

## SOME OBSERVATIONS ON STIVA'S DREAM

JAMES L. RICE, UNIVERSITY OF OREGON

Ian Saylor's intriguing research pursues a key element of Stiva Oblonsky's dream—its reference to Mozart's famous aria "Il mio tesoro"—through several contexts in *Anna Karenina*, *Don Giovanni*, and the life of Tolstoy. Saylor shows how the opera is used as background to Anna's ordeal with society, and he reminds us that *Don Giovanni* was a favorite with Tolstoy and his family, and was often performed on the twin pianos at Yasnaya Polyana. A remarkable insight of Saylor's work is that the novel's biblical epigraph with its ponderous Pauline theme of *vengeance*, upon which so much commentary has been lavished, is immediately inverted in Stiva's dream world (Ch. 1, pg. 1), where *vengeance* is sung in the exuberant tonalities of grand comic opera (Saylor 1996).

Saylor's work is a signal to reconsider all the elements of Stiva's dream, its conception, symbolism, design, and function. No doubt in the vast literature on Tolstoy some of our remarks below have been anticipated. But if Mozart's aria has indeed passed without arousing analytic curiosity, then it seems likely that the homelier features of the dream have likewise escaped close scrutiny. A recent article on the opening chapters of *Anna Karenina* describes Oblonsky as awakening "from his banal paradisiacal dream of glass tables and decanters resembling women to a reality not yet even purgatorial." (Jackson 350) Of course in a sense this is so, yet *banality* was certainly not the sole effect sought by Tolstoy in drafting and editing the dream text. The dream presents certain features of obscure symbolism (a mode of *ostranenie*), some of it no doubt more obvious to readers of the post-Freudian age than to Tolstoy's public. However, the symbolic design of Stiva's dream shrewdly mimics the structure of real dreams, and Tolstoy's personal understanding of dream process is already in evidence here. (Tolstoy 1957 57-8, 473) Finally, in regard to the banality of Stiva's dream, one recalls that most of Freud's own dreams, analyzed at length and with zest in *Die Traumdeutung*, are surpassingly banal, far more so than the dream of Stiva Oblonsky.

We see Stiva, his dream, his world, and his author as self-evidently intertwined, but here we seek mainly to describe the creative development of the dream text and its place in the novel's opening chapters. Tolstoy and Stiva share (obviously) a perception of matrimony often inescapable for spouses of either gender: "It is a noose, you know," says the bachelor Mr. Brooke in the fourth chapter of Eliot's *Middlemarch*, by now well-argued to be the novel that *Anna Karenina* herself is reading. (Eliot 39; Blumberg) Stiva's answer to the matrimonial noose is philandering, Tolstoy's—to make Stiva an innate, well-groomed genius at it. The following passage defined Stiva (and Tolstoy) at a stroke for me, forty years ago:

*"Nekhorosho! Est' chto-to trivial'noe, poshloe v ukhazhivan'e za svoeiu guvernantkoi. No kakaia guvernantka!" (On zhivo uspomnil chernye plutovskie glaza m-lle Roland i ee ulybku) (Ch. 2).*

Not good! There's something trivial and vulgar about chasing after the governess in your own family. But what a governess! (He vividly recalled the dark roguish eyes of Mlle. Roland, and her smile.)

The *author* of such a character, capable of conveying such resilient and good-humored extramarital enthusiasm under duress ("What a governess!"), is someone to be reckoned with, someone from whose lips the solemn righteousness of the Pauline God now sounds even more forced and remote. Like his creator, Stiva is a shameless punster, and we see him in these early chapters characteristically remodeling and rehearsing his behavior in covert formulas. Above all we see Stiva (and his author) toying with a specific behavior (a "brain reflex") that drives or destroys the sexual bonding of the characters in the novel—their *smiles*. In the passage quoted above, we note the fetching smile of Mlle Roland; and later the smile of Anna (Stiva's sister) lures Vronsky, from the first moment. Stiva's own involuntary smile destroys his wife's inclination to be reconciled with him. As he leaves that encounter, Stiva thinks: "That silly smile was the cause of it all." The context makes us suppose that he means his *own* silly smile. (Ch 1) But an early draft assigns to Stiva the identical thought in connection with Mlle Roland, in the context quoted above: "True, it's not good. There is something trivial, vulgar in it. . . . But *it was that smile that did it all.*" (Tolstoy 86—emphasis added) The final version of this passage (Ch. 2) retains only the *smile* of the governess, not Stiva's noodling about its being the cause of everything. But Tolstoy, and now we, might enjoy his private joke, that in fact it is Mlle Roland's smile that Stiva, leaving Dolly, recalls as the cause of *everything* (i.e., everything erotic and valuable between them, and the consequences). His own silly smile, after all, merely exasperated Dolly and terminated their brief, pointless encounter, a routine conjugal contretemps. "The cause of it all" seems more commensurate with Mlle Roland. One suspects, behind Tolstoy's physiology of smiles advanced in these early chapters and the drafts, a veiled reference to Helen of Troy, "the face that launched a thousand ships." By chance, such an outcome for Tolstoy's novel was to be supplied by current Russian history, in the spectacle of a depressive nation dragging itself to war.

One more trait of Tolstoy's dreamer, before we turn to the dream: Stiva's well-fed, well-groomed body is an emblem of cultivated narcissism, condensed in the Tolstoyan tag-phrase "*polnoe, vykholennoe telo*" (Ch. 1; cf. Ch. 2: "*kholenoe telo barina*"). In this formula one catches an echo of Greek comedy, not to mention the decadent ritual of Russian life which Tolstoy's novel celebrates, after its fashion. In the early drafts of the novel, stately, plump Stiva Oblonsky was instead Stiva (Stepan Arkad'ich) *Alabin*. When Alabin dreams the prototype of the novel's dream, it begins: "Misha Kortnev daval obed" (a luncheon served on *glass tables*, with some kind of *little women* present = the core of the finished dream). When in later drafts *Alabin* became *Oblonsky*, then the name Misha Kortnev was displaced in the dream, by *Alabin*: "Da Alabin daval obed". Stiva's dream host is thus his alter ego, who is also an earlier *anagrammatic* incarnation: aLaBiN > aBLoN-skii. The name Oblonsky may have been suggested by the Princes Obolensky, to

whom Tolstoy was related by marriages, but *Oblonsky* seems to have been chosen primarily as a surrogate of the original, more allusive name *Alabin*, to which it is acoustically linked.

Before proposing some symbolic values for the name *Alabin*, we must review four stages in Tolstoy's construction of the core dream, which begins as *Alabin's* dream and becomes *Oblonsky's*—with *Alabin* internalized as majordomo of *Stiva's* unconscious. (See Tolstoy 1939: 79, 86-89, 92-94.)

(I) Alabin dreams "with sweet smile"

- (A) Миша Кортнев давал обед
- (B) в Нью Йорке
- (C) на стеклянных столах
- (D) да и какие-то маленькие женщины, а хорошо.

"much more that was excellent,  
but I can't recall"

(«помимо его воли, лицо его очень мило и приятно, хотя и несколько насмешливо улыбнулось»)

(II) Oblonsky recalls, "smiling"

- (A) Да Алабин давал обед
- (B) в Нью Йорке
- (C) на стеклянных столах
- (D) да и какие-то маленькие графинчики

(DD) и они же женщины  
"more that was excellent"  
etc.

(«красивые глаза его становились более и более [блестящие] «улыбка исчезнула [...]»)

(E) «Ах, если бы заснуть опять! Как там в Америке безтолково, но хорошо было». Но заснуть уже нельзя было

(III) the published dream

- (A) Алабин давал обед
- (B) в Дармштадте;
- (BB) нет, не в Дармштадте, а что-то американское.
- (BB) Да, но там Дармштадт был в Америке.
- (A) Да, Алабин давал обед
- (C) на стеклянных столах
- (X) да и столы пели: *Il mio tesoro*,
- (Y) и не *Il mio tesoro*, а что-то лучше
- (D) и какие-то маленькие графинчики, и они же женщины

In the published text, *Stiva's replay* of the dream (= variant IV) causes him to plunge into thought, smiling. But there is no return to the hedonistic dream world (for the moment!)—as *Stiva* reflects in Chapter II, just after he recalls the alluring eyes and smile of *Mlle Roland*:

*Zabyt'sia snom uzhe nel'zia, po krainei mere do nochi, nel'zia  
uzhe vernut'sia k toi muzyke, kotoruiu peli grafinchiki-*

*zhenshchiny; stalo byt', nado zabyt'sia snom zhizni.*

No longer was it possible to forget oneself in dream, at least until night. It was no longer possible to return to the music that the carafe-women were singing; so one must forget oneself in the dream of life. (IV = fragmented replay variant)

Here Tolstoy gives us the final condensation of Stiva's dream, eliminating one redundant stroke of melodrama—escape to America (which was the only feature *remembered* in MS variant II, above), in favor of the last touch added to the dream, and the most sublime—escape into eroticized music, specifically Mozartian and yet "something better" (a clear impossibility). Here Tolstoy (or is it Stiva?) deploys an inane trope from literary antiquity, *the false dream of life*. Also in the drafts this commonplace is twice applied to Oblonsky/Alabin: "Enticement by the dream of life never left him"; and, "Stepan Arkad'ich was completely under the delusion of the dream of life." (Tolstoi 1939: 89, 100) This cliché apparently helped motivate Tolstoy to embellish Stiva's dream with particular virtuosity, as a prelude to the novel's plunge into "life's dream."

The central features of Stiva's dream all converge in images and concepts of women, representing a fantasy of flight to the hinterlands (Darmstadt/New York), and a wish for unencumbered security from the importunings of conventional virtue and conjugal duty. A luncheon is served to the dreamer on glass tables. Freud observed that tables of any kind are frequent dream symbols of women, and some of his reasons may seem plausible. Tables are angular, and so represent feminine curves by antithesis, a routine feature of dream symbol-formation in Freud's view. Tables are horizontal, presenting fine feasts, and so symbolize women in their sexual aspect (Freud VI.E., VI.E.x) The little decanters (*grafinchiki* < *grafin* < Italian *caraffa* or Arabic *gharrafa*), like the tables, offer the dreamer refreshment. They are also abstractly feminine in shape, with slender neck, flaring mouth, and rounded body, and their Russian designation is clearly resonant with the word for "countesses" (*grafini*). Carafes, in standard Russian dictionary definitions, are ordinarily made of *glass*, which allies them with the *tables* of Stiva's dream. As the dream fades from Stiva's memory, the singing tables are displaced by singing carafe-women, and Mozart's aria becomes generalized "music."

The opening words of the aria ("Il mio tesoro") —"*my treasure*"—refer to a *virtuous woman* whose ill-treatment must be avenged. But just as each of the other central images, "il mio tesoro" is displaced or modified, becoming "*not 'Il mio tesoro', but something better*" (Cf. Darmstadt > something American; carafes > women; the tables sang > the carafe-women sang). "*Something better*" than *my treasure* must mean Stiva's extramarital love object, in specifically hedonistic terms *something better* than his treasured wife Dolly. The dream, in Freud's basic understanding, is a wish to displace the conventional morality *of the aria*, and of the dreamer's *conjugal existence*, with "*something better*" for Stiva, to wit, adultery without consequences and, so to speak, "*with a song in one's heart.*"

However, Mozart's great aria (the final element added to the dream by Tolstoy) dominates the dream inescapably. Its familiar title conjures its melody and repeated threat of vengeance, and leads us to conclude that Stiva's dream is not only a wish for lawless abandon but also a punishment (a paradox which Freud eventually recognized), imposed by the dreamer upon himself—though a punishment quite cheerfully bearable, after all! The fact that Mozart's great tenor aria is performed here by a chorus of women's voices may be seen as one of the little jokes that dreams sometimes play—a jarring note in Stiva's wishful erotic escapade. When his dream-women take up Mozart's song of vengeance, it may remind us that the exhilarating score of *Don Giovanni* transforms the vicissitudes of love into something agreeable and exalted after all! But grand opera is only a more flamboyant form of art than the novel, not something different in kind, as Tolstoy was well aware. Therefore Stiva's dream is a metapoetic debate about the novelist's aesthetic and message, a point to which we return shortly.

Two dream symbols remain to be discussed, the constituent *glass* of the banquet tables (and the carafe-women), and the impresario of Stiva's dream escapade, *Alabin* (the dreamer's own persona from variant drafts of the novel). Dal' lists some suggestive Russian proverbs and idioms about glass: (A) "Kak steklyshko chist (ili trezv)" ("Pure, or sober, as cut glass [or a splinter of glass]"); (B) "Podoben stklu chistu" ("Pure as crystal glass"—from *Revelation* 4, 6); (C) "Znat' steklianoe sudno po zvonu, cheloveka po recham" ("A glass vessel's worth is known by its tone, a man's by his speech."); (D) "Zhena ne steklo, mozhno ee pobit'" ("A wife is not glass: you can give her a beating.") The purity of Stiva's glass dream world is of course belied by its illicit, adulterous nature, hence the symbolism of glass on this level is a wish to sanctify. But the erotic glass vessels of Stiva's dream make themselves known not just as objects intoning (C), but through Mozart's aria of *vengeance* for the woman wronged. These glass vessels eloquently ("*po recham*") thwart the dreamer's erotic wish by invoking his punishment instead! Finally, Stiva's dream also reverses the brutal truth of the folk saying (D): for these table-carafe-women *are* made of glass, betokening a fragile immunity from male violence, and they sing of revenge.

The name *Alabin* is elaborately multivalent, an appropriate symbol of the novel's covert gestation, and of Oblonsky's unconscious. *Alabin*: it has something not Russian about it, something 'Oriental', reminiscent (as a colleague suggested to me) of *Aladdin*. Or, why not *Ali-Baba*? Names and nouns that resonate with *Alabin* have exotic associations. The founder of a Yaroslav princely line that died out in the 16th century was *Alabysh*, and Khan Uzbek, the Golden Horde leader who converted to Islam (died 1342), was nicknamed *Alabuga* in Russian chronicles. A linear measure used in the Caucasus is the *alabi* (one arshin, or 28 inches); and more insidiously alien, *a-la-bess* is a stock-exchange term (< French, "a la baisse") meaning a downward swing of prices. *Alábyr'* is a mysterious metal found under lakes or seas far away, in fairytales (Dal'). *Alabandin*, like its English equivalent, is a precious stone known in antiquity, possibly the ruby or sapphire (Dal'). *Alabastr* (Old Russian *alavastr*) was at first a pure white lime sulphate used to make vases and ornaments (hence the simile "skin white as alabaster").

The same term was applied to a liturgical vessel for myrrh or aromatic oils (Dal'), and to a *narrow-throated metallic perfume flask* in various biblical contexts (Sreznevskii). The connotations of *alabastr* conjure up a pagan rite involving the narrow-throated carafe-women, the well-groomed Oblonsky, the underworld spirit Alabin. Another vocable that seems thoroughly appropriate in its allegorical associations here is the legal term *álibi* (< English, "alibi" < Latin = "elsewhere"), attested in Russian from 1843. In this light, Alabin is the very emblem of Oblonsky's alibi: "not in Darmstadt, but in America" (elsewhere). The Russian given name Albin (<Latin, *albus*) connotes "white", the sinner's wish to be seen as pure. But the very articulation of *Alabin*—with its play of erect tongue in "sweet" semivowels (*l*, *n*) around the "genitalic" bilabial (*b*)—is maximally erotic, according to theories of phonetic metaphor. (Fónagy 1963: 70, 90) The acoustically exotic symmetry of *Alabin* dissolves into the quotidian *Oblonsky* (cf. *bolonka*; *blin* 'lapdog', 'pancake'), an inept and comic philanderer. And let us note that *Alabin* anagrammatically represents Stiva's silly smile (*Alabin* /*ulybnulsia* /*ulybka*). The dream itself, like the smile, can be lightly and conveniently dismissed as "a reflex of the brain" (as Stiva himself whimsically does, echoing the title of Sechenov's popular physiological treatise). Tolstoy's dream text has all the signs of Freudian ambivalence: a wish for erotic escape bearing omens of the dreamer's guilt and punishment. But Stiva emerges with mental health and impunity. The author grants him safe passage back to the dream of life.

Yet Stiva's dream is more than a sign of the dreamer's shallowness, and more than a comic conceit to offset the pointedly lackluster cliché of "life's dream." We see Oblonsky's dream world in its fading, its symbols dissolving and realigning into ever more redundant and condensed emblems of eros, or more generally—emblems of pleasure tinged with pain, above all the pain (and "sweet sorrow") of lost love, which *Anna Karenina* so richly and darkly elaborates. We see another form of love lost, from Stiva's point of view, in the joy shining from his favorite daughter's face, followed directly by an unloved son's indifference to his father's "cold smile" (Chapter 3). This disparity, its terrible incomprehensibility, is the major theme of Tolstoy's novel.

Obviously Tolstoy had long puzzled over the structure and meaning of dreams before he designed the dream of Oblonsky. But his extant views on the subject do not afford much insight into the function of dreams in his novels. For the present, suffice it to say that Tolstoy had a clear understanding of *condensation* as a routine principle of dream construction (many impressions compressed into a single dream image; many years of a life's problems compressed into a single dream), and he felt that a dream fashioned disparate elements into a *unity*. Somebody who knew a dreamer well might grasp the dream's concise symbolism, yet a dream's lucid message becomes nonsense for the dreamer himself upon awakening.

These views, paraphrased from sources of the late 1870's and early '80's, we assume to have been more or less consciously held by the author when he began to draft *Anna Karenina*. (Tolstoi 1957: 55, 57, 473; Rice) Accordingly, the novelist might make of a fictive dream whatever seemed

necessary—prophecy or revelation, embellishment of the truth, its distortion, or its concealment.

The core problem of *Anna Karenina* is loss of affect: not only loss of love between people in fiction and life, but also loss of the empathy that enables a creative artist to embrace the work and carry the affair through to the end. Tolstoy wrote of this phenomenon in his diary on November 5, 1873, soon after he finished the first drafts of *Anna Karenina*:

Художник звука, линий, цвета, слова, даже мысли в страшном положении, когда не верит в значительность выражения своей мысли. Отчего это зависит? Не любовь к мысли. Любовь тревожна. А эта вера спокойна. И она бывает и не бывает у меня. Отчего это? Тайна. (Tolstoy 1952: 67)

An artist of sound, lines, color, the word, even thought, is in a frightful position when he doesn't believe in the significance of expressing his thought. Upon what does this depend? Not *love* for the thought. Love is disturbing. But this belief is calm. And with me it comes and goes. What causes this? It is a mystery.

The artist's feeling for his own creativity is neither precisely love nor is it religious faith, but aspects of both are felt and implied in Tolstoy's private formulation. By this time personal crises of erotic and religious being, of which Tolstoy wrote in *Confession*, were already well developed. But what disturbs him in the passage above is an inner process which plays off narcissism against depression, eros against death, "it comes and goes." Many readers of course love Tolstoy for his prodigious, precocious ability to express the affects of *loss* in the modern age. Although all process entails loss, nevertheless "there is no reason, of any ultimate metaphysical generality, why this should be the whole story" (Whitehead 401). For Tolstoy, "the whole story" also entails salvaging shards of life broken or trivialized by tragedy and depression, and folding them back into the design. Stiva's dream seditiously intones on page one, and Stiva sallies forth to endure, generally as a positive force among negative values until the novel's end, when he too abruptly becomes a maudlin patriot. Otherwise, he plays a balanced role in the soap opera that breaks his sister's spirit. In Tolstoy's aesthetic, that balance seems a virtue. As war twists the national psyche, perhaps one may say that Stiva's behavior is all perfectly human, and therefore perfectly incomprehensible. A mystery.

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## NOTES

Thanks, for their suggestions, to my colleagues Nathan Rosen and Cynthia Vakareliyska.

\*\* My sources for defining various Russian words are standard reference works (the dictionaries of Dal', Sreznevskii, and the AN 1950-65; Brockhaus-Efron; N. A. Petrovskii, *Slovar' russkikh lichnykh imen*, 1980). These have been cited only in some cases of more unusual meanings.

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— JLR