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A Buddhistic Leitmotif in Anna Karenina

The most cursory reading of Anna Karenina reveals it to be a sort of Erz- ziehungsroman developing in two directions. Along one axis the title character is brought by stages to utter disillusionment with her worldly milieu and to eventual suicide. Along the other axis Tolstoi’s alter ego Konstantin Levin arrives finally at a tentative faith in an unknowable God, whose immanent manifestations appear to lie in pastoral harmony and the extended family. In bringing these two main subplots to resolution Tolstoi uncharacteristically resorts to the hackneyed literary symbolism of darkness and light. Thus is Levin transfixed by lightning flashes at the culmination of his interior monologue on the transcendental nature of God at the novel’s end. And thus is the death of Anna at the end of Part 7 likened to the blowing out of a candle. The incremental repetition of the motif of light and darkness is so conspicuous as to force the reader to recognize its function as the objective correlative of life and death. The point of departure for the present study is the suspicion that the candle image has a specific connotation separate from the overall motif of light and darkness.

The candle image is produced at four junctures in the chapters leading up to Karenina’s suicide at the end of Part Seven. In Chapter 26, after it first occurs to her that she might kill herself in order to elicit remorse in her lover Vronskii, we find this passage: “‘Death!’ she thought. And such a terror came over her that for a long time she did not know where she was, and her trembling hands were unable to find matches and light a candle to replace the one that had burned down and gone out.”1 In Chapter, 27, following Vronskii’s departure for the countryside, Anna recalls the experiences of the previous night: “‘He’s left? It’s finished?’ Anna asked herself, standing at the window. And in answer to this question the recollections of the darkness when the candle had gone out and of the terrible dream, all merging together, filled her heart with cold terror.” In the final chapter of Part 7 Anna overhears a fellow railway passenger express the sentiment that people are endowed with reason in order that they might be delivered from distress. Hearing this Anna thinks to herself: “Reason is given to one for deliverance; therefore, one should be delivered. Why shouldn’t I blow out the candle when there is nothing more to look at, when everything is so repulsive to the sight?” And finally,

1. All translations of passages from Anna Karenina are by the author and are taken from the jubilee edition of Tolstoi’s works, Polnoe sobranie sochinenii, 90 vols. (Moscow: Khud lit., 1928-58).
after she has thrown herself under the wheels of the train, Tolstoi writes: "And the candle, by whose light she had been reading the book filled with anxieties, lies, grief, and evil, flared up with a light brighter than ever before, illuminated for her all that had previously been in darkness, crackled, began to grow dim and went out forever."

The candle image has not gone unnoticed by Tolstoi scholars. Konstantin Leont'ev dismisses its appearance in the novel as "nothing more than an exquisite allegory" (krasivo inoskazanie, bol'she nichego).2 Boris Eikhenbaum sees the origin of the candle theme in Tolstoi's attraction to the philosophy of Schopenhauer, without, it must be said, making a convincing case for his argument.3 And Elizabeth Stenbock-Fermor devotes an entire chapter of her recent monograph on the structure of Anna Karenina to the candle image.4 Stenbock-Fermor rejects as unconvincing Eikhenbaum's hypothesis about Schopenhauer's influence, emphasizing instead the functional importance of the motif as one of the "vaults" on which rests the doctrinal content of the work. The present author hopes to demonstrate below the correctness of Eikhenbaum's hypothesis.

The history and details of Tolstoi's attraction to Schopenhauer's theories has been told elsewhere and need not be repeated here.5 Let it suffice to say that there is abundant proof that Schopenhauer's works exerted a strong and abiding influence on Tolstoi's writings from 1868 to Tolstoi's death. There are numerous instances of probable Schopenhauerian themes in Anna Karenina.

Eikhenbaum has argued convincingly, on syntactic as well as contextual grounds, that the novel's epigraph ("Vengeance is mine; I will repay") was inspired by passages from The World As Will and Representation, and that Levin's figure of eighty thousand prostitutes for the city of London is taken from Schopenhauer's essay on women in Parerga und Paralipomena. Also one might add that Levin's reflections on the instinctive, as opposed to rational, modes of behavior characteristic of women recall in often strikingly similar passages the misogyny of Schopenhauer, who reserved the quality of Wissen, or rational knowledge, for the male sex, leaving women to grope for knowledge through Gefühl alone (a distinction Tolstoi would continue to make as late as 1887 in On Life). In the epithalamic paean devoted to the Levins' conjugal bliss Tolstoi on two occasions associates Kitty with the symbol of a bird building its nest in response to blind instinctive urges.