

Karenin's ears, Grinevitch's fingernails

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I wish to achieve two main goals in writing this article. First, I am going to take a close look at Vladimir Nabokov's reading practice, as demonstrated in his American lectures on the Western literary canon, and Russian literature in particular, including Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. Secondly, and more importantly, I want to read *Anna Karenina* (probably for the hundredth time in my life) using his method, paying particular attention to the presence and function of bodily details in the novel. I define the bodily detail as a part of the human body (e.g., the ear, the hand, the finger, the nail, the nape of the neck, the calf, a lock of hair) that is noticed by the characters in the novel and/or by the auctorial narrator.

In his article, Kazimierz Bartoszyński distinguished between two types of “rereading.” One centers on an academic analysis and interpretation of the text. Bartoszyński calls this type of “rereading,” drawing on Roman Ingarden, “a scholarly reconstruction of the text.” “Rereadings,” Bartoszyński writes, “help verify the hypotheses formulated during the first reading [...]” The other type of “rereading,” “literary rereading,” is aesthetic in nature and focuses on the represented world, and Bartoszyński concentrated on this type in his article.¹ I will not discuss Bartoszyński’s theory in detail – very interesting and thought-provoking, and based on phenomenology and reader-response theory, as it may be – and only say that my most recent rereading of *Anna Karenina* combines both types. My reading is academic, as evidenced by my earlier critical essays devoted to Tolstoy’s novel,² but at the same time amateur, in the best sense of the word, insofar as I truly love Kazimiera Iłakowiczówna’s Polish translation of *Anna Karenina* and I could read it again and again.

Bartoszyński argues that rereading essentially “[...] re-contextualizes each fragment of the text and this new context differs from the one found in the first reading,” which allows the reader “to notice in the text things that were originally overlooked.”³ “Karenin’s ears” mentioned in the title of my essay cannot be overlooked even in the first reading, because the moment when Anna pays attention to them for the first time in her life after eight years of marriage completely changes the course of the plot. In the novel, Anna is on a train from Moscow to St. Petersburg, she is returning home; she has only just met Alexei Vronsky, who declared his undying love for her, thus disturbing the peace of her soul and destroying her marriage:

At Petersburg, as soon as the train stopped and she got out, the first person that attracted her attention was her husband. “Oh, mercy! why do his ears look like that?” she thought, looking at his frigid and imposing figure, and especially the ears that struck her at the moment as propping up the brim of his round hat.⁴

At this point, Anna’s mind performs “a kind of mental somersault,” as Vladimir Nabokov vividly described it.⁵ And this realization is indeed an Aristotelian recognition; that is, it marks a change from ignorance to knowledge. In a tragic plot, such recognition must be followed by peripeteia, that is the shift of the tragic protagonist’s fortune, and this is what happens in Leo Tolstoy’s masterpiece.⁶ But it is not the plot, neither the ideological aspect of the novel, and not even the advanced modern ways of portraying complex characters, according to Nabokov,

¹ Kazimierz Bartoszyński, “O lekturze wielokrotnej” [On rereading], *Pamiętnik Literacki* 4 (1990): 146.

² Ewa Kraskowska, *Czytelnik jako kobieta. Wokół literatury i teorii* [The reader as a woman. Literature and theory] (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2007), 89, 92–93, 98–101, 115–128, 143–144.

³ Bartoszyński, 150–151.

⁴ Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, trans. Constance Garnett (<https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/1399/pg1399-images.html>).

⁵ Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, ed., with an introduction, by Edward Bowen (New York: Harvest Books/Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1981), 58. Nabokov actually writes about “a kind of mental somersault” when he discusses Gogol’s *Dead Souls*, and not Tolstoy’s works.

⁶ I interpret this scene in detail in my study *Powieść o socjety a stereotypy* [The novel of manners and stereotypes] (Kraskowska, 92–95).

which define beautiful prose and, at the same time, the beauty of reading it. As Nabokov writes in his 1944 essay on Nikolai Gogol's *Dead Souls*, "gusto and wealth of weird detail which lift the whole thing to the level of tremendous epic poem"⁷ are the most important. And in another lecture, he states: "his works, as all great literary achievements, is a phenomenon of language and not one of ideas."⁸ Nabokov is not interested in what Barthes calls the "zero degree of writing," a linguistic or painterly naturalization of the represented world, with which realism is usually identified. A seemingly realistic detail, appropriately placed in the wider context, endows the masterpieces of realism with something that exceeds the limits of mimesis, something "weird."

Nabokov's writing method, apart from the linguistic peculiarities of his prose, owes much to precise descriptions of the details of the represented world. I shall not give examples from Nabokov's works; my article is, after all, devoted to Tolstoy's novel, and thus I shall quote instead from the introduction to *The Annotated Lolita* written by Alfred Appel Jr., who also compiled over nine hundred footnotes to this edition of the novel:

[...] the apprehension of "reality" (a word that Nabokov says must always have quotes around it) is first of all a miracle of vision, and our existence is a sequence of attempts to unscramble the "pictures" glimpsed in that "brief crack of light." [...] the process of reading and rereading his novels is a game of perception.⁹

Appel also writes that reading realist works defined in such a way resembles looking at the *trompe l'oeil*, a highly realistic optical illusion, in which everything is seemingly obvious ("no symbols lurking in murky depths"). However, if you look at the painting long enough, it will "reveal something totally different from what one had expected." Let us remember these remarkable insights, for I shall refer to them in my conclusion.

In his "reading process,"¹⁰ Nabokov acts as not only an interpreter but also a potential translator. His attitude to the art of translation was most fully expressed in his monumental and controversial project – the English translation of Alexander Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, published in four volumes with extensive commentary. The preface to volume one is a manifesto of translational "literalism," that is, a form of translation that, as far as the "associative and syntactical" properties of the target language allow, closely reflects the "exact contextual meaning of the original."¹¹ The process of reading (of the source text), which I would like to call a "translation reading," pays very close attention to the detail; each word, each phrase is viewed as if under a microscope, and at the same time a unique, almost intimate, bond is created between the reader and the text. It is an experience so intense that it can inspire the translator to document it in writing, as demonstrated by numerous texts (essays but also

⁷ Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, 16.

⁸ Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, 61.

⁹ Alfred Appel Jr., "Introduction", in: Vladimir Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita. Revised and Updated*, edited with a preface, introduction and notes by Alfred Appel Jr (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), xx.

¹⁰ Bartoszyński, 146.

¹¹ Vladimir Nabokov, "Translator's Introduction", in: Aleksandr Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*, vol. 1, translated and edited by Vladimir Nabokov (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964), viii.

books) devoted to the process of translating a given work. In the relatively short history of Polish “translator’s memoirs,”¹² the following works deserve recognition: Maria Kurecka and Witold Wirpsza’s *Diabelne tarapaty* [Devilish troubles] (1970) devoted to the translation of *Doctor Faustus* by Thomas Mann; Elżbieta Tabakowska’s *O przekładzie na przykładzie* [Translation through example] (1999) and *Tłumacząc się z tłumaczenia* [Explaining translation] (2009), which document the painstaking work of translating Norman Davies’s historical books into Polish; and, most recently, Maciej Świerkocki’s 400-page-long book *Łódź Ulissesa: Siedem lat i osiemnaście godzin z Jamesem Joyce’em w Dublinie i nie tylko* [Ulysses’ Boat: Seven Years and Eighteen Hours with James Joyce in Dublin and more].

Nabokov’s translation reading of *Anna Karenina* is all the more intimate and detailed because the writer actually intended to translate Tolstoy’s masterpiece into English, alas this project was ultimately cancelled. Perhaps the best example of this kind of reading can be found in his essay devoted to *Dead Souls*, which begins with a semantic analysis of the Russian lexeme *poshlust*.¹³ In his *Anna Karenina* lecture, Nabokov pays close attention to the techniques of representation, especially Tolstoian adjectives such as “shlupayushchiye,” “shershavye,” and “tuyevo-lento-kruzhevno-tsvetnoy” (“gauzily-ribbonly-lacily-iridescent”), or cultural realities, such as Russian cuisine (“cabbage soup and groats Shchi” or “grechnevaya kasha”).¹⁴ He does not talk about bodily details a lot,¹⁵ and only in the context of a more or less comprehensive description of a given character. Indeed, I am interested in the details which are “weird,” details which are taken out of context of the whole and applied in a synecdochical manner (*pars pro toto*). Let us take a look at some of them.

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In *Anna Karenina*’s interpretations, symbolic elements – individual objects or situations which somehow foreshadow Anna’s fate or reinforce the overall meaning of the novel – play a very

¹²The term “translator’s memoir” appears more and more often in the academic discourse on translation, as evidenced by the seminar organized in Lancaster in 2021 entitled “The Translator’s Memoir/Translation as Memoir” (<https://www.iatis.org/index.php/news/calls-for-papers/item/2357-the-translation-memoir-translation-as-memoir-9-july-2021>, date of access 30 July 2022). The translator’s memoir was defined there as “a reflexive writing practice on the personal and political intersection between identity and translation.” Importantly, it differs from the reflection on the nature of translation in general, which has a much longer tradition. It was discussed in Poland in the anthology *Pisarze polscy o sztuce przekładu* [Polish writers on the art of translation] (the first edition came out in 1977 and was edited by Edward Balcerzan and originally discussed the texts from 1440 to 1974; the second edition came out in 2007 and was edited by Balcerzan and Ewa Rajewska and discussed the texts from 1440 to 2005).

¹³Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, 15–18. Russian: *пошлость* – a word with a complicated history and etymology, currently used in a pejorative sense: wickedness, vulgarity, triviality.

¹⁴The Polish translator of the lectures, Zbigniew Batko, with admirable and exemplary meticulousness, checked each time how a given fragment or word was translated by Iłhakowiczówna, adding his comments to the text in square brackets: “[u Iłhakowiczówny «ozdobione kwiatami», ale zdecydowanie chodzi tu o barwy; ZB]” [in Iłhakowiczówna’s translation ‘decorated with flowers,’ but we’re definitely talking about colors here; ZB] (Nabokov, *Wykłady o literaturze rosyjskiej*, 260).

¹⁵For example, when Anna’s appearance is described: “[...] Anna was rather stout but her carriage was wonderfully graceful, her step singularly light. Her face was beautiful, fresh, and full of animation. She had curly black hair that was apt to come awry, and gray eyes glistening darkly in the shadow of thick lashes. [...] Her unpainted lips were a vivid red. She had plump arms, slender wrists and tiny hands” (Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, 227).

important role. The most frequently noticed and commented on are: the train (and all related objects), a scary peasant with a curly beard, Anna's red bag, and Vronsky's mare Frou-Frou and its death during a race. Critics and scholars have often commented on how Tolstoy describes the physicality of his characters,¹⁶ but symbolic meaning was probably only found in Karenin's ears and the respective "points" of Frou-Frou (especially her head). However, I am not interested in symbolism, but in artistic tricks, especially the most famous of them – defamiliarization, and its ability to provide the reader with a new perspective. I assume that there is no need to explain the principles of defamiliarization and de-automation because they are fundamental concepts in contemporary literary studies.

Let us start with Mihail Stanislavitch Grinevitch – with his hands, especially his fingers and his nails. He is a side character, a colleague of Stiva Oblonsky, Anna Karenina's brother, who is the head of an important state institution. We meet him in one of the opening scenes of the novel and see him through the eyes of Konstantin Levin, who, having come to Moscow straight from his country estate, visits Stiva in his office:

Levin was silent, looking at the unknown faces of Oblonsky's two companions, and especially at the hand of the elegant Grinevitch, which had such long white fingers, such long yellow filbert-shaped nails, and such huge shining studs on the shirt-cuff, that apparently they absorbed all his attention, and allowed him no freedom of thought.¹⁷

Grinevitch's fingers and nails are mentioned several times, as a result of which Grinevitch turns into his yellow, long, curved fingernails, which resembles the way in which Gogol "made"¹⁸ his brilliant short story *The Nose*. The above scene is mainly intended to show us how uncomfortable Levin is in Oblonsky's office, but it also makes the reader uncomfortable. So far, the realistic narrative has prevailed, with no disturbances in the reading process, but all of a sudden, we come face to face with Grinevitch's disgusting (object) yellow fingernails. It absorbs our attention and allows us no freedom of thought just as it absorbed and arrested Levin.

In *Anna Karenina*, Levin is *the* one person who most often notices the graphic details of other people's appearance, and Tolstoy scholars see him as a *porte-parole* of the writer. These people are usually side characters and often do not fit in. Grinevitch's last name suggests his non-Russian origin, and although it is not explicitly stated in the novel, he may be a descendant of a Russified Pole, pursuing a career in the tsarist administration. During dinner with Oblonsky, Levin is struck by the sight of a French woman sitting at the restaurant cash register, who

¹⁶For example, a very interesting article by Michael Pursglove from 1973, i.e., before the era of computer stylometric tools, was devoted to the motif of the smile in *Anna Karenina*. Pursglove found that: "The smile is used in either or both these ways in Tolstoy's portrayal of no fewer than eighty-five characters, major, minor, and purely incidental. The noun *ulybka* and the verb *ulybat'sja* appear 613 times in the novel. The number of references per character ranges from seventy-eight for Anna herself to single references for characters such as Stremov, Princess Bohl, and even Levin's dog Laska." In one of the endnotes, Pursglove lists how many times a particular character smiles (be it a radiant, ironic, sly, or cold smile): Anna 78, Oblonsky 74, Kitty 68, Levin 47, Vronsky 46, Dolly 28, Karenin 10, etc. Michael Pursglove, "The Smiles of Anna Karenina", *The Slavic and East European Journal* 1 (1973): 43, 48.

¹⁷Tolstoy, n.p.

¹⁸Boris Eichenbaum, "The Structure of Gogol's 'The Overcoat'", trans. Beth Paul and Muriel Nesbitt, *The Russian Review* 22,4 (October 1963), 377-399.

was “all made up, it seemed, of false hair, *poudre de riz*, and *vinaigre de toilette*” [rice powder and toilet vinegar – E.K.].¹⁹ Levin is also annoyed by the nervous tic developed by his tuberculosis-stricken younger brother Nikolay (a side character, rather unpleasant, but extremely important for the ideological aspect of the novel), which manifests itself in “a nervous jerk of his head and neck,” “as if his neckband hurt him.”²⁰ Other characters also dislike some idiosyncratic aspects of other people’s physicality: Anna begins to notice her husband’s ears, but also how he snaps his fingers, his ugly hands and his high-pitched voice, which, when he was very agitated, turned squeaky. Karenin in general is made up of such idiosyncrasies; Vronsky notices that he walks funny (“Alexey Alexandrovitch’s manner of walking, with a swing of the hips and flat feet, particularly annoyed Vronsky”²¹). Often, it is the narrator who makes such observations, and in the case of *Anna Karenina* the narrator may be associated with the author. The narrator informs us, among other things, that the painter Petrov, whom Kitty met in Baden, had unusually shiny white teeth or that an Englishman, Frou-Frou’s trainer, was “walking with the uncouth gait of jockey, turning his elbows out and swaying from side to side.”²²

I must emphasize that the discussed examples are not meant to be read as ugly or, in general, naturalistic, because there are many ugly people and naturalistically described situations in *Anna Karenina*. For example, let us consider Anna’s internal monologue, which preceded her suicide. Anna rides through the streets of Moscow in a carriage, and then walks in desperation on a platform. Everything seems disgusting to her, she finds everything annoying, and she cannot help but notice how disgusting the people around her are: “some young men, ugly and impudent” hurry by; Vronsky’s servant has a “dull, animal face;” and “[a] grotesque-looking lady wearing a bustle (Anna mentally undressed the woman, and was appalled at her hideousness)” runs down the platform.²³ The descriptions of extreme existential experiences, such as Kitty’s labor or Nikolay’s death (both seen through Levin’s eyes) are long and shockingly naturalistic. Yet narrative sequences of this kind, producing a series of schematized aspects, to use Roman Ingarden’s term,²⁴ are characteristic of Tolstoy’s mimetic art and, while they influence the reader’s emotions, they do not hinder the process of reading as such. This notwithstanding, individual, incidental, mentions of peculiar details of someone’s appearance that evoke an abject reaction are examples of deautomatization, and thus essentially “defamiliarization,” insofar as they disturb the mimetic reading. How does this mechanism work?

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In Jacques Lacan’s eleventh seminar, known as *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, in Chapter Two, “Of the Gaze as *Objet Petit A*,” we read:

¹⁹Tolstoy, n.p.

²⁰Tolstoy, n.p.

²¹Tolstoy, n.p.

²²Tolstoy, n.p.

²³Tolstoy, n.p.

²⁴Roman Ingarden, *The Literary Work of Art: An Investigation on the Borderlines of Ontology, Logic, and Theory of Literature*, trans. George G. Grabowicz (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1973), 255-275.

What is it that attracts and satisfies us in *trompe l'oeil*? When is it that it captures our attention and delights us? At the moment when, by a mere shift of our gaze [emphasis – E.K.], we are able to realize that the representation does not move with the gaze and that it is merely *trompe l'oeil*. For it appears at that moment as something other than it seemed ...²⁵

Trompe l'oeil literally means “deceive the eye” and it is the art of optical illusion, the art of representing visual reality in such a “true” way that the viewer experiences, even if for a short moment, cognitive disorientation and believes that the representation of the object is the object. The paradox of this art/trick lies in the fact that, being the ultimate product of artistic realism, it actually transcends and thus destroys the *mimesis* effect.²⁶ This term may be used as a theoretical metaphor and thus I propose to read Tolstoy’s bodily details as literary *trompe l'oeils*. They interrupt the process of reading for a moment, and at first, we do not know why.²⁷ A closer look, a mere shift of our gaze, reveals that it is a literary trick which opens up a gap in the fictional world. What do we see through this gap? This is where Lacanian psychoanalytic language comes in handy: the scratch of Grinevitch’s long yellow fingernails is a sudden piercing experience of the Real with the epitome of the Symbolic, which is Leo Tolstoy’s epic prose.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

²⁵Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Hogarth, 1977), 112.

²⁶Among Polish scholars, Michał Paweł Markowski was interested in the paradoxical nature of *trompe l'oeil*. In the description of one of his projects (which, unfortunately, he did not finish), he described it thus: “Mere things which had previously been inscribed in a broader significant frame and thus bestowed with many kinds of familiar meaning suddenly gained their uncanny autonomy destroying the safe contemplative distance between representation and the beholder, on which mimetological ideology is thoroughly based.” <https://www.ifk.ac.at/fellows-detail/michal-pawel-markowski.html>, date of access 7 August 2022.

²⁷While I describe my reading impressions, I believe that they may be intersubjective.

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KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT:

The article focuses on the presence and function of bodily details in Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. The bodily detail is defined as a single part of the human body (e.g., the ear, the hand, the finger, the nail, the nape of the neck, the calf, a lock of hair) that is noticed by the characters in the novel and/or by the auctorial narrator. An important point of reference for the analyzes and interpretations is the style of reading proposed by Vladimir Nabokov in his lectures on literature and Kazimierz Bartoszyński's theory of rereading.

r e e a d i n g

T O L S T O Y

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Ewa Kraskowska – born 1954, professor of literary studies. Head of the Department of 20th Century Literature, Theory of Literature and the Art of Translation at the Institute of Polish Philology at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. Her main research interest are women's writing and translation studies. In 2018, she published the monograph *Tylem, ale naprzód. Studia i szkice o Themersonach* [Backwards yet forward. Studies and sketches about the Themersons] (Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, Poznań), and in 2021 she published the book *Ksiądz Kaingba, mój dziadek* [Father Kaingba, my grandfather], in which she reconstructs the history of her family on the basis of numerous historical documents and sources. |