

Notes from a Scene: Levin's Working Day During the Hay Harvest

The world of Tolstoy is world of randomness, the events of which arise spontaneously and indifferently: in one moment, a station worker is accidentally killed on the train Anna and Vronsky find themselves on, and in another, Vronsky is surprised to find Anna pregnant with a child. This randomness is further amplified by the fact that every character operates with imperfect information, unable to predict all the thoughts and actions of other characters. While the novel chronicles how every character struggles with a cloud of uncertainty for the future, witnessed in Karenin's obsession with maintaining social propriety and Anna's ultimate suicide, the scenes of Levin working during the hay harvest illustrate an instance where this world of randomness is not that all apparent. In Levin's labors we see how an individual establishes some normalcy in his way of life and how meaning can still be created amidst a randomness characterizing life at large.

Levin's preoccupation with haystacking is an attempt to adhere to some self-derived basic principles and to establish normalcy in this world of randomness. Levin is content with haystacking because he understands the main principles behind work to be rather straightforward: one reaps what one sows. Tolstoy writes that Levin has "always felt something special moving him to the quick at the haystacking," with this "quickness" illustrating a particular urgency to begin work, to make the most of one's labors in order to reap as much harvest as possible (83). These principles soon become self-derived in the sense that Levin is able to continue to adhere to these principles by merit of the actual success brought about by the adherence to these principles. Levin, after a day's work of stacking hay tirelessly in the fields, looks back on the results of his efforts, exclaiming, "We mowed the whole meadow! Oh, it is nice, delicious!" (102). This outcome of having the entire meadow mowed, coupled with the

imagery of Levin rushing into the room “with his wet and matted hair sticking to his forehead, and his back and chest grimed and moist” reaffirm Levin’s original principles that hard work will yield more harvest (102).

The conviction and meaning with which Levin infuses these principles of harvest are evident in Levin’s treatment of the natural world. As Levin looks at the entire meadow he plans to mow, his immediate impulse is to “get his work done more and more quickly and as much done as possible” (82). For Levin, the meadow retains a special significance because of its potential for harvest, and this potential for harvest fuels Levin’s drive to work harder and faster. Levin’s love of work permeates in his love of nature, a direct contrast to that of Sergey, whose love of nature is predicated on an escape from work. As Tolstoy writes, “To Sergey Ivanovitch the country meant on one hand rest from work, on the other a valuable antidote to the corrupt influences of town, which he took with satisfaction and a sense of its utility. To Konstantin Levin the country was good first because it afforded a field for labor, of the usefulness of which there could be no doubt” (91). Levin is able to look at the world with a realism that stems from personal principles of hard work and the natural countryside’s “usefulness” as a “field for labor”, whereas Sergey looks at the world with a romanticism that is rather randomly defined. For Sergey, as long as the natural world does not resemble anything of the “corrupt influences of town,” that was good enough to be beautiful. There is no sense of control in how Sergey is to make of his relationship with nature. It just happens that there are trees that look in this certain manner, it just happens to be “a tangles mass of leaves,” and it just happens that there is “an old lime tree on the point of flowering” (73). All these natural phenomena just happening is all it takes for Sergey Ivanovitch to “admire the beauty of the woods” (73). Sergey will simply accept whatever nature presents to him, and thus he gives in to this randomness of the natural world. In

contrast to Sergey, Levin invokes his principles of hard work and harvest when appreciating nature, making the natural countryside “the background of life, that is of pleasures endeavors, and labor” (74). By infusing his own principles of labor into the natural world, Levin is able to limit the random influences of what he finds admirable in the natural world, thereby creating a more well-defined, meaningful relationship with the natural world.

While Levin’s haystacking effectively limits randomness in the natural world, it is important to address the full extent to which randomness takes form in Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*. The analysis of Levin’s manual labors during the hay harvest is not fully complete without appreciating Sergey’s intellectual labors because Sergey’s intellectual labors illustrate the very power that randomness has taken hold of characters in the novel. Tolstoy writes that Sergey’s intellectualism takes on a certain random and unconvincing quality, where Sergey “was so used to intellectual activity that he liked to put into concise and eloquent shape the ideas that occurred to him, and liked to have someone to listen to him” (74). These intellectual labors of Sergey “occur” rather than take effort to develop, and the hollowness of Sergey’s intellectual activities become well evident by how Sergey wants to have somebody “listen” to him rather than to have somebody actively debate and discuss his ideas so that those ideas can become more convincing and profound. The lack of purpose and conviction in Sergey’s intellectual labors of trying to find meaning in the world may simply be attributed to the lack of structure and clear-cut truths in the world, or simply speaking, a randomness that defines this world. So lacking is Sergey’s conviction in his intellectual endeavors that he remarks, “You wouldn’t believe what a pleasure this rural laziness is to me. Not an idea in one’s brain, as empty as a drum!” (73). If Sergey’s years of intellectual labors have brought forth no satisfying conclusive truth, then it may very

well be that such truths may not have existed in the first place. In a world of no truth, randomness takes hold.

While in Levin's labors we see how an individual establishes some meaning despite the randomness characterizing life at large, in Sergey's labors we see how an individual slowly loses meaning because of that same randomness characterizing life at large. In fact, during these scenes of Levin's manual labors, Levin notices an apparent loss of meaning in Sergey's intellectual labors over time. As Tolstoy writes, "The better [Levin] knew his brother, the more he noticed that Sergey Ivanovitch, and many other people who worked for the public welfare, were not led by an impulse of the heart to care for the public good, but reasoned from intellectual considerations that it was a right thing to take interest in public affairs, and consequently took interest in them" (73). Sergey's intellectual interests have been occupied by public affairs, whatever is most in vogue, all of which arise randomly. Yesterday, public affairs might concern taxes, today, public affairs might concern income inequality, and tomorrow, public affairs might concern prison reform. Sergey's intellectual labors cave in to a superficial treatment of what the public views as the most popular issue on any given day, and this superficial treatment is what leads Levin to confirm this observation that "his brother [Sergey] did not take questions affecting the public welfare or the question of the immortality of the soul a bit more to heart than he did chess problems, or the ingenious construction of a new machine" (73).

It is clear that Tolstoy does not write about Sergey to ridicule academics and intellectuals of his time, as Sergey is never presented in a comical light, but Sergey does exist as a character foil to Levin, particularly in Levin's haystacking scene where Tolstoy tries to bring out the full meaning and beauty of manual labor. Tolstoy defies the reader's expectations of manual labor where such labor of the manual kind evokes banality and meaninglessness. To do so, Tolstoy

must illustrate the banality and meaningless of an entity that is traditionally assumed to be the opposite of manual labor, the labor of the intellectual kind. By the time we finish listening to Sergey ramble on about his intellectual ideas, we have become thoroughly disinterested with a supposed allure and charm of intellectual labor to the point that we question the supposed superiority of intellectual labor over manual labor. From there, we come to really understand the thoughts of Konstantin Levin, who has found it “dull sitting and listening to [Sergey], especially when he knew that while he was away they would be carting dung onto the fields not ploughed ready for it, and heaping it all up anyhow” (78). Suddenly, the thought of dung and plough appears much more appealing than answering such questions posed by Sergey like, “Do you admit that education is a benefit for the people?” These questions asked by Sergey, although quite intellectual and thoughtful by nature, end up sounding like clichéd and lifeless “meaningless rubbish” (79). By prefacing Levin’s labor scenes with the lifeless intellectual discussions with Sergey, we anticipate a visceral scene packed with action, and the scenes of Levin laboring in the fields and stacking hay provide exactly this visceral thrill. The sensory details of the “sweat that ran in streams over [Levin’s] face and fell in drops down his nose, and drenched his back as though he had been soaked in water” are all reason enough for us to empathize with Levin’s happiness in the fields, because we really come to understand “what delighted [Levin] particularly was that now [Levin] knew he would be able to hold out” (83). In other words, it’s this vitality and assertion of good health from the physical exertion of manual labor, of knowing “he will hold out” that gives Levin an intense and deeply enriching happiness.

Meanwhile, this continuity of Levin adhering to self-derived principles of hard work and this reaffirmation of these principles with plentiful harvest yields mark the beginning of a virtuous cycle. This virtuous cycle is virtuous in the sense that it inspires others to follow suit.

By laboring tirelessly in the fields, Levin lives out his personal principles of work and harvest, demonstrating a leadership and work ethic that the rest of the peasants follow. Tolstoy writes that as dinner approached, “Levin felt a longing to get as much mowing done that day as possible, and was vexed with the sun sinking so quickly in the sky. He felt no weariness; all he wanted was to get his work done more and more quickly and as much done as possible” (85). This enthusiasm for work in the hay harvest scene is enough to convince his peasants to cut Mashkin Upland and the entire big meadow in one day, which would have otherwise taken “thirty scythes two days to mow,” a hefty amount according to Tolstoy (92). Moreover, Levin never forces his fellow peasants to work as hard as he does, as Levin even asks one of the older peasants, as if for permission, “Could you cut Mashkin Upland too? – what do you think?” Such a question illustrates Levin’s deference and uncondescending treatment of his peasants, and this treatment is met with the peasants responding enthusiastically: “We’ll look sharp! We can eat at night. Come on!” cried voices, and eating up their bread, the mowers went back to work.” (87).

Levin’s commitment to the principles of work and harvest form a virtuous cycle rather than just virtue alone because the love for work and harvest he inspires in his fellow peasants eventually cycles back to him, giving him greater strength and energy to work for his harvests. Tolstoy writes that “Levin walked after [an old peasant] and often thought that [Levin himself] must fall, as he climbed with a scythe up a steep cliff where it would have been hard work to clamber without anything. But he climbed up and did what he had to do. He felt as though some external force were moving him” (88). Certainly, had Levin not been able to follow the old peasant or had surrounded himself with motivated peasants who were eager to finish the mowing completely, Levin would not have been able to experience this “external force.” This force, as Tolstoy noted, is external, as opposed to internal, and this external quality suggests that Levin

needed to draw upon virtues outside of himself, external of himself. These external virtues come from the peasants and the natural world he has worked so hard to infuse with his own principled virtues of hard work. These virtues come back to him, giving him greater strength, enthusiasm, and resolve, reaffirming Levin's core principles of hard work so that Levin could "climb up and did what he had to do." Thus, Levin's commitment to the principles of work and harvest is better defined as a virtuous cycle rather than just virtue alone.

Levin's haystacking with his fellow peasants also illustrate Tolstoy's ideals of a more democratic world, where every man is capable of experiencing the same basic toils and struggles of his fellow men. Levin's physical labors during the hay harvest demonstrate a certain brotherhood and fraternity Levin harbors towards his peasants. As Tolstoy writes, "To Konstantin [Levin], the peasant was simply the chief partner in their common labor, and in spite of all the respect and the love, almost like that of kinship, [Levin] had for the peasant—sucked in probably, as he said himself, with the milk of his peasant nurse—still as a fellow-worker with him, while sometimes enthusiastic over the vigor, gentleness, and justice of these men, he was very often, when their common labors called for other qualities, exasperated with the peasant for his carelessness, lack of method, drunkenness, and lying" (81). Such an attitude possessed by Levin is contrasted with Sergey, who "would deduce general conclusions in favor of the peasantry and in confirmation of his knowing them" (77). Levin's ability to toil in the fields with his peasants as an equal illustrate the simplicity and frankness with which he operates, where he does not place himself on a pedestal and instead defers to his peasants on matters such as whether Mashkin Upland could be cut, as he respects the experiences of his peasants and the toils they all experience together in the fields during the hay harvest. He is not condescending to the peasants, nor is he particularly friendly with the peasants like Sergey. In this way, he is even

closer to the peasants because he projects his own principles for himself onto his peasants, looking down upon the peasants for their “carelessness, lack of method, drunkenness, and lying” just as he would with himself. There is no pretension or hypocrisy in how Levin treats his fellow peasants, and his full transparency and frankness in working alongside them and sharing his principles with the peasants touch upon a greater element of sincerity that allows all of them to reap as much harvest as they can together, finishing the entire big meadow in one day, which would have otherwise taken “thirty scythes two days to mow” (85).

By writing deeply about Levin’s working day during the hay harvest, Tolstoy presents Levin as a model citizen of the world. Levin creates a world for himself grounded in self-derived principles of hard work, and in the process of doing so, creates a virtuous cycle where he and his fellow men participate democratically in physical toils, where all reap the benefits of harvest. From just this scene, we see Levin at his very best, a man humbled and utterly absorbed in his own work, infusing meaning in his world and in the world of others amidst all the hardships and randomness that surround them.

Works Cited

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