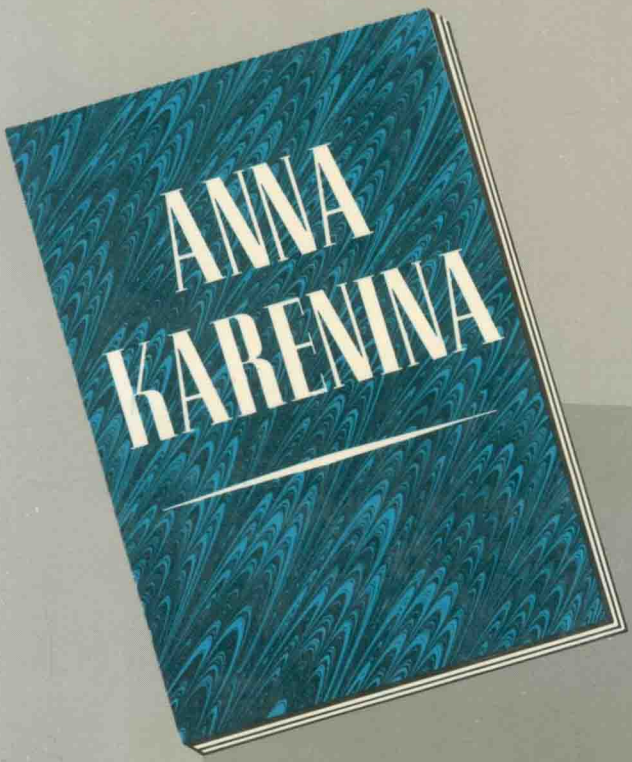
Mary Evans

REFLECTING ON



MARY EVANS

REFLECTING ON ANNA KARENINA

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Chapter One

WHO IS ANNA? WHAT IS SHE?

ANNA KARENINA is one of the most famous women in fiction. Of all the heroines in western literature Anna represents, more than any other, the woman who gives all for love; in her case 'all' includes a social position and reputation, access to a beloved son, and finally her life. But the love that brings Anna to her death cannot be assumed to be a simple, straightforward matter of emotional preference. Anna's love for Vronsky is a complex mixture of heterosexual desire and need, which today - just as much as in nineteenth-century Russia - raises questions about all relationships between women and men, people of the same sex, and parents and their children. Anna, we must remember, loves not only Vronsky; she also loves, with great passion and conviction, her son Seriozha. Less passionately, but fondly, she also cares for her shiftless brother and his wife and had, at an earlier point in their marriage, been fond of her husband. Love is for Anna, as for most other people, a complex emotion which she experiences in many guises in relationship to more than one person.

Yet the love that comes to dominate her life, and to cause her death, is none of these lesser loves, but her passion for Vronsky. This passion ranks alongside those other great loves of fiction and myth - of Helen and Paris, of Antony and Cleopatra, and of Abelard and Héloïse. All these couples represent, in the same way as Anna and Vronsky, the high point of known and articulated heterosexual desire. All these couples are driven to desperate and socially disruptive actions by their love for one

another and all, to a greater or lesser extent, bring disaster upon themselves and others. These great loves have little place in an orderly social world and yet they remain, paradoxically, our western measure of 'real', committed love. That all such loves defy rational action, justice to others and concern for the vulnerable counts for nothing against the powerful attraction of these mythical figures and their transcending passions.

The love of Anna and Vronsky (and Antony and Cleopatra *et al.*) is described by Tolstoy in what is generally regarded as one of the great novels of western literature. But if we view *Anna Karenina* in another light, other than that of accepted literary opinion, the essential narrative of the novel is simple, indeed vulgar, and we might well sympathize with Tolstoy's own view of the novel - that it was simple-minded, unworthy and a disgraceful distortion of human moral and emotional experiences. Given this permission by the author to view the novel as less than perfect it is possible to see how, in its essential elements, it resembles nothing less than a Mills and Boon romance - except, of course, that the ending is not that of a happily realized marriage. Otherwise, there is a great deal about the novel which is similar to the most banal romantic fiction: hero and heroine fall instantly in love (for no given reason) across a crowded room; hero follows heroine and declares his love in the middle of a snowstorm (thus allowing dramatic descriptions of the elements and natural forces); heroine nearly dies in childbirth; hero is inconsolable and the heroine's husband turns from an apparently reasonable, if unattractive, man into an embodiment of all that is repressive and narrow-minded in western bourgeois society. Just as there is apparently no place in the social world for the love of Catherine and Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights* (and again snowstorms and high winds are used as metaphors for passion and desire), so there is eventually no place for Anna and Vronsky. Despite Vronsky's best efforts to become a bourgeois *gentilhomme* and live the life of a country squire he cannot avoid the temptations of the corrupted social world of aristocratic society any more than Anna can emancipate herself from its values and judgements.

So what we have in *Anna Karenina* is a tale that in some

respects does resemble the simplest romantic fiction - a tale of a great love between a man and a woman, a love that conforms to those various clichés about love moving mountains and even, on occasions, the earth. Unlike romantic fiction, however, Tolstoy's novel contains an extraordinarily rich and vivid portrayal of part of a vanished society, and endless material for re-interpretation and speculation. *Anna Karenina* can be read as a novel about Tsarist Russia, a novel about social convention and its crushing effect on emotional life, a moral tale about the danger of loving outside socially accepted and agreed boundaries, or as a discussion not merely about love, but also about life, and how to live it. All these readings and many others are possible.

But what concerns us here is less the novel itself than the figure of Anna, a woman who can be variously interpreted as a demonstration of women's capacity for passion and sexual desire on the one hand and on the other, as a woman who is so trapped by conventional - and ultimately conservative - notions about romantic love that she abandons all other possible avenues of action. Thus, we can see Anna as either a deeply liberating, and liberated, figure, or as an equally deeply imprisoned and repressed figure. For the first point of view we can argue that Anna defies the mundane and material world for a vision of the ideal; for the second point of view we can argue that Anna traps herself in a personal prison, a prison in which her love, and her lover, are the gaolers. To these two, extreme, interpretations we can add interpretations derived from particular ideological persuasions: for example, to a socialist Anna might be seen as the personification of all that is futile and socially dangerous about bourgeois love and romance. It is difficult to imagine that Anna's plight would receive much sympathy in the context of contemporary China. Here is a woman who, after all, is about nothing less than a highly individualized love which places all other considerations - social and personal responsibilities in particular - in second place. To feminists, Anna can be seen as less a heroine than a victim, a victim of all that is most debilitating, corrupting and repressive about heterosexual love. Anna, many feminists would remark,

ends the novel dead: the inequalities between women and men that constitute a major feature of western society are vividly portrayed in the novel - bourgeois heterosexuality kills women, and ruins men.

Any reading of *Anna Karenina*, and any interpretation of Anna herself, will reveal as much about the reader as about the novel and the character. For example, in his essay, on *Anna Karenina*, F. R. Leavis cites one particularly vivid example of the self-revelation that can occur. D. H. Lawrence, Leavis tells us, apparently happily (and unselfconsciously) remarked that 'No-one in the world is anything but delighted when Vronsky gets Anna Karenina'. Leavis dissents from this view, and goes on to chastise Lawrence for what he describes as Lawrence's failure to understand the complexities of the novel. Lawrence receives further admonishment for his remark that: 'Why, when you look at it, all the tragedy comes from Vronsky's and Anna's fear of society ... they couldn't live in the pride of their sincere passion, and spit in Mother Grundy's eye. And that, that cowardice, was the real "sin". The novel makes it obvious, and knocks all old Leo's teeth out.' As Lawrence is an author whom Leavis admires, he does not condemn this remark outright; he suggests, however, that perhaps Lawrence was a trifle heavy-handed in his judgement of Tolstoy.[1] But Leavis on Lawrence, and Lawrence on *Anna Karenina*, reveal as much about the preoccupations of the critics themselves as about the novel: part of Lawrence's project in his literary work was to defend the primacy of passion and passionate sexuality against social conventions; equally, Leavis's preoccupation was to demonstrate a moral continuity in the realist novels of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe. This essay is written without - at least knowingly - the same kind of crusading spirit that inspired Lawrence and Leavis, but it is written from the belief that the ideology of western romantic love is worth, at the very least, critical evaluation. Indeed, if ever an indictment of romantic love was necessary, Tolstoy provides it; romance kills, is literally what the narrative of *Anna Karenina* tells us.

It is doubtful if the author himself would have described the cause of Anna's death as romance: indeed, he might well have

accused literary and social critics of mealy-mouthed fastidiousness in naming the passion of Vronsky and Anna as romance. Sexual passion might well be a better description that would accord more closely to Tolstoy's own understanding of his central characters, and of similar relationships between men and women in real life. The novel is, however, sufficiently coloured by Tolstoy's own experience to suggest that he did not see the relationship between Anna and Vronsky in any single sense. Certainly physical, sexual passion played a part, but so did other needs and desires - for social confirmation, for emotional intimacy, for intellectual and social companionship and even for the experience of integrity - an experience that was critically denied by the formal, and elaborate, social world in which Anna and Vronsky lived. We know from biographical and autobiographical material that Tolstoy experienced certain difficulties in his relationships with women (not to mention, of course, the difficulties that women experienced in their dealings with Tolstoy). His own marriage, to a woman twelve years younger than himself, resembled in many ways the relationship between Levin and Kitty in *Anna Karenina*, in that Tolstoy invested in his wife (as did Levin in Kitty) his hopes for reliving his relationship with his mother. The dead, venerated mother was for Tolstoy, as much as for Levin, the embodiment of all that was saintly in women. Society women for Tolstoy, as for Levin, were persons of fascination and terror: it was only with young women - indeed adolescent girls - that author and character could enter into marriage. Tolstoy does not tell us whether or not Levin saw each instance of marital sexual intercourse in the same way that Tolstoy did, as a fall from grace so horrible as to be deplored and the occasion for recrimination and self-loathing. But he does suggest that Levin experiences guilt at the results, for Kitty, of sexuality - namely the pain of childbirth and the debilitating preoccupation of childcare. Indeed, throughout *Anna Karenina* male guilt is a central theme. Vronsky and Levin both endure anguish and anger as Anna and Kitty bear their children, and Levin is endlessly, and generously, guilty about the way that other men (for example Oblonsky and Levin's brother) behave towards the women with whom they are involved.

But what makes men behave badly towards women is what Tolstoy saw, in both his own life and in fiction, as the curse of physical desire. Vronsky cannot but desire Anna, Oblonsky cannot resist, amongst others, his children's governess, and Levin himself - the eventual paterfamilias and benign landlord - spent a youth as apparently dissolute as that of any aristocratic young man. Vronsky and Oblonsky do not, eventually, lie crushed beneath the wheels of a train, but our last sight of Vronsky is of a man broken in spirit and condemned to a life of self-loathing, whilst Oblonsky's final fate is to become a more pathetic version of the good living fellow who greeted us at the beginning of the novel. What saves Oblonsky and Levin (and Tolstoy himself) is a household and a family. Thus we enter a perceptual world in which romance and sex are portrayed in fiction not as the glue of social life and social relationships but as the acid that rots and destroys the very fabric of social order and cohesion.

This pattern of perceiving sexuality as disruptive is a common theme in western fiction. From the days of *Clarissa* to the feminist novel of the late 1980s there are endless examples of novels organized around the theme of the disruption of the bourgeois order by sexuality. And amongst the novels that deal with this theme are some of the west's greatest contributions to fiction: *Wuthering Heights, Doctor Faustus, Madame Bovary, Mansfield Park, The Mill on the Floss* are a few examples of novels which are organized around the failure (or impossibility) of characters to resist the temptations of physical desire. The objects of desire may be unattractive in worldy or conventional terms, but in terms of the passions they arouse their power amounts almost to magic - a magic that many major novelists cannot themselves define. Two examples illustrate the realization by novelists that the power to seduce has little to do with ordinary standards of beauty. The first is Tolstoy's own tacit acknowledgement in *Anna Karenina* that it is extremely difficult to name in precise terms Anna's fatal allure. John Bayley tells us, in his essay on *Anna Karenina* in *Tolstoy and the Novel*, that in the first draft of the novel Tolstoy described Anna thus:

> She had a low forehead, a short, almost retroussé nose, and was far too plump - a little more and she would have seemed monstrous. Indeed, without the great black eyelashes which made her grey eyes wonderful, the black curls on her forehead, a vigorous grace of movement like her brother's, and small feet and hands, she would have been downright ugly.[2]

In the final version of the novel Tolstoy has abandoned the attempt to describe Anna's features in any detail and tells the reader, instead, about the impression that Anna conveys:

> Vronsky followed the guard to the carriage, and at the door of the compartment had to stop and make way for a lady.... He begged her pardon and was about to enter the carriage but felt he must have another look at her - not because of her beauty, nor on account of the elegance and unassuming grace of her whole figure, but because of something tender and caressing in her lively face as she passed him. As he looked round, she too turned her head. Her brilliant grey eyes, shadowed by thick lashes, gave him a friendly, attentive look, as though she were recognising him, and then turned to the approaching crowd as if in search of someone. In that brief glance Vronsky had time to notice the suppressed animation which played over her face and flitted between her sparkling eyes and the slight smile curving her red lips. It was as though her nature was so brimming over with something that against her will it expessed itself now in a radiant look, now in a smile. She deliberately shrouded the light in her eyes but in spite of herself it gleamed in the faintly perceptible smile.[3]

The crucial sentence here is 'it was as though her nature was so brimming over with something that against her will it expressed itself now in a radiant look, now in a smile.' Because it is in this sentence that Tolstoy suggests, as Jane Austen, George Eliot, Emily Brontë and Thomas Mann were also to do, that what makes individuals attractive is the vitality that they possess, and that apparent easy access to the direct expression of emotion and feeling that is generally either absent or buried in more mundane individuals. It is, in a sense, a certain childishness about the Anna Kareninas of literature that makes them appealing: just as children express their emotions with a directness that confounds and disturbs the adult world, so Anna, and even more her brother Oblonsky, are creatures with

an unbroken sense of the consolations of the sensual world and the importance of maintaining their access to them - in Anna's case through her relationship with Vronsky, in Oblonsky's case through making sure that all trials in life are mediated by excellent dinners. Indeed, in the early pages of the novel we meet Anna and Oblonsky as creatures of comfort; in the midst of domestic drama Oblonsky still enjoys the consolation of clean clothes and mourns, as much as his wife's unhappiness, the disruption of his domestic order, whilst Anna, returning home to a husband of whom she is at best only tolerant, consoles herself with the comforts of a new novel and her well ordered and well chosen possessions.

So Anna, we might conclude, has a strong sense of the physical and the material world, and an ability to communicate to others the possibilities of sensual pleasure of all kinds. Similarly, in describing Henry Crawford, the heart-breaker of *Mansfield Park*, Jane Austen tells us that he was, at first glance, rather plain, but on subsequent meetings, and particularly in his conversation, could convey a strong sense of energy and sensitivity - precisely what Tolstoy notes of Anna. Thus Anna descends from the train after her first meeting with Vronsky, with a 'light, sure step' and embraces her brother with a gesture that 'struck Vronsky with its decision and grace'. Equally, Henry Crawford is so articulate and at ease with the written and spoken word that it is a pleasure for people to listen to him talk, or read. Both characters, Henry Crawford and Anna Karenina, are portrayed by their respective authors as people wholly in command of their performance in action and words. That this is not the case forms the plot of both *Anna Karenina* and *Mansfield Park* - both characters cannot, in fact, contain their energy or organize its expression in ways that are socially and morally acceptable.

But the parallels between *Mansfield Park* and *Anna Karenina* do not stop at the personalities of Henry and Anna. Two further points are strikingly similar between these otherwise disparate novels: Henry Crawford, like Anna, has a sibling who throws into relief many of his characteristics and indeed suggests his failings, and both Henry and his sister, and Anna and her

brother come from unstable, if privileged, families. The expressed opinions of Mary Crawford predict the moral failings which Henry will eventually reveal, whilst Oblonsky's excursions from the straight and narrow road of domestic life suggest Anna's much more fatal, and decisive, departure from wifely virtue. Vice, it would seem, runs in families, and particularly families that have no established or settled home. 'Vronsky', Tolstoy writes with some of the vigour of a twentieth-century child-care officer, 'had never had a real home-life.'[4] What is more, Tolstoy goes on, 'In his youth his mother had been a brilliant society woman and during her husband's life-time, and still more after his death, had had many love affairs, which everyone knew about.'[5] Vronsky, Anna, and Oblonsky, and Mary and Henry Crawford, all live apparently settled lives, and indeed by the relative standards of their contemporary societies, particularly privileged lives, but they are unable to make those personal and emotional decisions which secure the continuity and the harmony of social life and the stability of social relationships. Vronsky, Henry Crawford, and Oblonsky are adulterers – as indeed is Anna herself – whilst Mary Crawford although technically free from sin is as morally culpable as her brother.

So one of the first features about Anna is her rootlessness. Tolstoy tells us almost nothing about Anna's childhood and adolescence. All we know is that she was married off to Karenin and spent her married life in the highest social circles of St Petersburg. Anna, unlike Kitty and Dolly, has no ties to a country estate, no large family and very little domestic and personal baggage of the kind that accompanies the two sisters. In Tolstoy, as in Austen, we find an association of city life with vice and country life with simplicity and true virtue. It is perfectly possible for worthy characters to move between the two worlds, but it is impossible for a worthy character to have no understanding of the moral importance of the countryside. Both authors are writing, of course, of pre-industrial societies, and the countryside, for Austen and Tolstoy's contemporaries, was the major source of sustenance and wealth. But apart from this fact of pre-industrial life both authors are arguing for a

moral perception of the value of rural society - not because turning the sod is in itself a moral activity (although passages in *Anna Karenina* come close to this position) but because the failure to care for the land - the wealth of the world, and the means of provision for individuals - is to turn one's back on those mutual associations and responsibilities which bind societies and families together. Anna and Vronsky, Tolstoy tells us, cannot settle to country life (nor indeed can Oblonsky) and maternity fails to provide for Anna a way of life. She is passionately fond of her son, but largely disinterested in her daughter by Vronsky.

What we know about Anna is that she is a creature of the social, urban world - a woman whose first passion is for her son, and whose interests are centred around her son and her own person. Anna is not, in anything like the same sense as Dolly or Kitty, a housekeeper: it is difficult to imagine her making jam on a hot summer's afternoon or tying up her hair in an untidy knot to take her children swimming. Anna appears, at every scene and on every occasion, beautifully dressed and arranged. Only towards the end of the novel does her narcissism begin to diminish, and then there is only the merest hint that pride and interest in her appearance - and the impression that she will make - is beginning to falter. Even then, it is not so much Anna's interest in her appearance that begins to decline, but her ability to maintain the poise and the grace that had been so essential a part of her charm and seductiveness. As Anna becomes more aggressive, more brittle, much less polite and more demanding in her relations with Vronsky, so we see the vitality that was once so attractive turned into a defeating, although no less agile, energy. The woman who had once been able to subdue and to claim Vronsky's feelings becomes the person who now can do nothing to please him. The transformation is neither final, nor complete. Only a few hours before her suicide Anna still appears as lovely as ever to Kitty, but to Vronsky she has become a source of irritation, a person who is capable of vulgarity and the kind of behaviour that has no place in fantasies of the perfect woman.

The implication of that last sentence is, in fact, that Anna is a

fantasy, a fantasy of both Tolstoy and Vronsky. Anna's rootlessness, her distance from, and lack of interest in, domestic and maternal concerns place her not amongst women in general but apart from them. It is not that women are naturally interested in domestic life and the care of children, but such has been the sexual division of labour that in all western societies women have been placed - like it or not - in the household. Tolstoy's fantasies about a woman who can inspire male desire (and even Levin is forced to admit to Anna's seductive powers) have no place for the realities of female experience which commonly include not merely the love for children (an emotion which Anna was certainly capable of) but the care of them. Dolly and Kitty consult each other about the care of Kitty's baby. Ironically, it is only because of Karenin's intervention that Anna and Vronsky's daughter survives. Dolly and Kitty are preoccupied with the details of their households; Anna has little to do with any domestic tasks other than those that include her wardrobe. Indeed, for any task that is related to her narcissism Anna has considerable energy - an interest in her clothes is but one aspect of the cultivation of self which surrounds her. It is predictable, certainly in psychoanalytical terms, that this woman should love so dearly her son (albeit by a despised husband) and be so disinterested in a daughter (albeit by an adored lover). It is, moreover, a feeling that Tolstoy emphasizes by his portrayal of the physical characteristics of Anna's children. Seriozha is a complete, finished child - recognizably a young man, whilst the baby daughter is a plump bundle of polymorphous perversity. The son can give the mother 'almost physical pleasure' with his caresses, whilst the daughter can offer nothing, and can only demand.

And the demands of her daughter do not, for Anna, constitute moral imperatives in the same way as do the demands of their children for Dolly and Kitty. So this most apparently feminine woman, and certainly a woman who can appeal strongly to men, is not in the general, conventional sense a maternal woman. A passionate mother of a son perhaps, but a woman who specifically and categorically refuses her lover more children and whose relations with her own are at best fleeting.

From the point of view of Seriozha and Ani, Anna is anything but an ideal mother; Tolstoy tells us that Seriozha has to develop a protective dislike of his mother in order to come to terms with her loss, and the eventual fate of Ani is one of those fictional loose-ends which Tolstoy fails, forgets or cannot bring himself to conclude.

The relationship of Anna to her living children, and to those prospective children which she might have with Vronsky, portrays an assumptive world that exactly matches the arrangements of the bourgeois family in both the nineteenth and the twentieth century. Anna - a creature who embodies western male fantasies about the ultimately seductive woman - is not a woman preoccupied with the care of children. Dolly and Kitty, on the other hand, are the absolutely and utterly committed mothers of bourgeois families. They do not, however, inspire in their husbands or bring into existence those heights (or depths) of heterosexual passion that exist between Anna and Vronsky. Maternal love, and the ability to inspire and share sexual passion, are thus neatly compartmentalized and no one realizes this more forcefully than Anna - and indeed Dolly. When Dolly goes to visit Anna at Vronsky's country estate she has a conversation with her in which Anna reveals that she is deliberately and consciously practising birth control. Dolly is amazed by the revelation:

> 'Impossible!' exclaimed Dolly, opening her eyes wide.
>
> For her this was one of those discoveries the consequences and inferences of which are too vast to take in at a moment's notice. She would have to reflect a great, great deal upon it.
>
> This discovery, suddenly throwing light on all those families of one or two children, which had hitherto been so incomprehensible to her, aroused so many ideas, reflections and contradictory emotions that she was unable to say anything, and could only stare at Anna wide-eyed with amazement. This was precisely what she had been dreaming of on the way to Anna's that morning, but now that she learned that it was a possibility she was horrified. It seemed to her too simple a solution for too complicated a problem.[6]

Anna's justification for her actions - a justification that is