other women in the room? As Tolstoy describes her—practically caressing her as he does so—we fall in love with her ourselves. How could Vronsky resist her?

But wait. It isn't Tolstoy who describes Anna—it is through the eyes of Kitty Scherbetskaya that we see her. The scene is written not as a romance but as a nightmare.

Kitty, who loves Vronsky, has come to the ball in the happy expectation that he will propose to her. As in our worst nightmares, when a horrified realization of disaster comes upon us and will not let go of us, Kitty's delight turns to horror as she watches Anna and Vronsky displaying the signs of people falling in love, and grasps the full extent of Vronsky's indifference to her. Kitty will hate Anna for the rest of her life, but Tolstoy—to render his effect of Anna's powerful sexual magnetism—captures the moment when Kitty is herself attracted to Anna. Tolstoy places or rather displaces the weight of Kitty's crushing mortification onto the mazurka that she assumed she would dance with Vronsky and for which she now finds herself without a partner. In writing the scene as an archetypal nightmare of jealousy—in refracting Anna and Vronsky's passion through the prism of Kitty's anguish—Tolstoy performs one of the hidden tours de force by which his novel is animated.

The horse race offers another example of Tolstoy's use of the archetypal nightmare as a literary structure. This time his model is the dream of lateness. In this dream, no matter what we do, no matter how desperately we struggle, we cannot get to the airport, or the play, or the final examination in time. Something holds us back and we struggle against it to no purpose. On the morning of the race Vronsky makes a visit to the mare he is going to ride (and kill). The English trainer asks him where he is planning to go after he leaves the stable, and when Vronsky tells him he is going to see a man named Bryansky, the Englishman—evidently not believing him, knowing, as others seem to know, that he is going to visit Anna—says, "The vital thing's to keep quiet before a race . . . don't get disturbed or upset about anything."

Vronsky drives out to Anna's summer house and becomes predictably disturbed and upset when she tells him she is pregnant. He leaves for Bryansky's house to give him some money—he wasn't lying to the trainer, just not telling the whole truth—and the nightmare proper of lateness begins. Only on the way to Bryansky does he look at his watch and see that it is much later than he thought and that he never should have started out. Should he turn back? No, he decides to keep going. He believes he will just make the race.

At this point, Tolstoy veers away from the classic dream of lateness in which the dreamer never arrives at his destination and allows Vronsky to make the race. But Vronsky is clearly not in the right state of mind. An unpleasant encounter with his brother, who wants him to end the affair with Anna, is another assault on the necessary condition of quiet. When disaster strikes, when Vronsky makes the wrong move that breaks the mare's back, it registers, as these things do when we dream them, as a terrifying inevitability.

All dreams are not nightmares, of course. As we sometimes awaken from a dream in tears, so a number of Tolstoy's scenes draw on the sentimentality—a sort of basic bathos—that is lodged in the hearts of all but the most high-minded among us. One such scene takes place the day after the ball, when her sister Dolly comes to the humiliated Kitty's room in her parents' house and finds her sitting and staring at a piece of rug. Kitty rejects Dolly's attempts to make her feel better, is cold and unpleasant to her, and finally silences her by spitefully flinging Stiva's philandering in her face. "I have some pride,

and never, *never* would I do as you're doing—go back to a man who's deceived you, who has cared for another woman. I can't understand it. You may, but I can't!" Tolstoy continues:

> And saying these words, she glanced at her sister, and seeing that Dolly sat silent, her head mournfully bowed, Kitty, instead of running out of the room, as she had meant to do, sat down near the door and hid her face in her handkerchief.
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> The silence lasted for a minute or two. Dolly was thinking of herself. That humiliation of which she was always conscious came back to her with a peculiar bitterness when her sister reminded her of it. She had not expected such cruelty from her sister, and she was angry with her. But suddenly she heard the rustle of a skirt, and with it the sound of heart-rending, smothered sobbing, and felt arms about her neck. Kitty was on her knees before her.
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> "Dolinka, I am so, so wretched!" she whispered penitently. And the sweet face covered with tears hid itself in Darya Aleksandrovna's skirt.

The novel is filled with such passages (another is the scene in which Dolly comes upon her daughter Tanya and her son Grisha eating cake and crying over Tanya's kind-heartedness in secretly sharing it with him after he had been forbidden dessert as a punishment) that do not advance its plot—almost seem to retard its forward motion—but heighten the sense of piercing reality Arnold and Rahv could find no words to account for.

The novel is also filled with accounts of actual dreams

experienced by characters that entirely lack the vividness of the scenes of waking life. They seem, in their various ways, flat, formulaic, even boring. When Anna dreams of sleeping with both Karenin and Vronsky, we get the point—and feel that Tolstoy is not being very subtle. On the morning after Dolly confronts Stiva with the evidence of his affair with a former governess, he awakens in the study to which he has been banished from this uninterestingly incomprehensible dream:

> Alabin was giving a dinner at Darmstadt; no, not Darmstadt, but something American. Yes, but then, Darmstadt was in America. Yes, Alabin was giving a dinner on glass tables, and the tables sang *Il mio tesoro*—not *Il mio tesoro*, though, but something better, and there were some sort of little decanters on the table, and they were women, too.

"Yes, it was nice, very nice," Stiva recalls. "There was a great deal more that was delightful, only there's no putting it into words, or even expressing it in one's thoughts once awake." Tolstoy was obviously well acquainted with the guard who stops us at the border of sleep and awakening and confiscates the brilliant, dangerous spoils of our nighttime creations. The capacity to re-create these fictions in the unprotected light of day may be what we mean by literary genius. As the full realization of the mess he has made of his domestic life comes over Stiva, he reflects that "to forget himself in sleep was impossible now, at least till nighttime; he could not go back now to the music sung by the decanter women; so he must forget himself in the dream of daily life."