

THE PASSAGE-TO-THE-ACT IN ANNA KARENINA

Maire Jaanus

The amazing, curt chapter, describing the aftermath of Anna and Vronsky's first sexual encounter, is one of the most horrific post-coital scenes ever written, and key for an interpretation of her passage-to-the-act. Here we already see, figuratively, the body 'cut in pieces' that will become Anna's literal destiny. The chapter describes sexual reality as the enactment of a murder.¹ What the reality of phallic *jouissance* 'murders' is love and desire. Without the protective covers of her desire-induced fantasy and the feminine *jouissance* with which she has loved at once Vronsky and her son, Anna is terrified. The extraordinary scene shows how alienated a woman can be from the phallic and how foreign male *jouissance* can be for her. Anna is a stranger to the phallus. What is Vronsky's bliss is not hers at all: "I cannot help remembering what is life itself to me. For one moment of that bliss. . . ." 'What bliss,' she said with disgust and horror" (136).

Phallic reality, normally a defense against the unlimited *jouissance* of the real, is, for Anna, an encounter with the real. It signifies becoming the passive, though willing object (as her nightmare tells us) of another's wavering and uncertain desire. In the nightmare, she is deeply satisfied to be the sexual partner of both her husband and Vronsky. Consciously, there is horror, but unconsciously, there is satisfaction.² Before the suicide, Anna concedes that she does not want to be anything else but Vronsky's mistress. However, she believes that "this desire awakens disgust in him, and that arouses anger in me, and it cannot be otherwise" (690).

For Anna, sexuality is a crime, a fall: "she writhed, slipping down... She would have fallen... if he had not held her" (135). Hereafter, her own symbolic activities and fantasies cannot hold her nor can her newborn daughter become a substitute for the son whom she has lost. As Anna continues to fall and to lose all her social and emotional bonds, sexual desire becomes her exclusive focus, her drug against fear, her one remaining, vital assurance of a link between herself and another human being. She is too frightened, anxious, and exhausted to sustain the more distant position of symbolic love object. Sex and anxiety go together nowhere more resolutely than in *Anna Karenina*.

Her divided, lawless, and impossible position as adulteress overwhelms her and disables her from symbolizing the experience. 'Not another word', Anna repeats twice (136). The hole that sexuality makes in her symbolic fills with the anxiety of being only an object.³ Finally, Anna's guilt and anxiety drive her to pay with her own life (and with the 'murder' simultaneously of her copartner in crime) the debt of having sacrificed her son, her husband, and her own ethical self for a pleasure that didn't come to be: "Count Vronsky and I have also been unable to find that pleasure from which we expected so much" (690).⁴

Lacan distinguishes passing to the act from acting out. Acting out involves a fantasy scene, dialogue, and others. It is a symbolic message, a challenge, or an appeal to the attention of the other. The passage-to-the-act, by contrast, erases subjectivity (but thereby allows rebirth).⁵ It is the equivalent on the mental level of the 'little death' of orgasm. The pure act of suicide, of course, attacks the self both as subject and object. It is characterized by 'an appalling certitude' and the abolition of all doubt. Initially, Anna draws pleasure from the fantasy of her own death. She enjoys seeing herself being loved and mourned by Vronsky. She also enjoys the idea of his suffering and her cruelty to him because she has deprived him of the cause of his desire. In the final act, however, Anna's last energies are aimed with hatred beyond Vronsky at the core of a torment so tied to life itself that it can only be extinguished together with the extinction of her own living being.

Anna's radical self-division makes certitude more and more desirable. Before her suicide, Anna convinces herself that she has rational certitude. The truth as she sees it is that hatred has primacy and that only hatred exists. No one loves anyone. Even her love for her son was false. "I thought I loved him [my son] too... Yet... I exchanged his love for another's, and did not complain of the change as long as the other love satisfied me" (691). She attempts to split the ineluctable conjunction of hatred and love (the representatives of the death and life forces) that Lacan termed *hainamoration*.⁶ The consequence is a radically de-sexualization of the entire realistic scene around her. Everything begins to look odious. She flees from others as if they were lepers.

The note that comes from Vronsky at this critical moment is too brief and too carelessly written to provide the symbolic hold and reassuring link to an imaginary 'you' that she needs. "'No, I will not let you torture me,' she thought, addressing her threat not to him nor to herself but to that which forced her

to suffer" (694). This 'you' that forces her to suffer is the original 'you' (beyond Vronsky or herself) that is not incorporated as the likeness or the familiar other human; it is the 'you' that remains the stranger, the unfamiliar, that belongs to *das Ding*.⁷ The only thing she has left to negate this stranger (glimpsed in the form of the uncanny peasant doing something to her body with a phallic iron) with is herself as an object. Now the imaginary acting out of the desire for death disintegrates into a de-subjectified need for an act of vengeance and punishment: "There, into the very middle, and I shall punish him and escape from everybody and from myself" (695). As regards Vronsky, the other object against whom her death wish (and her desire to retain value and mastery in some form) is directed, she succeeds.⁸ Afterwards, Vronsky "could think of her only as triumphant, having carried out the threat of inflicting on him totally useless but irrevocable remorse" (707).

She looks for the opening, the hole between the two wheels of the train. She throws herself. She falls. Yet, even then, she reflects: "Where am I? What am I doing? Why?" She wishes to rise, to throw herself back, but something huge and relentless struck her on the head and dragged her down" (695). Tragically, the foundational human ambivalence remains. 'The appalling certainty' is undone; we have no access to a final, unambivalent hatred or love. The suicidal being is, to the end, fully entangled in language and subjectivity. Finally, it is not the subject that acts but the object, the train, which is a large metaphor for destruction by sexual intercourse. 'The shadow of the object' falls on her; it is not only she as the object that falls.⁹ The agent of death is the sexual intercourse or traffic symbolized by the train, as Freud often reminded us. The form of suicide Anna chooses is another symbol for the sexual encounter she never named. The subject names, the object acts.

Presented at the NLS-Congress, London, May 2005

1. "He felt what a murderer must feel when looking at the body he has deprived of life... But in spite of the murderer's horror of the body of his victim, that body must be cut in pieces. . ." L.Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, trans. Alymer Maude, W.W. Norton & Company Ltd, New York, 1970, pp 135-136. Future references in the text are to this edition.
2. The structure of the chapter clearly confirms that sexuality is "strictly consubstantial with the dimension of the unconscious." J. Lacan, *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 1978, p. 146.
3. "The libido cannot but participate in the hole." J. Lacan, *Le Sinthome*, lesson of December 9, 1975.
4. "The law of talion lays it down that a murder can only be expiated by the sacrifice of another life: self-sacrifice points back to bloodguilt." S. Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, SE: 154.
5. See J.-A. Miller, "Jacques Lacan: Bemerkungen über sein Konzept des Passage à l'acte," *Wo Es War*, 7/8 (1989)
6. J. Lacan, *Seminar XX: On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge 1972-1973*, trans. Bruce Fink, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 1998, p. 90-1.
7. J. Lacan, *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Denis Porter, W.W. Norton & Company, 1992) 56.
8. "Probably no one finds the mental energy required to kill himself unless, in the first place, in doing so he is at the same time killing an object with whom he has identified himself, and, in the second place, is turning against himself a death-wish which had been directed at someone else." S. Freud, "A Case of Homosexuality in a Woman," SE XVIII: 162
9. S. Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, SE XVII: 109.