

# Review Article: Signs of Design

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***Anna Karenina*, adapted by Helen Edmundson, directed by Elizabeth Carlin-Metz. Performed by The Vitalist Theatre of Chicago, October to November 2005.**

When I was in graduate school, I attended a performance of Camus's dramatization of Dostoevsky's *The Possessed* directed by Andrzej Wajda. Three prodigious intellects combined, and one might have expected a powerful philosophical and theatrical statement. Instead, I experienced confusion. The same lines seemed to come from incompatible "speech centers" (as Bakhtin might say) saying contradictory things.

Camus had added elements not present in Dostoevsky, and Wajda had done the same with Camus, so occasionally the Russian, the Frenchman, or the Pole seemed to show himself fleetingly alone. But too many scenes made sense from one or two perspectives but not from all three. I imagine that such confusion is common with dramatizations. Sometimes one may try to think away the adapter or director to focus on the original author. Or, when I saw Mary Zimmerman's production of Shakespeare's appallingly bad play *Pericles*, I soon thought away the author to focus on the brilliant directing. If one tries to hold three strong intellects together, one needs to construct a sort of composite implied author, and that is often far from easy.

If a novel has accumulated a history of adaptations for stage or film, then each adapter or director may situate himself or herself among earlier ones. I suppose that no dramatization of *Anna Karenina* quite escapes the shadow of the Garbo film. Dialogues with absent voices can make an adaptation either richer or incoherent.

Helen Edmundson explicitly opposes her adaptation to earlier ones. Originally staged by the Shared

Experience Theatre at the Theatre Royal, Winchester, in 1992, her version then toured Cardiff, Oxford, Leeds, Leicester, Taunton, Salisbury, and London. In 2005, The Vitalist Theatre of Chicago used the same text but a different cast and director.

In her "Author's Note" (is the adapter the author?), Edmundson explains that when she first read Tolstoy's novel, she was wholly absorbed in Anna's love story and found the Levin plot to be an "irritant." After rereading the book, she decided that it was precisely the Levin story that rescues Tolstoy's novel from being just another love story and makes it "something great". She also saw the need to include the Levin story after "watching the films of the novel, all of which deal solely with Anna and none of which get beyond melodrama and cliché" (v).

But how was the Levin story to be included? A leisurely eight-hundred-page novel can develop two or three plots that barely intersect, and perhaps a twenty-four part BBC production (such as the celebrated Palliser series) could gesture in the same direction, but an evening's performance would seem to demand tighter integration to sustain the drama. Besides, Edmundson observes, the Levin story is not especially dramatic in the first place.

Edmundson arrived at interesting solutions. Her text constitutes an important interpretation of the novel. The same cannot be said of Elizabeth Carlin-Metz's production. Carlin-Metz understands the work in utterly hackneyed terms. The title of her statement included in the playbill—"The Divorce Dilemma"—again tacitly excludes Levin and re-Garbo-izes the story. She solemnly informs us that "Like Levin (and Tolstoy), Anna values truth" and that "Like Levin (and Tolstoy), Anna embodies the struggle to find balance between the spiritual and the sensual, the Apollonian and the Dionysian" (Playbill 4). As graders of under-

graduate papers can testify, Nietzsche has a lot to answer for. Carlin-Metz also discovers that the play is about the repressive social conditions of “Tsarist Russia.”

Fortunately, it was easy to think away Carlin-Metz’s weak ideas and focus on Edmundson’s interpretation, which invites those familiar with Tolstoy’s novel to rethink critical orthodoxies.

### The Metanarrative

Edmundson links the Levin and Anna stories by constructing a kind of metanarrative. Levin and Anna repeatedly address each other about their lives. “Where are you now?” one asks the other, and then a scene begins in which one character experiences and the other witnesses. More often, Anna tells her story to Levin and tries to justify herself; Levin comments on the morality and honesty of what she does, thinks, and says.

The play begins with Levin watching Anna encounter the “muffled figure” of her dreams, thereby establishing his presence in her deepest thoughts. After Levin and Anna have addressed each other repeatedly, Stiva is still able to say: “Do you know this man has never met Anna. After all these years. It’s incredible” (Edmundson 75). By this point, we have witnessed the two address each other numerous times, and so Stiva’s comment appears designed to make explicit, as if such explicitness were needed, that their conversations have taken place in a time outside of time. Unfortunately, its palpable falsity to our experience, coming from someone who is less than truthful, renders Stiva’s comment unintentionally comic.

Edmundson uses Levin’s perspective to indicate the ways in which Anna plays false. Edmundson seems to think, as I have argued, that Anna adjusts her memories of Karenin and teaches herself to see him in the worst possible light so as to ease her conscience. At the beginning of the play, she appreciates Karenin. “He is good to me,” she tells Levin, and when Karenin tells Anna that Stiva is to blame for the quarrel with Dolly, “even though he is your brother,” the stage direction declares: “*Anna smiles. She likes this absolute morality in her husband*” (1).

### How Do We Identify the Authoritative Voice?

Stage directions here embody an interesting form of authority. When Anna says that Karenin is good to her we may suspect that she is merely trying to convince herself. The words are suspect. In novel or play, whenever Anna’s earlier assessments of her marriage conflict with her later ones, we may regard either set as rationalization.

In a realist novel, third person testimony is also often unreliable because ever since Jane Austen it has been common to use such statements to report not the author’s views but the character’s thoughts, either actual or what she might say to herself if she verbalized her feeling. Formally, this device is still sometimes called “free indirect discourse” although by now many have come to accept Bakhtin’s idea that it is not the stylistic or grammatical form but the particular kind of double-voicing that makes this device the trademark of the realist novel. Regardless of what terminology one uses, it is clear that in a realist novel the veracity of statements reporting a character’s thoughts depends crucially on whether the statements are authorial testimony or a paraphrase of the character’s inner speech.

Consider Anna’s thoughts at the races as Tolstoy himself describes them:

She was aware of her husband approaching a long way off, and she could not help following him in the surging crowd....She watched his progress to the pavilion, saw him now responding condescendingly to an ingratiating bow, now exchanging nonchalant greetings with his equals, now assiduously trying to catch the eye of some great one of this world, and tipping his big round hat that squeezed the tips of his ears. All these ways of his she knew, and all were hateful to her. “Nothing but ambition, nothing but the desire to get ahead, that’s all there is in his soul,” she thought; “as for these lofty ideals, love of culture, religion, they are only so many tools for advancing.” (219)

We may ask: Is Karenin really “assiduously trying to catch the eye of some great one of this world”? Or is this how Anna perceives his behavior or, even, tries to perceive it? In my view, the reference to “ears” indicates that these impressions, though delivered in the

third person, belong to her. The final direct quotation of her thoughts also suggests that the preceding thoughts were hers as well. We slide deeper and deeper into her perspective until we reach her very words. Nevertheless, as I can testify from experience, thoughtful critics disagree even on cases that (to me) are as clear as this one.

Is there any way that a novelist can make a statement about a character's thoughts *not* plausibly interpretable as a paraphrase of the character's inner speech? One method, I think, involves the use of negatives. If the author says what a character is *not* thinking, it is hard to imagine that the character is thinking just that. The character cannot be conscious of what is not in her mind. The passage about Anna at the races continues:

"It's the breath of his life—falsehood. He knows all about it, he sees it all; what does he care if he can talk so calmly? If he were to kill me, if he were to kill Vronsky, I might respect him. No, all he wants is falsehood and propriety," Anna said to herself, not considering exactly what it was she wanted of her husband, and how she would like to see him behave. She did not understand either that his peculiar loquacity that day, so exasperating to her, was merely the expression of his inward distress and uneasiness. As a child that has been hurt skips about, putting all his muscles into movement to drown the pain, in the same way Aleksey Aleksandrovich needed mental exercise to drown the thoughts of his wife which in her presence and in Vronsky's, with the continual iteration of his name, would force themselves on his attention (210).

"She did not understand": the reason for Karenin's peculiar loquacity, and the simile of the child in pain, must belong to the author because they are what Anna is *not* thinking.

In a drama, stage directions can play the same role. Edmundson's comment—"Anna smiles. She likes this absolute morality in her husband"—clearly indicates that Anna does in fact like Karenin's absolute morality (at this point). The reason stage directions carry this authority is not strictly speaking because they are stage directions but because we do not expect stage directions to be in free indirect discourse, all the more so

because we know the stage directions only when we read the play.

### Showing Falsity

Edmundson also uses the adaptation's metanarrative—the story of Levin's "conversations" with Anna—to indicate the ways in which Anna deceives even herself. In the novel, readers may overlook Anna's neglect of contrary evidence, her strategic forgetting. But in the adaptation Levin interrupts to remind her of it:

ANNA [to Karenin, ironically]: Oh how Christian, how generous, you vile disgusting man.

LEVIN: You don't mean that.

ANNA: I despise you. I...hate every little bit of you.

LEVIN [quoting Anna's earlier words]: "He is good and kind and remarkable in his way."

ANNA: You don't know—no one knows except me. Everyone thinks he's so religious and high-principled and but [sic] they haven't seen what I've seen, they don't know how he has humiliated and crushed everything that was living in me.

LEVIN: I have seen you happy with him.

ANNA: That was pretense.

LEVIN: It was not. (Edmundson 39)

When Anna gets ready for the ball, Levin asks her what she is doing, and when she replies that she is simply getting ready for the ball, Levin answers: "That's not what I mean" (16). Levin witnesses and is disgusted by the consummation scene.

In the novel, Karenin, after his conversion at Anna's apparent deathbed, offers Anna a divorce and custody of Seryozha. He offers to plead guilty to a fictitious charge of adultery, thereby endangering what he believes to be his immortal soul, so she can remarry (and he cannot). Anna refuses because, as she says, she does not want to be indebted to his generosity—a truly Dostoevskian motive that leads her to abandon her son. When she later wishes she had Seryozha and the divorce, she speaks as if she never had the choice. She tells Dolly that she loves two beings and one love necessarily excludes the other—quite forgetting that she could have had both, and at this point has still not even asked for the divorce Karenin offered. Vronsky has in fact asked Dolly to bring the matter up because he has failed to get her to take the matter seriously.

Strangely enough, critics have repeatedly overlooked the fact that Anna could have had Seryozha—testimony, perhaps, to how thoroughly they identify with the heroine. Just as Anna forgets, so do they.

But Edmundson does not forget. To be sure, she changes Anna's motive—in the adaptation, Anna refuses Seryozha out of a sense that as a guilty woman she does not deserve him—but Edmundson, again through a dialogue with Levin, indicates that such a motive also raises moral questions:

KARENIN: I can see that my presence irritates you....Tell me what you want, Anna, Tell me what would give you happiness, and you will have it.

*Pause*

Do you wish for a divorce? You may have a divorce.

ANNA: I don't know....I.... (*She cannot answer.*)

KARENIN: Do you wish to see Alexei Vronsky?

ANNA: Yes. Yes.

VRONSKY *runs in and takes her in his arms and kisses her passionately.* KARENIN *turns and goes.*

ANNA: Oh, God, what am I doing?

LEVIN: Don't do this. Anna, don't.

ANNA: I am yours now. You have taken possession of me.

VRONSKY: We will go to Italy.....

LEVIN: If you do this, I will have nothing more to do with you.

ANNA: I don't want a divorce, it's all the same to me now. I will not take Seryozha. I don't deserve him.

LEVIN: You are leaving your child? You ask God for forgiveness and throw it back in his face. (59)

Of course, nowhere does Tolstoy explicitly offer this condemnation for abandoning Seryozha when she could have kept him. He suggests it, and Edmundson makes the suggestion explicit. But perhaps what Edmundson makes explicit is what Levin, not the author or adapter, would say to Anna? Either way, the suggestion hangs in the air and the audience must consider it.

### “This Is My Story”

Edmundson also suggests (as I have) that Anna is a consummate narcissist. The opening scene features a conversation between Anna and Levin in which she

repeats her name and tries to claim the story as hers alone:

ANNA (*not seeing him*): Anna Karenina. Anna Karenina. I was a shy girl with red hands. Now people nod and bow to me and call me Anna Karenina and kiss my hand, which is white. Anna. Anna.

LEVIN: Anna.

*At the sound of his voice, she rises and backs away.*

I am a friend of your brother, Stiva...

ANNA: You are Levin. You are Constantine Levin. Why are you here?

LEVIN: I don't know.

ANNA: This is my story.

LEVIN: It seems it is mine, too.

ANNA: I don't understand. (1)

Anna's repetition of her own name apparently corresponds to the indications of narcissism in the novel: her servant is Annushka, her daughter is Annie, and when she takes an English girl under her protection, the girl's name is Hannah. Anna surrounds herself with self-portraits. We constantly find her changing her clothes or standing in front of the mirror. Edmundson has her preening and asking Levin about her looks when she is on the way to suicide. When she reads an English novel, she does so narcissistically: it is distasteful for her to follow other people's lives. Edmundson has her say, a bit too explicitly, “I am reading an English novel on the train and the hero is getting what he wants from life, and I can hardly bear to read it because his story is better than mine” (17).

Of course, Anna is the eponymous heroine, and so the repetition of her name, especially in an opening scene of an adaptation, recalls the novel's and the play's title. Given the dual plot, it leads us to ask why the novel is called *Anna Karenina*, rather than, let us say, *Two Families* (as Tolstoy once considered calling it). Or Tolstoy could have picked some other title that fits more than one plot in a multi-plot novel like (to cite two novels Tolstoy had in mind when writing *Anna*) *Middlemarch* or *Can You Forgive Her?* Eliot's title invokes the place and culture that shape the lives of all characters, and Trollope's question applies to the heroines of both major plots, Alice Vavasor and Lady Glencora.

If we consider Anna's narcissism, the reason for the title suggests itself: it is what *Anna* would call the novel. "This is my story"; I do not understand why you, Levin, are here; the story is about me, Anna Karenina, Anna Karenina, Anna, Anna. Edmundson, whose preface differentiates her adaptation from others because it is not only about Anna Karenina, also differentiates her view from Anna's. Think of the difference when this title applies to a dramatization that includes only her story as opposed to naming the novel or adaptation that includes both stories. I myself believe that Tolstoy's title is to be understood as the work's first instance of its heroine's inner speech.

### The Walking Symbol

At times, Edmundson makes her points in a heavy-handed way. Perhaps the need to give dramatic unity to a sprawling work in which a great deal is not dramatic leads to shortcuts that are too short. The "muffled figure" from Anna's dream, who represents death as unambiguously as a grim reaper, reappears frequently as a kind of metacharacter. I will not repeat my reasons for thinking that Tolstoy's novel does not rely on foreshadowing; it is, instead, Anna who believes in omens. But even if one does think the novel uses foreshadowing, one may be disturbed by a walking symbol. The dramatization begins:

#### *Music*

*A man, LEVIN, is standing in the shadows of the stage, watching.*

*A bent, muffled figure enters, dragging a sack. He mutters. There is the sound of a hammer on iron.*

*A woman, ANNA, follows the figure. She is scared, agitated, but she wants to see his face and hear his words....She takes hold of the sack, clings to it, and is dragged across the stage. She is desperate. The figure goes. (1)*

One can almost hear the high-school English teacher reciting: Now, class, what does the muffled figure represent?

When Karenin experiences Christian love, it is this love that, amazingly, actually saves Anna's life: with the power of such love, he "*summons all his strength and removes the arms of the muffled figure from around her*" (Edmundson 58). In the novel, we are told that if

not for Karenin, the baby Annie would have died, but here it is Anna whom he saves, and not because of prosaic care (as with Annie) but because of a mystical power. One danger of thinking Tolstoy uses foreshadowing becomes apparent: where one mystical power reigns, why not others? Realism goes by the by.

### Allegory?

Edmundson's treatment of the horse race is heavy handed in a more interesting way. Like so many critics, she sees the race as allegorical: Anna is Frou-Frou, the beautiful mare, and Vronsky makes an unpardonable mistake with one as with the other. Edmundson's scene dramatizes this reading:

ANNA: I am at the race track. He is riding in the last race....All the other riders have stallions—big, powerful horses which stamp the ground, but Alexei has a mare called Frou Frou. She is delicate, with fine soft skin and a gentle head, but she is spirited too and her neck is strong and she has good blood in her veins.

VRONSKY *calms ANNA as if she were a horse.*

She is nervous he is calming her...

....

VRONSKY *has seduced ANNA down upon the ground and now he is riding her like a horse.*

The audience witnesses Vronsky riding Anna: a blatant literariness we might expect from a lesser writer, but not from Tolstoy. If we find this scene grotesque, we may ask whether the conventional allegorical reading is also inadequate. I think Barbara Hardy's contrast between Lawrence and James on the one hand and Tolstoy on the other is correct:

When Vronsky loses the race and kills his mare the scene is not, I think, symbolic in the way suggested by Joyce Cary in his book *Art and Reality*. We do not have to translate the objects and events and see them as transparent windows for the main relationships of the action. They exist in themselves, as characteristic and particular demonstrations. Vronsky's fatigue and anxiety before the race link his love with his failure, in the most practical way...Each moment has its convincing immediacy, and falls naturally into the total impression of character and action with the absolute

minimum of artistic heightening. The mare does not stand for Anna, nor Vronsky's mistake for his "failure" in love. Not only are the actual reasons and motives importantly distinct but the feeling for each of these losses is perfectly appropriate to the particular situation. Vronsky loses the race and kills the mare because his absorption in Anna leads him to miscalculate. He loses Anna and she kills herself for more complex reasons...If the Tolstoy scene is symbolic then it is so in a much more diffuse and imperfect manner...In Lawrence, the action often proceeds by a symbolic process...In Tolstoy it is part of the natural flow of events, and symbolic only in the way events are symbolic in life, in their typicality which is only part of their nature and function. (880)

Of course, we may draw parallels between Anna and Frou-Frou, but we may also note the differences. Vronsky is in total control of the horse, but the slightest acquaintance with Anna makes it clear that she pretty much controls the relationship with Vronsky.

Then why the partial parallels, the merely "diffuse" and partial symbolism? Because life repeats patterns but does not work by allegory, which (like omens) suggests a pre-given plan we merely execute; and because partial similarities invite us to see differences as well. Tolstoy above all resists anything that makes

the world too simple, from Pfühl's science of war to Levin's idea that fallen women are all vile, to critics' detection of allegory in the contingencies of life.

As we reflect on where the adaptation falls short, we may recognize that even here it raises interesting questions. Edmundson's reading is coherent, and whether she realizes or obscures Tolstoy's ideas, Edmundson provokes thought. She knows what she is doing, and in appreciating her adaptation we can also learn a good deal about Tolstoy's novel.

### **Works Cited**

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