

Anna Karenina Revisited

Tolstoy, eh? He could write a bit.

A great deal of the book consists of Tolstoy working through the two issues which clearly plagued him, speaking through whatever character was convenient at the time. These two issues were: the apparent death of God with its resulting struggle for meaning in life, and the problem of the peasants: the gross social inequality which persisted despite the recent nominal emancipation of the peasants. These particular themes are hardly surprising as the good Count was then developing what was shortly to be called Tolstoyism. Here its origin is evident. From Tolstoy's own perspective, of course, the idea of any such thing as Tolstoyism was a gross error. He espoused an ascetic Christianity including vegetarianism, pacificism, abstinence from intoxicants, and sexual continence. But he had no wish to impose the conclusions of his own conscience on others. Tolstoy was also vehemently anti-State, and hence Tolstoyism carries intimations of anarchy. That is all very well, one reflects, so long as someone less fastidious is maintaining order.

The book is replete with political musings. Whilst couched in terms relevant to mid-19th century Russia, it is striking how relevant much of it is. One thinks of the hysteria about "the rise of the far right" and the antics of Antifa when reading a passage in which the rapidly rising Serpukhovskoy says, "*Scheming people always have invented and always will invent some harmful and dangerous party. That's an old trick*". He continues, claiming that such people "*can be bought by money or by affability, and must invent a theory to keep their positions. And they bring forward some new idea, some theory (in which they themselves do not believe and which does harm) merely as a means of procuring government quarters and a salary*". One feels he has a point in view of our present vulnerability to a take-over by the ideological.

Ostensibly, though, the main theme of Anna Karenina is a morality tale. It contrasts two couples. On the one hand Vronsky and Anna, and on the other Levin and Kitty. The first are a matching pair: both are wealthy socialites, sensualists riding high on their effortless social successes. His dashing virility is matched by her conquering beauty. Levin and Kitty, in contrast, are less imposing personages. Modesty, perhaps, is their hallmark. Levin is virtually socially inept, more at home with the peasants than in high society. Vronsky, having toyed callously with Kitty's feelings, is subsequently captured by Anna's charms. The latter – already pregnant by Vronsky – eventually leaves her husband, Karenin. Whilst the main characters are painted in full colour, Karenin is in black & white. No one ever sympathises much with a cuckold, though one wonders why not. More of Karenin later.

Levin, being the reverse of Vronsky in matters of love as in most else, is painfully slow to secure Kitty as wife, though he eventually does so. Whilst Levin orbits around Kitty before landing, so to speak, Tolstoy takes the opportunity to regale us with his social and philosophical musings using Levin as mouthpiece. Not as dull as that sounds, provided one is exercised by such matters – and the curious thing is that the same issues are just as pertinent today, 142 years later.

As 19th century novels were largely obliged to do, the immoral couple meet with their just desserts whilst the moral are duly rewarded. Yet there is no preaching here. Tolstoy's illumination of the human soul is too honest to permit anything so crass. If the book is edifying – and it is – then it is because the trajectories of the protagonists are seen to be determined by their own actions. Just desserts are meted out as a result of psychosocial causality, not because a retributive hand descends upon them in vengeance for transgressions against an arbitrary law.

Let us dive in then.

Anna and Vronsky

Vronsky meets Anna at a Ball and Kitty is immediately, and thoughtlessly, displaced in his affections. Kitty sees it. *“Vronsky and Anna sat almost opposite her. And she saw them with her far-sighted eyes....and the more she saw of them the surer she was that the blow had fallen....On Vronsky’s face, usually so firm and self-possessed...an expression like that of an intelligent dog when it feels guilty.”* Referring to Kitty’s view of Anna we read, *“...every graceful movement of her small feet and hands, her handsome, animated face – everything about her was enchanting, but there was something terrible and cruel in her charm.”* Kitty felt herself *“crushed, and her face expressed it.”*

“Yes, there is something strange, satanic, and enchanting about her”, thought Kitty.

For some time, Karenin refuses to acknowledge that his wife is carrying on an affair, though it has already become a talking point. Ultimately Anna confesses. She is now pregnant by Vronsky. Karenin can no longer avoid scandal and carry on as normal, and Anna refuses to even be discrete. After Karenin encounters Vronsky on his own porch, Karenin confronts Anna. *“It will end sooner than you and your lover imagine. You want to satisfy animal passions....you think only of yourself”*. He is right, of course, but she merely accuses him of being ungentlemanly. He retorts, *“the sufferings of the man who was your husband do not interest you. What do you care that his whole life is wrecked and how much he has suffered.”*

In his emotional state Karenin mispronounces “suffered” and Anna, for the first and last time, briefly felt for him. She was not discommoded for long. Quickly her empathy passes. *“No, it was an illusion”*, she thinks. *“As if a man with those dull eyes and that self-satisfied immobility could feel!”* Ah, the denial of a man’s emotional capacity was ever used as an excuse for female callousness.

In a truly remarkable passage, immediately after the first consummation of their passion, we have a foretaste of trouble between Anna and Vronsky to come: a virtual sermon against yielding to sensual pleasure we read of the shame which follows,

“That which for nearly a year had been Vronsky’s sole and exclusive desire, supplanting all his former desires: that which for Anna had been an impossible, dreadful, but all the more bewitching dream of happiness, had come to pass.”

“...she drooped her once proud, bright, but now dishonoured head.... ‘My God, Forgive me!’...She felt so guilty, so much to blame....but she had no one in the world now except him, so that even her prayer for forgiveness was addressed to him.”

“He felt what a murderer must feel when looking at the body he has deprived of life. The body he had deprived of life was their love....”

Tolstoy then likens the kisses with which Vronsky covers Anna to a murderer hacking his victim’s corpse to pieces for disposal. Is this the harshest of moral judgments, or is it a foretaste of where their trajectory will inevitably take them? In either case it is an analogy which draws its power from its startling dissonance.

After running off with Vronsky, Anna becomes a social outcast. It is not a condition which someone of her nature will tolerate with equanimity. She attempts to attend the opera, despite Vronsky’s desperate appeal to her not to do so. The opera, you will understand, is not so much a performance by those on stage as a performance by those in the audience. It is a society event in which who is seen with whom, and who says what to whom, is of central importance. It is not a place for a social pariah. Punishment for the audacity of such a pariah

in attending is inevitable. Anna at this point is in denial as to what she has wrought upon herself. She fondly imagines that her habitual social ease and accomplishment will enable her to weather the storm and emerge triumphant. But society is not forgiving of such transgressors. She is duly shamed to a degree she has never previously experienced, or perhaps even imagined possible. (Think of a previously ardent feminist making a public statement contrary to the sisterhood's diktats and you will get the picture). On her return to their hotel she immediately blames Vronsky,

"It's all your fault! Your fault!" she exclaimed with tears of despair and spite in her voice, and rose.

'But I asked, I entreated you not to go! I knew it would be unpleasant for you!' replied Vronsky"

It is the beginning of the end, but there are many agonies to be endured yet.

There is much to please the feminist. For example, here is an extract in which Dolly (Anna's sister in law) recounts a chance meeting,

"She recalled a talk she had had with a young woman at the halting place. In answer to the question whether she had any children, the good-looking young peasant wife had cheerfully replied, 'I had one girl but God released me. I buried her in Lent.' 'And are you very sorry?' asked Dolly. 'What's there to be sorry about? The old man has plenty of grandchildren as it is. They're nothing by worry. You can't work or anything. They're nothing but a tie...'

The answer had seemed horrible to Dolly, despite the good natured sweetness of the young woman's looks, but now she could not help recalling it. In those cynical words there was some truth. 'Altogether', she thought, looking back at the whole of her life during those fifteen years of wedlock, 'pregnancy, sickness, dullness of mind, indifference to everything, and above all disfigurement.'"

Dolly is on a trip to visit Anna (despite her pariah status). There is a back-story here. The opening scene of the book has Oblonsky, Dolly's husband and Anna's brother, in the dog house. He is a serial philanderer and has been caught by Dolly in his latest escapade. The irony is that it was Anna who was instrumental in re-uniting the couple, persuading Dolly to forgive him. En route Dolly muses on how things have turned out.

"They are all down on Anna! What for? Am I better than she? I at least have a husband whom I love. Not as I wished to love, but still I do love him; but Anna did not love hers. In what is she to blame? She wishes to live. God has implanted that need in our souls. It is quite possible I might have done the same. I don't even know whether I did well to listen to her at that terrible time when she came to me in Moscow. I ought then to have left my husband and begun life anew. I might have loved and been loved, the real way. And is it better now? I don't respect him. I need him...and I put up with him. Is that any better? I was still attractive then, still had my good looks, she went on, feeling she wanted to see herself in a glass."

Even Dolly, though, is surprised by Anna's lack of interest in her own baby daughter – a telling point being Anna's unawareness of the baby's latest couple of teeth. This is not the first time it has been clear that Anna has scant love for her daughter by Vronsky (*"try as she might she could not love that child"*) though she pines for her son by Karenin constantly.

Nor, it seems, is Anna concerning herself with any domestic business. Dolly is obliged to concede that Vronsky, for all his socialite nature, is the practical one about the domestic arrangements in his shared dwelling with Anna. At table, *"Dolly observed all this luxury...and, as a housewife herself controlling a household she could not help noting the details...and asking herself how it was all done and by whom. Veslovsky (a guest), her*

husband, and even Sviyazhsky and many others she knew, never thought about these things, and readily believed, what every decent host wishes his guests to feel, that all that is so well arranged at his house has cost him no trouble but has come about of itself. Dolly, however, knew that not even a milk pudding for the children's lunch comes of itself, and that therefore so complicated and splendid an organisation must have needed someone's careful attention; and from the way Vronsky surveyed the table, gave a sign with his head to the butler, and asked her whether she would like fish-broth or soup, she concluded that it had all been done by, and depended upon, the master's care. It was evident that it depended no more on Anna than on Veslovsky. Anna, Sviyazhsky, the Princess and Veslovsky were all equally guests, gaily making use of what was provided for them. Anna was hostess only in what concerned the conversation."

That night Anna confides to Dolly that she will be having no more children. Dolly is amazed at how she can possibly know. The Victorian reader's blushes are spared by the blank which follows Anna's reply, "the doctor told me...". We are to understand that Dolly had no notion that contraception was a possibility, those previously incomprehensible families with only one or two children being suddenly explained. One has some sympathy with the feminist position at this point, though one notes that the wishes of the lover she dreamed of marrying were of no consequence to her, and we learn later that Vronsky did want more children. Anna, it seems, could no more put herself in Vronsky's shoes than in her husband's.

In their country living, Vronsky busies himself with being a rich landowner with ideas, including building a tremendously expensive hospital. Anna becomes increasingly clingy and desperate to maintain Vronsky's infatuation at white heat. This possessiveness is counterproductive. "*Her chief preoccupation was still herself – herself in so far as Vronsky held her dear and in so far as she could compensate him for all he had given up. Vronsky appreciated this, which had become the sole aim of her life, a desire not only to please him but also to serve him; but at the same time he was troubled by these love-meshes in which she tried to entangle him. As time went on, the oftener he felt himself caught in these meshes the more he desired, not exactly to escape from them but to try whether they really interfered with his freedom. Had it not been for this ever-increasing desire for freedom – not to have a scene each time he had to go to town for a meeting or to the races – Vronsky would have been quite content with his life.*" Later, when Anna calls Vronsky back early from the Nobles' Elections, for trumped up reasons, Vronsky reflects dolefully on the contrast between "*the innocent mirth of the elections and this dismal burdensome love to which he must return*". Oh dear.

And now she is taking morphia increasingly often.

Back in Moscow, Levin – now married to Kitty - visits Anna rather unwisely after drinking. The innocent Levin is largely immune from the charms of women. But he has not encountered the likes of Anna Karenina before – at least, not such a one as she in a mood to seduce him. He is captivated: "*her beauty, her cleverness, her good education, together with her simplicity and sincerity*" (he thinks) "*what a wonderful, sweet, pathetic woman!*". Oblonsky sees that Levin is entirely vanquished, despite having formerly judged her severely. This is not lost on Kitty when Levin returns to their house: "*you have fallen in love with that horrid woman! She has bewitched you!*"

And wicked she surely is. We read,

"When her visitors had taken their leave Anna did not sit down but began pacing up and down the room. Though she had involuntarily done all in her power to awaken love in Levin (as at that time she always did to all the young men she met) and though she knew she had

succeeded in as far as was possible with an honourable married man in one evening....yet as soon as he had left the room she ceased to think about him.”

What callousness. And to Levin of all people – the husband of Kitty whose heart Anna had broken once already by stealing Vronsky from her. But such considerations do not even register with Anna Karenina. And from this point on it becomes increasingly obvious that what we have here is a narcissist. I have been determined to avoid that over-used word, but it is now unavoidable.

After one episode when Vronsky has the temerity to be elsewhere than with her, she upbraids him mercilessly. His look of irritation she interprets as “obstinacy” – which it to say, obstinacy at insisting on his independence. “*Well then*”, he says, touched by her apparent despair. “*Tell me what I should do to make you easy? I am ready to do anything to make you happy. What would I not do to spare you such grief as this, about what I know not what! Anna!*” She tries to “*hide her triumph at her victory, for the victory was hers after all*”. But he resents being manipulated by moral bullying, and she herself realises that the words she used to bring about her victory were a dangerous weapon and must not be used again: “*I am near catastrophe and afraid of myself*”. Prophetic, of course.

Their domestic discord continues to amplify. “*The irritation which divided them had no tangible cause, and all attempts at an explanation not only failed to clear it away but increased it.....Neither of them spoke of the cause of their irritation, but each thought the other in the wrong, and at every opportunity tried to prove that this was so.*” Anna was unable to see that the very intensity of her neediness, her irrational jealousy, was driving Vronsky away. “*For her he, with all his habits, thoughts, wishes, mental and physical faculties – the whole of his nature – consisted of one thing only: love for women, and this love she felt ought to be wholly concentrated on her alone. This love was diminishing; therefore, in her judgment, part of his love must have been transferred to other women or one other woman*”. Satisfying Anna has become an impossibility, as it always does with those of her personality. “*I have tried everything*”, Vronsky ultimately decides, “*the only thing left is to pay no attention*”.

A self-destructive climax is inevitable. When Vronsky returns late one night and does not come into her room (following her own instructions) we are told what is going on in her head. “*Death, as the sole means of reviving love for herself in his heart, of punishing him, and of gaining the victory in that contest which an evil spirit in her heart was waging against him, presented itself clearly and vividly to her.*” The next few chapters are remarkable for their depiction of a person in the extremes of despair and depression. Anna imputes the most ignoble motive to everyone. She despises even casual passers-by. The world has been drained of all goodness; all is bleak and pointless. The end comes in the same railway station in which she met Vronsky. At that time a man had thrown himself in front of a train – and, with poetic resonance – she does the same. “*The candle, by the light of which she had been reading that book filled with anxieties, deceptions, grief, and evil, flared up with a brighter light, lit up for her all that had before been dark, crackled, began to flicker, and went out forever.*”

Without doubt the feminist position would be that Anna was a victim of the patriarchy; that it was patriarchal social constraints which rendered her a fallen woman and a social outcast, whilst, in contrast, Vronsky could carry on much as before. There is truth in that, of course, but by no means the whole truth. For Anna did have considerable agency – especially before deciding on the course she took. As for the difference in treatment, Anna was unfaithful to her husband and freely decided to leave him. This did not apply to Vronsky. Had Vronsky been a married man who deserted a faithful wife and child to live with another woman, how

would society have treated him then? Perhaps his wealth might have carried him through it in better shape than Anna, but he would likely never have had any career again and been shunned by many previous acquaintances. After all, look what happened to Karenin (below), and he was the injured party. The feminists will refuse to acknowledge that Anna was the architect of her own downfall. That her freedoms were undoubtedly curtailed in that culture hardly marks her out for special attention. Everyone's freedoms are curtailed in every culture: it is the price we pay for cooperative communal living, without which we would all perish. And it seems that Karenin gave Anna far more freedom than many women of her class and position, and she certainly enjoyed far more freedom than any of the serving or peasant classes.

Anna's suicide is not the true denouement. There are nearly 50 pages more of the book, and it is not mere padding. I must give sufficient attention to Levin and his constant agonising over the peasants, social inequality, agricultural inefficiencies and, most importantly, his sustained spiritual crisis. In the closing chapters, and against expectation for those raised with modern novels, he (and we) find resolution. But first, I have left unfinished the matter of Karenin.

Karenin

Karenin does not attract the reader's sympathy, though he should. He is depicted as a dry-as-dust government functionary, and emotionally repressed. I am tempted to add that, in a land apparently populated by the emotionally gushing, Karenin's company might have been rather a relief. But we are told more than once that the suffering of others affected Karenin deeply. Unfortunately Karenin's response to his own empathy was generally to disguise it with irritation and brusqueness, thus was his unsympathetic persona consolidated. But consider a passage after Anna's near death delivering her illegitimate daughter. Of Karenin we read,

“By his wife's bedside he had for the first time in his life given rein to that feeling of tender sympathy which the suffering of others evoked in him and which he had until then been ashamed of, as of a weakness; and his pity for her, remorse at having wished for her death, and above all the joy of forgiving, in itself gave him not only relief from suffering but inward peace such as he had never before experienced. Suddenly he felt that the very thing that had been a source of suffering to him had become a spiritual joy, and that what had seemed insoluble as long as he indulged in censure, recriminations, and hatred, had become simple and clear when he forgave and loved.

He forgave his wife and pitied her for her sufferings and remorse. He forgave Vronsky and pitied him, especially when reports of Vronsky's desperate action reached him (he had attempted suicide). He pitied his son too, more than he had done before, and reproached himself for not having paid more attention to him. But for the newborn little girl he had a peculiar sentiment, not of pity alone but even of tenderness.”

We are told that, despite this baby girl not being his, that she would certainly have died had it not been for Karenin's solicitude whilst her mother neglected her.

Karenin had lived for his work. We are told bluntly that Anna's disgrace, falling also upon him, was the end of his career. His whole world had fallen apart, through no fault of his.

Karenin's position after the birth of this child and before Anna has left him is pitiable. So it is curious that (I suspect) the general reader would have scant sympathy for him. Tolstoy summarises his condition thus, *“the transition from the past to the consciousness of his wife's infidelity he had already painfully passed through; that had been trying, but it was comprehensible. Had his wife then, after confessing her infidelity, left him, he would have been grieved and unhappy, but he would not have felt himself to be in such an unintelligible impasse as now. He could not at all reconcile his recent forgiveness, his emotion and love for*

his sick wife and for another man's baby, with the present position: with the fact that, as if in reward for all that, he was now left alone, disgraced, ridiculed, not wanted by anyone and despised by all."

What follows is just a few paragraphs about Karenin which, I suspect, have made little impact on most reviewers. But they are so important. The first is one of the most perfect descriptions of how male emotional crisis arises, not internally from negative aspects of masculinity, but as a result of societal intolerance of a wounded man, a man who is failing to perform. For a couple of days after Anna left, Karenin managed to maintain a pretence of calm competence, discharging myriad minor duties as if nothing was untoward: "*no one could have observed in him any signs of despair*". But following the visit of a tradesman, Karenin breaks down.

"He felt he could not bear the general pressure of contempt and harshness which he had clearly seen in the faces of that shop-assistant and of Korney (his servant), and of everyone without exception whom he had met during those two days. He felt that he could not divert from himself people's hatred, because that hatred was caused not by his badness (had it been so he might have tried to be better) but by his disgraceful and repulsive misery. He knew that for that reason – because his heart was rent in pieces – they would be pitiless towards him. He felt that people would destroy him, as dogs kill a tortured dog that is whining with pain. He knew that the only way of escape from men was to hide his wounds from them. He had unconsciously tried to do so for two days, and now felt himself unable to continue the unequal struggle."

The entirety of male utility, male disposability and the empathy gap is contained in "*because his heart was rent in pieces – they would be pitiless towards him*". Imagine saying such a thing of a woman.

And still I suspect that not one reader in twenty finishes the book with any feelings of sympathy towards Karenin. He is the grey government functionary who is to be despised because he failed to keep his wife – a cuck, in fact. (I hate that expression, and I trust I am telegraphing why).

In this enormous book we are permitted only three short paragraphs about Karenin's back-story. I will quote them in full. Though he had assistance, he also had to make his way in the world through his own efforts. He did sufficiently well at the task, rising to be a provincial Governor, that he became desirable husband material. His betrothal to Anna, it turns out, was the result of coercion – even trickery.

"Karenin had been left an orphan. There were two of them: he had a brother. They could not remember their father, and their mother died when Karenin was ten years old. They had small means. Their uncle, a high official and at one time a favourite with the late Emperor, brought them up.

Having taken a medal on finishing, both at school and at the university, Karenin, by his uncle's help, started at once on a conspicuous path in the Civil Service, and from that time devoted himself entirely to official ambition. Neither at school nor at the university, nor afterwards, did he enter into friendly relations with anyone. His brother was nearest to his heart, but he served under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and always lived abroad, where he died soon after Karenin's marriage.

At the time when he was Governor of a Province, Anna's aunt, a rich provincial lady, introduced him, who though not a young man was a young Governor, to her niece, and contrived to put him in such a position that he was obliged either to propose or to leave town. Karenin hesitated long. At that time there were as many reasons for the step as against it, but

there was no such decisive reason as to make him neglect his rule of refraining when in doubt. But Anna's aunt intimated to him, through an acquaintance, that he had already compromised the girl, and that he was honour bound to propose to her. He proposed, and devoted to his betrothed and to his wife all the feeling of which he was capable."

Tolstoy writes a simple sentence which summarises perfectly the vulnerability of so many men which can result in their devastation after separation,

"His attachment to Anna excluded from his soul any need he had felt for affectionate relations with other persons; and now, among all his acquaintances, he had no intimate friend."

Yet, when he finally identifies someone who is willing to listen without condemnation (the Countess Lydia Ivanovna) he does not hold back, *"I am broken, I am stricken. I am no longer a man!"* Yes, men do talk – if they can find a sympathetic audience.

When Anna eventually leaves Karenin, she takes the new daughter and Karenin keeps their son. Thus both children are retained by their respective fathers, surely the most sensible arrangement. On being petitioned by third parties to divorce his wife, Karenin does eventually agree. This is no small issue because the only way that the divorce can be achieved without Anna's complete ruination is for Karenin to take the blame upon himself. The situation would seem to parallel that in the UK in (say) the 1950s when men would have to fabricate infidelity in order to give their wives a divorce (often involving hiring a woman with whom to be "found" in a hotel bed). But Anna insists on regaining her son, Serezha. Karenin refuses, and who can blame him. Anna has made her bed but refuses to accept she must lie upon it.

Levin and the Spiritual Quest

Nietzsche famously declared that we had killed God, and that the consequences would be nihilism, in 1882. But Tolstoy was there first. In one passage, Karenin, the conservative, is praising a classical education against a "modern" (in 1877) scientific one: *"the influence of the classics is in the highest degree a moral one, whereas unfortunately with instruction in natural science are connected those dangerous and false teachings which are the bane of the present times"*. Karenin is disputing with the liberal intellectual Pestsov who replies, *"which kind of education should be preferred would not have been so easily decided had there not been on the side of classical education that advantage which you have just mentioned: the moral advantage – the anti-nihilistic influence."* Oddly, Pestsov merely concedes the argument, and for good measure Koznyshev, Levin's half-brother, chips in, *"Were it not for the advantage of this anti-nihilistic influence on the side of classical education we should have considered the question longer....But now we know that those classical education-pills contain the salutary virtue of anti-nihilism"*.

Frequently it seems that Tolstoy is playing out his own agonising over the meaning of life, the claimed death of God and its associated nihilism. It may come as a surprise – it did to me – that the closing sections of the book provide a clear answer (through the mouth of Levin). With hindsight, the passage above clearly telegraphs Tolstoy's conclusion. He had come through the other side of doubt at a time when professing doubt was still generally taboo.

On the matter of atheism, here's an extract which seems peculiarly modern. The speaker is visiting Vronsky and Anna during their stay in Italy and he is speaking of a local artist. *"He is one of those heathenish new folk one so often meets nowadays, you know. One of those freethinkers who have been brought up from the beginning in disbelief, negation, and materialism. Formerly a freethinker was a man brought up with ideas of religion, law, morality, who himself, through struggle and pain, had attained freedom of thought; but now a*

new type of born freethinker has appeared. These grow up without so much as hearing that there used to be laws of morality and religion, and that there was once authority in these things; they grow up simply with the idea of negation – that is, as heathens.” Perhaps our current malaise, our endemic lack of meaning, is not so new; perhaps this has always been the case and our fond belief that previous ages enjoyed naïve faith is yet another historical myth.

Tolstoy, through Levin, expresses the spiritual dilemma thus: *“Levin, for the first time looked at the questions of life and death in the light of the new convictions, as he called them, which between the ages of twenty and thirty-four had imperceptibly replaced the beliefs of his childhood and youth, he had been less horrified by death than by life without the least knowledge of whence it came, what it is for, why, and what it is. Organisms, their destruction, the indestructibility of matter, the law of the conservation of energy, development – the terms that had superseded these beliefs – were very useful for mental purposes; but they gave no guidance for life, and Levin suddenly felt like a person who has exchanged a thick fur coat for a muslin garment and who, being out in the frost for the first time, becomes clearly convinced, not by arguments, but with the whole of his being, that he is as good as naked and that he must inevitably perish miserably.”*

One of the great appeals of reading is to discover that others have had the very same thoughts as yourself, though you have never heard them expressed explicitly, or so well, before. Thus,

“What astounded and upset him most in this connection was that the majority of those in his set and of his age, having like himself replaced their former beliefs by new convictions like his own, did not see anything to be distressed about, and were quite contented and tranquil. So that, besides the principle question, Levin was tormented by other questions: Were these people sincere? Were they not pretending?...having read a great many books he became convinced that those who shared his outlook understood only what he had understood, explaining nothing and merely ignoring those problems, without a solution to which he could not live..”

“Besides, during the time of his wife’s confinement an extraordinary thing had happened to him. He, an unbeliever, began to pray, and while praying believed. But that moment had passed, and he could not allot any place in his life to the state of mind he had then experienced. He could not admit that he had then known the truth and was now making a mistake; because as soon as he reflected calmly about it, it all fell to pieces; nor could he acknowledge that he had then been mistaken, for he prized the state his soul had been in, and by acknowledging it to be a result of weakness he would have defiled those moments.”

Tormented by these thoughts Levin turns to the non-materialist philosophers, but finds no consolation in philosophy. Houses of cards constructed of words, they all tumble down in the absence of due regard for *“something in life more important than reason”*. We cannot doubt that Tolstoy is working out his own spiritual crisis in print at this point. He even has Levin fearing to carry a gun lest he should shoot himself, a thing which was actually true of Tolstoy at the time.

“Thinking about it led him into doubts and prevented him from seeing what he should do and should not do. But when he did not think, but just lived, he unceasingly felt in his soul the presence of an infallible judge deciding which of two possible actions was the better and which the worse; and as soon as he did what he should not have done, he immediately felt this.”

Levin ultimately realises that it is useless to dispute with atheists. In a thought which may chime with many he concludes, *“no, I must not dispute with them, they are clad in impenetrable armour and I am naked”*.

Levin's tormenting thoughts during his spiritual crisis bear comparison with those of Anna during her last hours. But whilst she despised all she saw, the culmination of a life lived for herself, Levin's agony resulted from his search for meaning which would apply to all.

"'Why is all this being done?' Levin wondered. 'Why am I standing here, obliging them to work? Why do they all make such efforts and try to show me their zeal? Why is my old friend Matrena toiling so (I doctored her after the fire, when she was struck by a girder)?' he thought, looking at a thin peasant woman who pushed the grain along with a rake, her dark sun-burnt bare feet stepping with effort on the hard uneven barn floor. 'She recovered then, today or tomorrow, or in ten years' time, they will bury her and nothing will be left of her, nor of that smart girl with the red skirt, who with such dexterous and delicate movements is beating the chaff from the ears. She too will be buried, and that piebald gelding too – and that one very soon' he reflected, looking at a horse breathing quickly with falling and rising belly and inflated nostrils, as it trod on the slanting wheel that moved under it. 'They will bury her, and so they will Theodore, who is feeding the machine, his curly beard full of chaff and his shirt torn on his white shoulder. Yet he loosens the sheaves and gives directions, shouts at the women, and quickly puts right the strap on the flywheel. And, moreover, not they only but I too shall be buried and nothing will be left. What is it all for?'"

The ultimate question of which all pretend to be unconcerned. And so Levin has his epiphany.

"Theodore says that it is wrong to live for one's belly, and that we must live for truth, for God, and at the first hint I understand him! I and millions of men who lived centuries ago and those who are living now; peasants, the poor in spirit, and sages, who have thought and written about it, saying the same thing in their obscure words – we all agree on that one thing: what we should live for, and what is good. I, and all other men know only one thing firmly, clearly, and certainly, and this knowledge cannot be explained by reason: it is outside reason, has no cause, and can have no consequences.

If goodness has a cause, it is no longer goodness; if it has a consequence – a reward, it is also not goodness. Therefore goodness is beyond the chain of cause and effect."

Levin had discovered that he had been living well but thinking badly.