TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

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Anna Karenina has captivated English readers at least since Constance Garnett's much-loved translation of 1901. Tolstoy's work, considered one of the supreme novels, is especially beloved for its psychological and spiritual insight into the human condition, as applied to some of the most vivid characters in world literature. Many existing translations have conveyed these aspects with some success.

What English translations have yet to address effectively, however, is Tolstoy's literary style, which can be both unconventional and unsettling. Beginning with Garnett, English translators have tended to view Tolstoy's sometimes radical choices as "mistakes" to be corrected, as if Tolstoy, had he known better, or cared more, would not have broken basic rules of literary language.

When I reread *Anna Karenina* fifteen years ago, I was struck by the exact opposite: Tolstoy clearly meant every one of his "mistakes." He used language to convey meaning, to express his spiritual and moral concerns, and to show what he believed to be beautiful. I found the so-called roughness so widely remarked upon both purposeful and exciting, and I was eager to re-create Tolstoy's style in English.

The *how* of writing meaningfully in Russian was much on Tolstoy's mind at precisely the time he was beginning *Anna Karenina*.

On March 22, 1872, Tolstoy wrote to his editor, N. N. Strakhov, asserting that the Russian writer was "unfree," calling literary Russian "repulsive." Tolstoy abhorred affectation on moral as well as aesthetic grounds and sought to express what was true, rejecting the conventional in literary Russian and embracing what was "specific, clear, beautiful, and temperate"—language he associated positively with the peasant and negatively with "society." Tolstoy's language became an instrument of his worldview. Although these concepts were played out more explicitly in later works, they are amply represented in *Anna Karenina*.

I thus produced my translation in the firm belief that Tolstoy wholly intended to bend language to his will, as an instrument of his aesthetic and moral convictions. Eschewing the predictable metaphors, idioms, and descriptions, he put repetitions, stripped-down vocabulary, and long sentences to brilliant

effect to meet his higher literary and philosophical ends. Tolstoy's characters speak—and think—in language all too true to their nature.

Tolstoy's use of style to relate pointed moral observations begins at the very beginning, with the famous opening sentence: "All happy families resemble one another; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." The first half of this now famous saying is often translated using the word "alike." The sentence thus rendered becomes aphoristic: "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." It is a tidy package, but not the package Tolstoy wrote. Tolstoy said not that happy families are "alike" (*odinakovy*) but rather that they "resemble" one another (*pokhozhi drug na druga*). By not using the expected word in that first half, Tolstoy makes the reader take a second look and points to a more complicated opinion about those happy families. "Alike" here is pat, almost dismissive, whereas "resemble" requires additional verbiage ("one another") and a more subtle interpretation. Tolstoy's phrasing is deliberately dense, forcing the reader to pause and introducing nuance.

If the first sentence eases us into our subject, the second sentence is the book's moral and stylistic cornerstone—on which English translators have heretofore stumbled.

The Russian sentence is short and elegant: *Vsë smeshalos' v dome Oblonskikh* (word for word: "Everything was confused in the house of the Oblonskys"). In Russian, this is a lovely, rhythmic line employing a concise reflexive verb form. It bluntly states Tolstoy's underlying premise that the pain and suffering brought upon the characters in the book arise from "confusion" (perhaps not coincidentally, this same verb is used in the Bible in connection with the aftermath of the Tower of Babel). The Oblonsky house is in tumult. Stiva's actions have violated the proper order of things, gravely wounding those closest to him.

Translators of this sentence have been betrayed by a misguided loyalty to preservation of word order, a loyalty that leads in English to a clumsy passive construction and a sentence unworthy of launching this monumental work. A word-for-word translation explains only the Russian syntax and ignores the effect the sentence achieves through concision and rhythm, yielding two consecutive prepositional phrases in English and nearly doubling the word count of the original sentence. The solution lies in writing an *English* sentence that is similarly concise and rhythmic and has the same taut vigor as the Russian: "The Oblonsky home was all confusion."

These are just the first two sentences of a very long book full of intriguing sentences and innovative devices.

Anna Karenina is replete with repetitions of words and phrases. Tolstoy deliberately limited his vocabulary, avoiding the "elegant variation" that conven-

tional literary language advocates. Often it is quite ordinary words that appear over and over, but this is also true of phrases, sentences, and even roots. These repetitions form a fine web of connections between people and events that is progressively cast over the full length of the novel, but the repetitions begin at the very outset.

In the first long paragraph, Tolstoy practically bludgeons the reader with his insistence on the consequences of Stiva's actions when he repeats (with slight variations) the same phrase three times in the space of two sentences, twice back to back:

This had been the state of affairs for three days now, and it was keenly felt not only by the spouses themselves but by *all the members of the family and the servants as well. All the members of the family and the servants* felt that there was no sense in their living together and that travelers chancing to meet in any inn had more in common than did they, *the Oblonsky family members and servants.*

Why does Tolstoy commit this apparent faux pas? The existing translations treat it as a mistake; none repeat it in exactly this way. Before we go "fixing" Tolstoy, however, let us first view the positive effect of this device, which is to provide emphasis in a striking and pointedly unconventional way. This repetition slows the reader down, makes the reader dwell on this point of consequence simply by giving him more words to read and in this way making him spend more time on this idea. Tolstoy says with pointed understatement that the situation was "keenly felt," but does not say outright that Stiva is bad, or that he has sinned. Instead, he emphasizes that Stiva's violation of the proper order of things has brought misery down upon the very people to whom he owes happiness. Their suffering far outweighs Stiva's personal failings in importance because they are innocent.

Tolstoy also uses repetition globally, insisting, for example, on a number of key words throughout the text. For example, there is a striking frequency of the adjective *vesëlyi* and related words with the same root: *vesëlost'* (noun), *veselit'sia* (verb), and so on. When possible, I've used "cheerful" for this because it has similar grammatical variations and broader semantic application than any other choice. Of course, the substitution cannot be automatic because the "same" two words in different languages will always have different ranges of meaning; there were times when the translation had to be "gay" because that was the meaning. In all, Tolstoy uses *vesëlyi* and its variants 316 times, and as the repetitions build, it begins to take on ominous associations. The reader begins to wonder just how cheerful anyone really is.

Stiva, to whom the adjective is first applied, almost always appears of good cheer, but his moral character decidedly does not shine. As Professor Gary Saul Morson writes in “Prosaics and *Anna Karenina*,” “Stiva is the villain of the book, its representation of what evil is. And the first thing to note about evil is that it is quite congenial—as is the devil in *Karamazov*. Both Dostoevsky and Tolstoy had it in mind to dispute the notion that evil is grand, satanic, ugly, and alien; on the contrary, it is the most familiar thing in the world. We have met the enemy, and he is us.”¹

Vesëlyi and its variants even appear in the kind of close quarters repetition mentioned above, as in the following: “It was as if something *cheerful* happened after the doctor’s departure. The mother *cheered up* when she returned to her daughter, and Kitty pretended to *cheer up*” (part II, chapter 1).

Over and over again, previous translators have balked at reproducing this kind of repetition, thus depriving the reader of what should be an arresting effect.

A wonderful example of the use of repetition to create connections and inject meaning comes in part VIII, when Kitty summons Levin to the nursery to admire their infant son, who sees his father and “smile[s] radiantly.” Four short paragraphs later, as Levin is leaving, Kitty “smile[s] radiantly” at him, too. The wording, save for the grammatical subject, is identical. Instantly, Tolstoy demonstrates rather than states the visceral bond between mother and son and sets up an identity in their relationship to Levin.

The consistent failure of previous English translations to repeat this one construction diminishes the moment’s intense emotional poignancy.

Anna Karenina abounds in counterintuitive devices beyond repetition. Tolstoy strips his vocabulary. He rarely uses synonyms (a variation on the repetition device), particularly within paragraphs, a practice ordinarily considered just as deplorable in standard Russian as it is in standard English. Routine physical descriptions and lyrical descriptive passages are few. Tolstoy does not routinely describe characters or places, and what visual memories he creates attach to key moments, such as Stiva’s pampered self, Anna and Kitty at the ball, Levin mowing the fields, Vronsky’s horserace, and Nikolai Levin’s squalor. He wields the cliché, usually the nemesis of good writing, with irony and often humorously.

We know that Tolstoy produced many drafts of this novel, so there are no grounds for considering such rule-breaking mere carelessness. With this translation, I have endeavored to honor Tolstoy’s concern about “false” language. But the way he used language in *Anna Karenina* to convey his beliefs and ideas must also be seen as intrinsically bound to his notion of beauty. At the time, he

believed that literary Russian was “spineless” and could not be beautiful. With *Anna Karenina* he created language that could be beautiful because it was not false.

This translation has been more than a decade in the making, and inevitably I owe thanks to a few people in particular who have helped along the way: Sergei Task, for his unerring insights and unwavering collegial support; Peter Sawyer, my agent, who has cheerfully navigated the real world for me; and Gary Saul Morson, whose visceral understanding of this text—and his readiness to collaborate—have made this the most exciting translation ride of my life.

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