

Bookmark

Tolstoy and Lacan: Phallic Jouissance and the passage à l'acte in Anna Karenina

Maire Jaanus
Professor of English & Comparative Literature
Barnard College/Columbia University

If we throw a crystal to the floor, it breaks; but not into haphazard pieces. It comes apart along the lines of cleavage into fragments whose boundaries, though they were invisible, were predetermined by the crystal's structure. Mental patients are split and broken structures of the same kind.

Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*

Phallic Jouissance

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 suicide.¹ The scene describes their passion as the enactment of a murder.

And he felt what a murderer must feel when he looks at the body he has deprived of life. This body deprived of life was their love, the first period of their love. There was something *horrible and loathsome* in his recollections of what had been paid for with this terrible price of shame... But, despite all the murderer's horror before the murdered body, *he had to cut this body into pieces* and hide it, and he had to make use of what the murder had gained by his murder.

And as the murderer falls upon this body with animosity, as if with passion, drags it off and *cuts it up*, so he covered her face and shoulder with kisses. (my italics)

Rather than joyous and life-affirming, the sex act is traumatic and violent. Vronsky attacks Anna's body with an aggressivity that Tolstoy, in an extended comparison, likens to an act of murder. He is a murderer and she is his victim. Sex is a criminal act. His lovemaking as if "cuts" her body "into pieces." Figuratively, the scene anticipates the "cut up" body and self-mutilating act that are Anna's literal destiny at the end. The brief chapter concludes with the account of a nightmare and the word "horror."

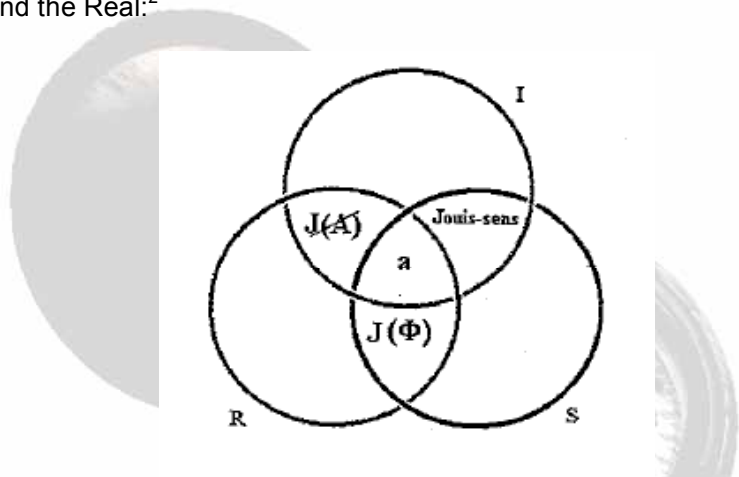
Tolstoy's use of the murder metaphor expresses the extreme violence of Vronsky's long repressed desire. Over the course of a year, the sexual possession of Anna had become

¹ Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, trans. Richard Pevear & Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Viking, 2000) 149-50 (Part II, chapter 12). Future references in the text are to this edition.

Lacanian Compass

for him his “one exclusive desire” in life, “replacing all former desires.” For Anna, the encounter “had been an impossible, *horrible*, but all the more enchanting dream of happiness.” (my italics) It is the meeting of a masculine “desire”, focused on an object, with a diffuse and undefined “dream of happiness”. The violent power of Vronsky’s desire catapults them both beyond what either had hitherto called reality. They are hurled into an unknown dimension, which binds their bodies and lives in new and unexpected ways.¹ However, this is a Real knotted to the Symbolic, a Real gazed at and judged by the Symbolic. The lovers are in the Real, in a new, lawless domain foreign to them both, but they are at the same time in the Symbolic, the domain of law, and it is the Symbolic law that declares their act a murder. It is their internalized social Symbolic that characterizes their sexual experience, subjectively for them, as something “loathsome” and “horrible,” and that labels it a crime.

In the Borromean knot, Lacan situates sexuality or phallic jouissance ($J(\Phi)$) between the Symbolic and the Real:²



By contrast, Feminine Jouissance ($S(\emptyset)$) or the jouissance of being, which is between the Real and the Imaginary, is also a satisfaction that engages the body, but in an asexual way.³ This asexual jouissance of being, grounded in the body, is what Lacan calls the soul. This soul’s desire, no matter whether it be feminine or masculine, is for that which is beyond sex.⁴

The sexual encounter leaves Vronsky shaken and “trembling” and Anna humiliated, guilty, and ashamed: “she bent her once proud, gay, but now shame-stricken head... *falling* from the divan where she had been sitting to the floor at his feet; she would have *fallen* on the carpet if he had not held her.” (my italics) The encounter is her Fall, the

¹ Lacan makes a distinction between the Imaginary or visible phenomenological body form and image seen in the mirror, and the invisible, organic or Real body, felt and experienced as mere flesh that could bring on a sensation of disgust. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton, 1981), 172.

² Jacques Lacan, “La troisième: Intervention au Congrès de Rome,” *Lettres de l’École Freudienne* (1975: 16).

³ “There is a jouissance of being.... If there is something that grounds being, it is assuredly the body.... But being is the jouissance of the body as such, that is as asexual”. Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XX: On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge 1972-1973*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998), 70, 110, and 6.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 85.

horror of which she communicates to him. Tolstoy's description intertwines their passionate reactions in a chiasm of negativity and guilt that grips them both and becomes part of their bond.

Initially, the intensity of phallic sexuality overwhelms Anna. It is foreign to her. Although she is a sensuous and warm woman, she is a stranger to passion and to the phallus. The phallic encounter that she experiences, which excludes her soul, was not part of her "dream of happiness". What Vronsky claims is his happiness and bliss isn't hers at all: "How can I not remember what is my very life? He says. For one moment of that happiness..." "What happiness?" she said with loathing and *horror*.¹ (my italics) Whereas the phallic experience is synonymous for Vronsky with his "very life", she characterizes it as horrible. It splits her being. A different kind of jouissance qualifies as "life itself" for Anna.

The shock effect of the sexual act and its power over Anna are signaled by her inability to speak of the experience. Momentarily, she is as if no longer knotted to the Symbolic. She loses access to language and thought. She does not want words. They are "imprecise" and deficient. Her new libidinal life is too complex for expression. Languageless holes open up in the Symbolic fabric,² exposing its impotency in the face of the Real. Where jouissance dominates over words, language grows pusillanimous.

For God's sake, not a word, not a word more.... Not a word more,' she repeated.... She felt that at that moment she could not put into words her feeling of shame, joy, and *horror* before this entry into a new life, and she did not want to speak of it, to trivialize this feeling with imprecise words. But later, too, the next day and the day after that, she not only found no words in which she could express all the complexity of these feelings, but was unable even to find thoughts in which she could reflect with herself on all that was in her soul. (150) (my italics)

Her soul, which is her living being, is no longer anchored to language or articulable. It is literally thus a lost soul, a soul adrift from words. This in turn makes words soulless. Later these soulless words come to strike her as empty, senseless, and unsatisfying: "It's all words, words, words! she said, looking at him with hatred" (749). As her experience splits her modes of jouissance, her love for Vronsky also splits into love and hatred.

Her adultery jettisons her outside of society. It is a radical cut with her past and her past possessions: her good social standing and name, and her son. No bridging of her past and her new life seems possible. This also contributes to Anna's refusal to confront her experience and to her postponement of thinking about or discussing it. Without the Symbolic support of social-legal sanction or that of an independent and satisfying feminine jouissance, the pact of phallic desire between Anna and Vronsky casts her into the Real of pure anxiety, where she feels terrified and alone.

¹ The reaction of disgust and horror qualify her at least by Freud's definition as a hysteric: "I should without question consider a person hysterical in whom an occasion for sexual excitement elicited feelings that were preponderantly or exclusively unpleasurable; and I should do so whether or no the person were capable of producing somatic symptoms." But this definition alone is not adequate for Anna. Freud, SE VII: 28.

² "The libido as its name indicates cannot but participate in the hole." Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire, livre XXIII: Le Sinthome* (1975-1976), 40.

The phallic encounter reorients her entire being and focuses her exclusively on Vronsky: “‘Everything is finished,’ she said. ‘I have nothing but you.’ ” For her, the new contract with phallic life means radical loss and reduction. She loses herself as a speaking subject and begins to feel more and more that she is only a passive object at the mercy of others, circumstances, and fate. In her haunting dream of the old peasant, “bent over some iron,” the part that causes her the maximum of terror is that the muzhik “pays no attention to her, but was doing this dreadful thing with the iron over her” (752). To the peasant in her nightmare, only her body exists, and it exists only as an object to which anything can be done, with indifference, such as taunting it with something as hard as an iron. The recurrent dream is further confirmation of her initial reaction to the sexual encounter as harsh and exacting and as lacking in tenderness.

The long-awaited sexual union destroys “the first period of their love.” For Anna this was the romantic, desire-induced fantasy as well as the maternal and feminine jouissance with which she had hitherto loved at once Vronsky and her son. It damages the main form of jouissance that had previously filled her emptiness: her love for her son. It becomes unbearable for her even to speak of him: “‘Yes,’ she went on, ‘I’ll become your mistress and ruin...everything.’ Again she was going to say ‘my son,’ but could not utter the word” (190). Anna’s son is for her a piece of her own being, a part of the domain of feminine jouissance and speechlessness, separated off from the Symbolic (see the Borromean knot). Her feelings for this child are beyond words. He is her soul. The pain of his possible loss remains a hole on the page as it is in her heart and life. This hole fills with anxiety about the continuity of Vronsky’s desire, and then with repressed hatred towards him, but above all it fills her with anxiety about her son. The fragile synthesis of body and soul that she had had when with her son is now about to be severed.

Vronsky is inscribed in her mind first of all as a son. On the train she and Vronsky’s mother spent a great deal of time discussing their sons: “Yes, the countess and I spent the whole time talking — I about my son, she about hers... and again a smile lit up her face, a *tender* smile addressed to him” (62) (my italics). A transference effect of tenderness to Vronsky as a son on Anna’s part is there from the start.¹ Anna has never known love except as love for a son. She “married without love or not knowing what love is” (427), and “to the first child, though of a man she did not love, had gone all the force of love that had not been satisfied” (538). Her relationship to this child is tender, warm, and sensuous: “Anna experienced almost a physical pleasure in the feeling of his closeness and caress” (107).

A tender, maternal feminine jouissance can be satisfied by very little: a smile, a touch, a glance, or a word. In such a love relationship, the body is used in a partial, fragmented way. Vronsky and Anna’s love affair begins with such small contacts, a touch of the eyes and of smiles. The first time Vronsky lays eyes on her, what he sees is that: “...a surplus of something so overflowed her being that it expressed itself beyond her will, now in the

¹ The very first time Vronsky sees her at the railroad station, “he felt a need to glance at her once more — not because she was very beautiful, not because of the elegance and modest grace that could be seen in her whole figure, but because there was something especially gentle and tender in the expression of her sweet-looking face as she stepped past him.” (61) [I, 18]. It is the tender and sweet-faced mother/woman, whom he never had, that he wants Anna to be. It is tragic and ironic therefore that Anna believes that he loves her primarily for her beauty and that she sterilizes herself to prevent further pregnancies and to keep her figure, whereas Vronsky loves her for her tender, feminine, and maternal way of loving. He also hopes to have another child with her.

brightness of her glance, now in her smile. She deliberately extinguished the light in her eyes, but it shone against her will in a barely noticeable smile.” (61).¹ The drives escape through the orifices. Love makes do with the partial drives. The shift from this first, asexual love to extreme passion breaks, in a way that she is never again able to mend, the radiant but fragile, crystalline structure that Anna was when Vronsky first sees her.

In *Anna Karenina*, the sexual act as such is not directly represented, but the drives are. The novel is full of libidinal fragments. Tolstoy calls them “signs of joy.” Such signs are what Kitty sees between Anna and Vronsky, dancing at the ball:

Each time he spoke with Anna, her eyes flashed with a joyful light and a smile of happiness curved her red lips. She seemed to be struggling with herself to keep these *signs of joy* from showing, yet they appeared on her face of themselves. ‘But what about him?’ Kitty looked at him and was horrified. What portrayed itself so clearly to Kitty in the mirror of Anna’s face, she also saw in him. Where was his quiet, firm manner and carefree calm expression? No, now each time he addressed Anna, he bowed his head slightly, as if wishing *to fall down* before her, and in his glance, there were only obedience and fear. (81) (my italics)

Kitty is horrified because these signs of jouissance announce to her more clearly than words could that Anna and Vronsky have *fallen* in love and that she has lost Vronsky as her suitor.

In passion, Anna has to produce and give the sexual body whereas in her tenderness she did not. The new, alien body that Vronsky’s extreme and excessive passion evokes destabilizes her and begins to unknot her. It displaces her former body that had been the site of the nonsexual though sensuous bodily acts in which love showed itself. This asexual, though carnal body harbored her soul. The soul is love. She knows this when Dolly comes to visit and talks of her love for her children:

Anna felt sad. She knew that now with Dolly’s departure, there would be no one to stir up in her *soul* those feelings that had been aroused in her at this meeting. To stir up those feelings was painful for her; but she knew all the same that that was the best part of her *soul* and that it was quickly being overgrown in the life she lead. (642) (my italics)

The bewilderment and conflictedness that her new adulterous life brings on seeds her soul with a pain that becomes despair, then nihilism, and, finally, the idea of death: “And suddenly she understood what was in her *soul*. Yes, this was the thought which alone resolved everything. ‘Yes, to die’ ” (745). (my italics)

Signifiers are “the moorings that anchor [our] being,” as the early Lacan said,² but signifiers alone are not enough. We need as well to moor in the jouissance of another

¹ This excess of energy, animation, and vitality or “fire,” which distinguishes her from the beginning from all other women, is quenched when she is with her husband: “not only was that animation which had simply burst from her eyes and smile when she was in Moscow gone from her face: on the contrary, the fire now seemed extinguished in her or hidden somewhere far away” (112).

² Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1977), 174.

human being to find our own jouissance.¹ Signifiers give us a name and place in society. They map the reality for us and they fit us into this reality. But to anchor our being's jouissance another embodied being is necessary. The body needs confirmation of its existence, substantiality, and jouissance from the concrete presence, touch, voice, and gaze of an other human. Only another body anchors our body. The encounter with the jouissance of an other being is as necessary to the awakening of our own forms of jouissance as is the encounter with language and images for our symbolic and imaginary life. For the human being in the feminine position (who may be either a man or a woman) a double mooring is necessary. When Anna is robbed of her jouissance of being, she clings desperately to Vronsky, tiring him with her demand to be desired. When Anna feels that Vronsky no longer looks or listens to her as she would want, with desire, and in the way that would give her significance in phallic reality, but rather with cold and cruel eyes, she feels unsupported in her existence and terrified. " 'I can see all his cold hatred of me,' she thought, not listening to his words, but gazing with horror at the cold and cruel judge who looked out of his eyes" (748).

At the same time, the law and all symbolic supports fail her. Her own symbolic activities and fantasies fail her as well 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 contact with Vronsky and his desire become her exclusive focus, her anguished point of concentration, her drug against fear and anxiety, and her one remaining, vital assurance of a link between herself and another human being. Sexual desire and anxiety go together nowhere more resolutely than in *Anna Karenina*.

The chapter that began with her "dream of happiness" ends with a nightmare in which she is the sexual partner of both her husband and Vronsky. In the nightmare, Anna acknowledges her immense, newfound satisfaction in phallic enjoyment. Even the first, undesired sexual union with a husband, whom she never loved, is now, retroactively, something that her unconscious can accept. In the dream all three are happy, and Anna is laughing. Consciously, she is horrified by this nightmare; unconsciously, she is satisfied, "content and happy."

Still later, just before her death, Anna admits or perhaps condemns herself to believing that all she ever wanted was to be Vronsky's mistress, "passionately [loving] only his caresses." However, she adds that "by this desire I provoke his disgust, and he provokes my anger, and it cannot be otherwise" (763). She now ascribes the ambivalence and disgust that she felt towards her own sexuality to him, but for her disgust and sexuality are still allied. It is sex that made her indifferent at once to legitimacy, law, and love. Phallic enjoyment made her forget her love for Seryozha and prefer passion to love. It is sex that stands accused. With the character of Anna, Tolstoy grants sex the power of an addiction equal to any drug addiction that cannot be altered or defeated by reason, law, or even by great maternal love.

For a time Anna believes, mistakenly, that the continuation of her union with Vronsky depends on the continuation of his sexual desire for her as verified by the repetition of the sexual act. At the same time, each fleeting sexual encounter guarantees nothing for

¹ I am reminded here of the final stanza of Emily Dickinson's "Wild Nights": "Rowing in Eden -- / Ah, the Sea! / Might I but moor -- Tonight / In Thee."

her. It offers no safe harbor or refuge from anxiety. The first sexual act opened up a void, a fearful emptiness and a sense of isolation that nothing seems capable of closing. For Anna, therefore, sex becomes an intuitive experience of what Lacan called the fundamental lack of the sexual relationship. She grasps that the sexual encounters do not secure the relationship or given her the certitude of its continuity and necessity that she needs. Rather the encounter reveals an abyss between them that she was not aware of before because language and fantasy hid it. Sex is not a guarantee of union; words of assurance are also of not much use. The absence of a link is frightening, and to maintain it is exhausting: “ ‘And between me and Vronsky what new feeling will I think up? Is anything – not even happiness but just not torment – possible? No, nothing!’ ” (764).

What remains powerfully present, in the outer world, is the severe and judgmental law as exercised for one, with great cruelty, by her husband turned religious fundamentalist, who forbids Anna her son. But in the inner world of her soul something even more cruel arises. Her superego comes like the ancient law of talion, in its most dreadful form, to exact repayment for murder with another murder. “The law of talion,” as Freud said, “lays it down that a murder can only be expiated by the sacrifice of another life: self-sacrifice points back to bloodguilt.”¹ She knows that she has in a sense let both her husband and her son “drown.” She sacrificed them to save herself. But her initial, superabundant joy to find herself united with Vronsky in Italy enables her to repress her memory of that and her guilt:

The memory of her husband’s unhappiness did not poison her happiness.... The memory of the evil done to her husband called up in her a feeling akin to revulsion and similar to that experienced by a drowning man who has torn away another man clinging to him. That man drowned. Of course it was bad, but it was the only salvation, and it was better not to remember those dreadful details. (463-4)

But as this moment of supreme happiness fades, she herself begins as if to drown or to seek self-loss with morphine. The growing strength of her guilt and her anxiety finally force her to pay with her own life (and with the “murder” simultaneously of her copartner in crime) the debt of having sacrificed her husband, and above all, her son, as well as her original libidinal body for a happiness that didn’t come to be.

Anna’s Choice

The scientific and rational notion of the act, as Jacques-Alain Miller points out, is that it is for our self-preservation and self-satisfaction.² An act is in our self-interests; we do what is pleasurable and useful for us. The telos of the act is self-development and self-fulfillment. (41) However, Lacan’s view of the act differs.³ He questions whether the act is always useful or in the subject’s interests. Suicide, obviously, is not. Thus, he searches for a concept of enjoyment that does not have to do only with self-satisfaction

¹ Sigmund Freud, “Totem and Taboo,” *SE*: XIII: 154.

² Jacques-Alain Miller, “Jacques Lacan: Bemerkungen über sein Konzept des Passage à l’acte,” *Wo Es War*, 7/8 (1989). This section of the essay draws extensively on Miller’s eminently lucid elaborations of Lacan’s ideas in *Seminar X* and adapts them to Anna’s act and acting out. Future references in the text are to this citation.

³ See especially Chapter 9, “Passage à L’acte et Acting Out”, *Le séminaire, livre X: L’angoisse* (Paris: Seuil, 2004), 135-153.

but with self-damage, not only utility but uselessness, not pleasure but pain, not self-fulfillment but self-expenditure and self-abdication. As Miller says, Lacan puts in doubt the entire idea that the subject wants its own good or happiness. (42)

Lacan distinguished the act from actions. The act is something that makes a radical break with what was; it produces something new, and causes change and mutation, whereas actions can continue, complete, or fill in what is or exists. The act is a fundamental transgression, a revolutionary change that produces a future different from the past. After an act, one is not the same as before. (48) The sex act was such an act for Anna, though it still allowed some inner resistance and ambivalence as her hesitations and her delirious return to her husband during her illness showed. Suicide alone, because it allows no return, is a definitive act. Hence, for Lacan, suicide is, the paradigmatic act. (44) It shows the act in its essential character of finality.

As Miller points out, Lacan also questions the ideal of a continuity and unity between the act and thought. For him, they form an antinomy. (45) The act is a rupture with thought, a way to escape thought. The nature of thought and words is equivocation, questioning, and doubt whereas that of the act is certitude. "The kernel of every act is a 'No' to the Symbolic" (44). It is a withdrawal from the ambivalence, duality, dialectics, and all the calculations and evaluations that are at the core of the world of words. The act overcomes these divisions, which lead to inhibitions, indecisiveness, or a total impasse and inability to act. Especially the rash act (as often in the case of the obsessional) can seemingly provide a passageway out.¹ By contrast, even intolerable doubt because it is still within the Symbolic realm remains a defense against an irreversible act. What one must, however, seek to avoid above all in the state of anxiety is what Lacan calls an "appalling certainty" (*d'affreuse certitude*).² Doubt enables us somehow to tolerate the Real of anxiety. As long as Anna doubts and is ambivalent she can avoid the irrevocable act.

With the forbidden sex act, Anna stepped out of the frames of her culture and its laws. Her act was a saying of "No" to this culture, which did not let her live and love:

They don't know how he [her husband] has been stifling my life for eight years, stifling everything that was alive in me, that he never once even thought that I was a living woman who needed love....Didn't I try as hard as I could to find a justification for my life? Didn't I try to love him, and to love my son when it was no longer possible to love my husband? But the time has come, I've realized that I can no longer deceive myself, that *I am alive*, that I am not to blame if God has made me so that *I must live and love*. (292) (italics mine)

¹ The obsessional, characterized by chronic doubt, is particularly endangered by an over intense desire for solution, resolution, definiteness, clarity, and finality, even the absolute finality of death. The obsessional's inhibitions, procrastinations, hesitancy, retardations, and constraints can alternate with or be suddenly interrupted by hastiness, over-impetuous action, and an urgency that reveals the pressure of the drive. Such hastiness characterizes Anna when she leaves for Italy. Such an antinomy of thoughts and acts also characterizes Levin. His philosophical doubts bring on a suicidal crisis, but an all-consuming work act, such as mowing with the peasants, allows him oblivion and mindlessness and grants him ecstasy.

² "L'angoisse n'est pas le doute, l'angoisse est la cause de doute.... La doute ... n'est fait que pour combattre l'angoisse, et justement par des leurre. C'est qu'il s'agit d'éviter se qui, dans l'angoisse, se tient d'affreuse certitude." Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire, livre X: L'angoisse* (Paris: Seuil, 2004), 92.

The need for jouissance, the necessity of “I must live and love,” enables her acts. Her acts are a demand for more satisfaction, and she gets it. Because her acts emerge from the Real of need, they are indifferent to meaning and to the future. They are breakthroughs to a disconnected auto-enjoyment. She says “no” to her society again when she leaves for Italy with Vronsky. For a brief time there, she is “unpardonably happy and filled with the joy of life” (463). Vronsky is exclusively hers and she is completely satisfied. For once she has both life and love. Momentarily she is as if not split and she feels no emptiness.

Anna leaves for Italy postponing the critical decision about her divorce. What is odd is that she not only postpones, but that she categorically refuses it. Anna seeks definiteness and finality above all. Consciously, she wants an end to her uncertain and indecisive state. Yet, when it is offered to her by Karenin she “went abroad with Vronsky without obtaining a divorce and resolutely abandoning the idea” (435). Though it is often argued that social forces and the laws of her era were against her and largely responsible for her tragedy, it seems important to emphasize that there is this one, unique moment, when Anna could have had a divorce and her son. There is this one window of opportunity when Karenin agrees to declare himself the guilty party and to renounce his son. That would have allowed Anna to remarry under Russian law.

‘Yes, yes!’ he [Karenin] cried in a shrill voice, ‘I’ll take the disgrace upon myself, I’ll even give up my son, but... isn’t it better to let things be? However, do as you like...’. He felt grieved; he felt ashamed. But along with the grief and shame he experienced joy and tenderness before the loftiness of his humility. (432)

Oblonsky has brought Karenin to concede everything and to give his word. But when Anna hears of it, she says: “ ‘I cannot accept *his* magnanimity’.... ‘*I don’t want a divorce*, it’s all the same to me now’ ” (435) Because of Karenin’s exceptional state of jouissance (for once in his life time), she has a unique opportunity to have everything she wants, and astonishingly, she rejects it all. She refuses for complex reasons. The seemingly ethically noble and selfless reasons having to do with her considerateness and identification with Karenin and his suffering and unhappiness:

‘It was inevitable that I would be this man’s unhappiness,’ she thought, ‘but I do not want to take advantage of that unhappiness. I, too, *suffer* and *will suffer*. I did a bad thing and therefore I do *not* want happiness, I do *not* want a divorce, and *will suffer* from my disgrace and my separation from my son.’ (464) (my italics)

This is the “*one* soothing reflection about her behavior” that had occurred to her and “the *one* reflection” that she remembered. (my italics) The “one” indicates its absoluteness, its source in her being, in her jouissance. However, what is seemingly “soothing” about it to her consciousness is that it puts an ethical, a just, and an altruistic interpretation and meaning on her refusal. Consciously, the suffering seems to be a just punishment for her bad behavior. But the refusal is an act, rooted as all true acts are in her jouissance. And unconsciously what appears to be soothing to her is that it gives her a cause for suffering. Suffering is the word she keeps repeating. What sounds loudly and repetitiously is her *want* to suffer, and *not* to have what she wants (“I do not want happiness, I do not want a divorce”). She asks to be deprived. It is a hysterical renunciation, a symptom which she does not seem to want to rid herself of and which

makes it impossible for her to act according to her desire and her more positive feminine jouissance.

Her act of refusal also reveals her deep unconscious tie to and slavish imprisonment in her culture. She refuses, one could say, in order to enact judgment and the law upon herself. She both judges and punishes her act. Her haughty superego declares her an autonomous and self-responsible master. If he is noble, she will be more so and triumph over him. Her accent on "*his* magnanimity" suggests her antagonism to him and a readiness for competitive battle. Her narcissistic ego cannot bear to let him win. Her ethical heroism is that of a master, and therefore, suspect. As often in the case with heroism, there is a hidden pact with self-sacrifice and destruction.

That her ethical, noble, and altruistic superego and her ego may be supporting an unconscious will to suffer and to destroy herself is, of course, not evident to Anna. Her novel and overwhelming experience of freedom and satisfaction hide the very possibility of such a thought from her.

But however sincerely Anna wanted to suffer, she did not suffer. There was no disgrace.... Even her separation from her son, whom she loved, did not torment her at first. The little girl, his child, was so sweet and Anna had become so attached to her, once this little girl was all she had left, that she rarely remembered her son. (464)

Anna's refusal is a questionable ethical heroism, a heroism of the sacrifice of her wants and needs that will destroy her though at the moment she is unaware of this. Her jouissance gives her a momentary, false sense of completion. For once in her life, she is at *one* with her being, her life and love.

Ethics has to do with the act. And the act has to do with one's jouissance. At this moment of superabundant joy, Anna refuses more joy. Her state of jouissance disables her from asking for more. It is a state of disconnection, a state that obscures reality. Tolstoy, however, leaves us in no doubt that she is the agent of her own suffering. This self-deceiving and self-defeating renunciation that keeps her suffering is her choice, her own act. And it is not rational, not pragmatic, not in her self-interests, and not for her good or happiness.

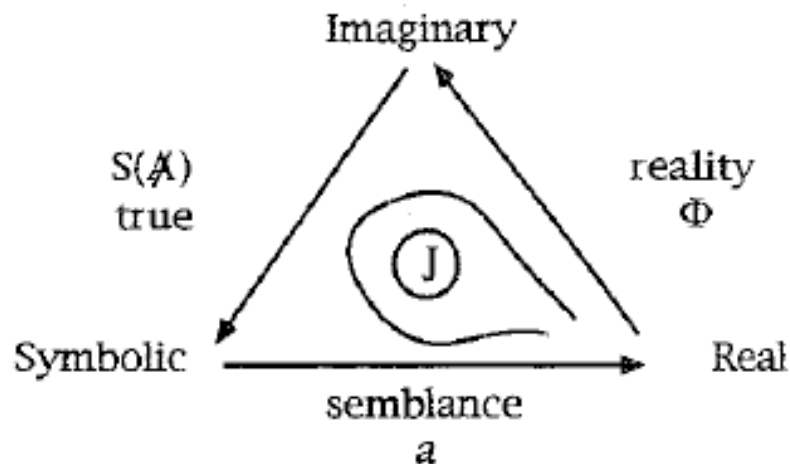
One can readily agree with Michael Holquist's general thesis that in *Anna Karenina* theological ideas about human behavior and our destiny are replaced by economic and sociological ideas and with his more specific argument that Anna's suicide "is portrayed in terms of social forces that foreshadow Durkheim theses on suicide."¹ But granted the alliance of the novel and modern realism, sociological and cultural realities are still not a sufficient elucidation of the act as Lacan defines it. As the early Lacan said, first, the human subject must be mapped in relation to the signifier or the meanings that she gives experience and not in relation to reality or the experiences themselves, which lack these meanings.² And second and actually more importantly as the late Lacan believed, the subject's relation to the dire needs of her own, singular jouissance must be uncovered.

¹ Michael Holquist, "The Supernatural as Social Force in *Anna Karenina*," ed. Amy Mandelker, *The Supernatural in Slavic and Baltic Literature: Essays in Honor of Victor Terras* (Columbus, OH: Slavica, 1988), 177.

² Lacan, *Seminar XX*, 90.

Lacanian Compass

The subject does not act without its deepest corporeal will. But this bodily will or drive is disconnected from everything exterior.



This deep corporeal will is, for the late Lacan, fundamentally a separated-off zone in subjectivity (see the capital “J” in the above diagram).¹ It is a solitary, corporeal Jouissance, not in rapport with reality or desire. Whereas desire has to do with life (Φ), Jouissance has to do with both life and death. Jouissance flows into all aspects of the structure of the Symbolic, Imaginary, and the Real, but in order both to support and to undermine them. To recapture this originary, unbroken Jouissance would mean the end of existence. Yet, total satisfaction on the level of being is exactly what jouissance aims for.

The subject is not simple a reaction; it is a structure and has beyond this structure a potential for the act, given by the energy of a body with its Jouissance. Anna Karenina is driven to death not only by social forces, the conditions of her historical reality, the evil of patriarchal men and their culture of desire, or bad luck, but also by the force of her own jouissance. Her jouissance determines Anna’s choices: to live in phallic reality, renouncing everything else, and to die.

From Acting out to the *passage à l’acte*

Lacan distinguishes acting out from passing to the act. As Miller states, acting out involves a fantasy scene, dialogue, and others, who are witnesses to what one is doing or who are looking at one. Acting out is a symbolic message, a challenge, or an appeal to the gaze, ear, or attention of the other.²

‘To die – and he will repent, pity, love and suffer for me!’ With a fixed smile of compassion for herself, she. . . vividly imagined from all sides his feelings after her death

¹ Lacan, *Seminar XX*, 90.

² “Acting out est essentiellement quelque chose, dans la conduite du sujet, qui se montre. L’accent démonstratif de tout *acting out*, son orientation vers l’Autre, doit être relevé”. *L’angoisse*, 145.

(744) again she began to enjoy thinking of how he would suffer, repent, and love her memory when it was too late..... she vividly pictured to herself what he would feel.... "How could he have said those cruel words to her?" he would say. 'How could I have left the room without saying anything?' (751-2)

Here, Anna draws pleasure from the fantasy of her own death. Her fantasy satisfies and fulfills her fundamental need to be the phallic object that is desired even if it is only after her own death. She "enjoys" seeing herself being loved and mourned by Vronsky. She knows she will make Vronsky suffer by making herself unavailable to him, by depriving him of the cause of his desire. She also enjoys her cruelty to him. In this fantasy, she is the master and the idea of her own death gives her control over him. Her suicide will be a victory. She has discovered a new source of power, more potent than her beauty. But this mastery requires her identification with death.

By contrast, as Miller points out, in the *passage à l'acte*, there is a radical separation from others and a withdrawal from reality. Others and the self are as if dead. The subject is alone with the "appalling certitude" of its anxiety. This anxiety coincides with an equally unbearable state of inner conflictedness. Some kind of oneness and undividedness becomes absolutely necessary. Thus, before the *passage à l'acte*, Anna works to convince herself that she has rational certitude. In her final hours, she makes a rational determination that only hatred exists: "Aren't we all thrown into the world only to hate each other" (764). Hate, she determines, is the truth. The world is one of relentless egotism in which one person destroys the other for his or her own satisfaction. There is no love. No one loves anyone. Even her love for her son was false. "I also thought I loved him [Seryozha] and used to be moved by my own tenderness. But I did live without him, exchanged him for another love, and didn't complain of the exchange as long as I was satisfied by that love.' And with disgust she remembered what it was that she called 'that love' " (764).

Anna argues that love fails because there is no love. There is only lovelessness. It is a categorical deduction, but indeed the simplest and seemingly most logical explanation for the failure of love. Her nihilistic despair now rejects all dialecticism and complexity. She needs the support of one general truth. Her tolerance for ambivalence or *hainamoration*, the word Lacan coined for the ineluctable conjunction of hatred (*haine*) and love¹ -- the representatives of the death and life forces -- is exhausted. "Then she thought ... how tormentingly she loved and hated him, and how terribly her heart was pounding" (765), but her demand for definiteness requires that she sever this conjunction of hatred and love and chose hatred as the truth.

In her final hours, she works to undo the binaries imposed on us by language and to make one part true and the other false. Thus, she seeks to convince herself that only hatred is left: "And where love stops, hatred begins" (763). It is one or the other. She rejects the idea of a conjunction of opposites. She has to find what is true and what is false. This way she can escape doubt and contradiction. She must also, in order to escape the ethical ambivalence of good and evil, endorse evil: "It's all untrue, all a lie, all deceit, all evil" (767).

¹ Lacan, *Seminar XX*, 90-1.

Her efforts are accompanied by a radical de-erotization and de-aesthetization of the entire realistic scene around her as well as of everyone in the scene. There is no longer any beauty, only ugliness; no pleasure, only pain. She hates what she sees: "looking with revulsion at the people coming in and going out (they all disgusted her)... It was impossible not to hate such pathetically ugly people" (764, 766). As she continues to tear down the veils of the aesthetic and ethical that protect her, everyone begins to look odious. She flees from these others as if they were "lepers" (767).

The note that comes from Vronsky at this moment is too brief and strikes her as too carelessly written to hold her. It doesn't respond to her absolute need to speak to him or to her demand to see him at once. (756). At this critical moment, he does not provide her with the symbolic hold she needs or with his presence as an imaginary and reassuring "you." " 'No, I won't let you torment me,' she thought, addressing her threat not to him, not to herself, but to the one who made her suffer" (767). The "you" that forces her to suffer is, as she at this moment recognizes, beyond Vronsky or herself. It is the original "you" that is not incorporated as the similar, the likeness, or the familiar other human; it is the "you" that remains the stranger, the unfamiliar, that belongs to *das Ding (the Thing)*, but that was once a part of our being.¹ It is also the torment that the uncanny peasant doing something to her body with a phallic iron represents. It is the primary repressed or the Jouissance that Lacan wrote with a capital J.

To oppose this stranger she must apply her body. It is the only object she has left to say "no" with. At this moment of crisis, there is no more acting out. She exerts her last defense, her body, which Lacan once referred to as the vase of desires, to ward off a fear of life greater than her fear of death. She must break this vase. The imaginary desire for death that she had played with earlier must now become an act in the Real. To accomplish the act she must stay with the one truth that consciously justifies it: the truth of an evil and loveless humanity, and on another level, the truth of her anguish and suffering due to this. Anna's last energies are aimed with hatred beyond Vronsky at the core of her suffering: a primal division so tied to life itself that it can only be extinguished together with the extinction of her own living being.

The act is always in relations to the fundamental hole of our being.² She looks for the opening, the hole between the two wheels of the train. She misses the hole on the first try. Falling, escaping from the stage of the world is work, requiring exactitude. She must try again and let herself fall again.³ She throws herself into the hole to be rid of her body, but at the same time she does so in order to fill this anxiety-provoking hole *with* her own body, the only thing she has left to fill this hole with. "'There!' she said ... there, right in the middle, and I'll punish him and be rid of everybody and of myself" (768).

"Probably no one finds the mental energy required to kill himself," as Freud noted, "unless, in the first place, in doing so he is at the same time killing an object with whom

¹ Jacques Lacan, *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Denis Porter (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992), 56.

² "All jouissance is posed in relation to the hole." Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Barbara P. Fulks, "Lacan's Later Teaching," *Lacanian Ink* (no.21), 17.

³ *Ce laisser tomber est le corrélat essentiel du passage à l'acte.... Le sujet va dans la direction de s'évader de la scène. C'est ce qui nous permet de reconnaître le passage à l'acte dans sa valeur proper, et d'en distinguer ce qui est tout autre, vous le verrez, à savoir l'acting out.*: *L'angoisse*, 137.

he has identified himself, and, in the second place, is turning against himself a death-wish which had been directed at someone else.”¹ Vronsky is the other against whom her death wish (and her desire to retain value and mastery in some form) is directed: “I shall punish him.” But the very fact that she knows that she can punish Vronsky by killing herself proves that she knows that he loves her and that her act is not centrally about the dread of the loss of his love. That dread is a displacement of another deeper dread of the loss of her son, with whom her identification is deeper than with Vronsky, and her dread of her own failure to love. It is the son whom she threw away for whom she now throws herself away. And as regards punishing Vronsky, she succeeds. She inflicts on him an utterly useless and irrevocable remorse. After her death, when Vronsky goes off to war, seemingly to let himself be killed, he “remembered only her triumphant, accomplished threat of totally unnecessary but ineffaceable regret” (781).

When her little red handbag blocks her first attempt to throw herself into the hole between the wheels of the train, she makes an even more determined effort the second time. The same enormous energy that enabled her to transgress against the marital laws of her society enables her now to make the final passage. The same, terrible vitality, which shaped itself into a love passion, shapes itself now into a will to break her body. Anna's suicide is an act in Lacan's sense as was her sexual infidelity. She could have chosen some gentler form of death (e.g. taken an overdose of morphine), but she chooses a passionate and violent death, an act of death that mutilates and punishes her body, an act that is like a “murder” as had been her experience of the act of sex.

What makes this final scene of suicide more horrific is that even as Anna is in the very hole between the train wheels, 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” (768). In the very act, she is “horrificed at what she was doing” and wants to pull back. The appalling rational certainty that she reasoned herself into is undone. Doubt returns. The “habitual gesture of making the sign of the cross” restores for a moment the structural supports of her Symbolic and Imaginary orders and that is why she sees, one last time, life “with all its bright past joys” (768). The human being has no access to certainty or to truth or to a final, unambivalent hatred or love of life, of others, or of herself. The suicidal being is to the end still fully entangled in language, and thus, in uncertainty and doubt. The act of suicide itself is, therefore, not a pure act or an act purely in the Real, but in part a symbolic gesture.

At the end, it is not the subject that acts but the object, the train, which is a large metaphor for destruction by sexual intercourse. It is not only that Anna as the object falls or that “the shadow of the object” falls on her,² the agent of death is the train, symbolizing sexual intercourse or traffic as Freud often reminded us. The form of suicide Anna chooses is another symbol for the sexual encounter she never named or symbolized. The subject names, the object acts.

All of history is not only “a misunderstanding of the body” (*ein Misverständnis des Leibes*), as Nietzsche said,³ but, more specifically, a misunderstanding and mishandling

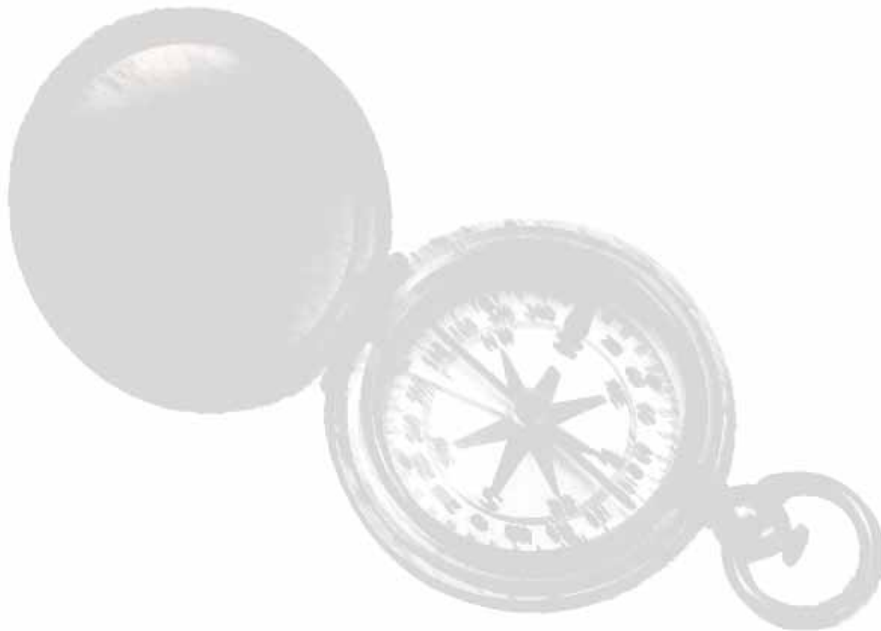
¹ Sigmund Freud, “A Case of Homosexuality in a Woman,” *SE XVIII*: 162.

² Sigmund Freud, “Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego,” *SE XVII*: 109.

³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Trans. Walter Kaufmann (Vintage, 1974), 35.

Lacanian Compass

of jouissance. In the couple Anna and Vronsky, we do not see “the humanization of sexuality” that Lacan spoke of in *Desire and its Interpretation*¹ or any incorporation of feminine jouissance into the economy of phallic desire. We see instead the passage from phallic sexuality to the Real of flesh, anxiety, and death. Kitty and Levin, however, manage a de-dramatization of sexuality by their love for each other and their child. They modulate passionate desire and pass beyond it to love and a jouissance of being.



¹ Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire, livre VI: Le désir et son interprétation*. (1958-1959), 18.3.1959.