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## The Allure of Stiva Oblonsky

John Fawell

Traditionally, critics have tended to dismiss Anna Karenina's brother, Prince Stepan Arkadyevich Oblonsky, as a superficial sensualist, an "homme moyen sensual," as James Thorlby describes him, who "presents us with the simplest form of relationship between a healthy body, easy circumstances and a not very highly developed intelligence."<sup>1</sup>

More recently, certain critics have not found Oblonsky so wanting in intelligence. Judith Armstrong, in *The Unsaid Anna Karenina*, emphasizes the subtlety of Oblonsky's mind and the practicality of his ethics. She compares him favorably to Levin, arguing that Tolstoy, in spite of himself, created a livelier, more interesting character in the witty and irreverent Oblonsky than in the sober and morally stringent Levin. She argues that Oblonsky's "life choices are better adapted to survival than Levin's"<sup>2</sup> and that while Levin is often treated ironically, Oblonsky never is.<sup>3</sup>

The truth lies somewhere in between these two opinions of Oblonsky. Oblonsky represents too strong a character to be summarized as Thorlby does. His humor, warmth, intelligence and openness to moral ambiguity represent a serious challenge to Levin's self-seriousness and moral stiffness—and probably to Tolstoy's also. One often feels that as Oblonsky prods Levin in his moral absolutism, Tolstoy is prodding himself, testing his own moral strictness and, in the meantime, guarding his book from an excessive spiritual certainty.

On the other hand, Oblonsky is not such a strong character that he necessarily outshines Levin. There is no evidence in the text to support Armstrong's claim that Oblonsky's philosophy is better adapted to survival than Levin's. For all of Levin's torments and all of Oblonsky's comforts, by the end of the book it is Oblonsky who is feeling the pinch of straightened circumstances and Levin who is finally breathing a little easier. Through Oblonsky, Tolstoy gives full ventilation to a philosophy that attracts and impresses him but one that he nevertheless ultimately rejects.

It is difficult to accord Thorlby's description of Oblonsky as a man "of not highly developed intelligence" with Tolstoy's description of Oblonsky as a man "who was always quick to understand anything—a hint was sufficient."<sup>4</sup> Oblonsky is no unconscious hedonist. He is a perceptive, sensitive creature whose sensualism is derived from his sharp sense of the ironies and ambiguities of life. To Levin, who disapproves of his marital infidelities, he says, "you want love and family always to be the same thing. But that doesn't always happen. All the diversity, all the charm and all the beauty of life are made up of light and shade" (57). Similarly, when Levin criticizes his friend Malthus, the railway magnate, for having made money which was dishonest since it was not proportionate to the labor spent, Oblonsky responds, "But who is to say what is disproportionate. . . . You haven't defined the borderline between honest and dishonest work" (587).

Because he is less willing than Levin to draw rigid moral lines, Oblonsky does not experience the intense guilt that Levin does. He is, for example, not without understanding of the pain he has inflicted upon Dolly and when he sees "her worn out, suffering face" and hears the "despair and utter resignation in her voice" he catches his breath, a lump rises in his throat and his eyes glisten with tears. He sympathizes with her but he refuses to act on these sympathies or to blame himself. An "inner voice" tells him that it is hypocritical even to seek a reconciliation with Dolly, "since it was impossible to make her attractive and desirable again or to turn him into an old man incapable of love" (19). Oblonsky is a realist who accepts the sovereignty of his passions. Unlike Levin, he feels no need to judge or interpret his sexual desire. When Levin painfully confesses the guilt he feels for his sexual feelings towards Kitty, Oblonsky blithely responds, "Well, what's to be done. That's the way the world is made" (54). Oblonsky fully acquiesces to the determinism of his body. He even attributes the involuntary smile that crosses his face when Dolly confronts him with his infidelity to "reflexes of the brain." (Tolstoy notes that "he had a liking for physiology.") Oblonsky steadfastly refuses to beat his breast in self-punishment. "It's my fault," he says of his unfaithfulness, "and yet I'm not to blame. That's the tragedy of it" (18).

Oblonsky's unwillingness to find guilt extends towards others as well as himself. He is renowned among his workers for "his extreme indulgence with people, which was based on the fact that

he was conscious of his own shortcomings" (31). Oblonsky has always been recognized as likeable but his likability has always been attributed to his bon vivance and party-loving nature, rarely to a quiet sense of humility and indulgence of others. Oblonsky, Tolstoy writes, is characterized by a "genuine liberalism," the sort of liberalism which was "in his blood and which made him treat all people the same whatever their financial standing or social position" (31). He always treats servants with respect, taking pains to learn their names and address them in a personal manner. When an arrogant subordinate at work sniffs at Oblonsky's orders, Oblonsky puts "a friendly hand on his sleeve . . . softening his remarks with a smile," and says quietly, "please my dear fellow do it like that" (35). He rarely gets angry. When a petitioner interrupts his breakfast, during his crisis with Dolly, Oblonsky hears her out "attentively and without interruption, gave her detailed advice how and to whom to apply, and even wrote her a note" (25).

Oblonsky is far less likely to form snap judgments about people than is Levin. Oblonsky cites Jesus' attitude towards Mary Magdalene when Levin sneers at a heavily made-up woman at the restaurant, England's. He is mocking his religious friend, but there is a sincerity within the irony. When his friend Grinyevich calls someone a "thoroughgoing rascal," he frowns, "indicating that it was improper to form an opinion prematurely" (32). He does not believe, as his co-workers tell him, that his new boss is a severe man with whom he will have trouble. "They're all human beings," he says to himself, thinking of his boss, "they've all got weaknesses, like us poor sinners: what is there to get angry or quarrel about?" Oblonsky often sounds like one of Tolstoy's calm peasants, so suffused with a sense of understanding and sadness for humanity that he can bear a grudge toward no one.<sup>5</sup> He is, at times, a genuinely consoling presence. To his struggling sister, Anna, he brings consolation in the form of a smile in which "there was so much kindness and almost feminine tenderness that it did not hurt, but soothed and calmed" and "soft, comforting words" that had a "calming effect like that of almond oil" (432)<sup>6</sup>. Oblonsky is able to assuage the suffering of others. And this ability to minister to other's grief is derived from his own deeply held principle that life is as it is and that men are as they are and there is nothing they can do about it and they should not blame themselves.

Oblonsky, then, is a challenging and problematical character. He is undoubtedly often cruel but his cruelty often bears the stamp

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of a hard honesty. Other times he shows himself to be a reflective, wise, loving, compassionate man who is well-liked not only for his gaiety and worldly charm but for his sense of human tragedy and his profound empathy for others. He is a practical man and does not hold up man to an impossible ideal. He lives in the world as it is and does not torture himself with how it should be. If Oblonsky is to be condemned, it has to be on this level, as a serious man with a cynical but defined attitude towards life and not simply as a fop of middling intelligence, "un homme moyen sensuel."

And yet condemn Oblonsky Tolstoy does. Tolstoy recognizes the strong allure of Oblonsky's way of life but he also knows its pitfalls. This is what Armstrong does not recognize in her too sympathetic reading of Oblonsky. She does not recognize Tolstoy's ability to take Oblonsky to task. Armstrong's faulty interpretation grows out of her psychoanalytic view of Oblonsky as a character that "got away" from Tolstoy. Oblonsky, according to Armstrong, testifies to a repressed relativism and sensualism in Tolstoy that he did not know he was letting out. He did not realize how attractive he was making Oblonsky. Her book is rife with comments such as the following: "He (Oblonsky) comes as far as is acceptable to expressing that other wayward and wanton way of life in which Tolstoy was deeply embroiled while fighting so hard to suppress its seductions."<sup>7</sup>

This attitude belittles Tolstoy both as a thinker and as an artist. She is accusing him as a thinker, of being such a soft idealist that he could not recognize the power and allure of Oblonsky's philosophy while still resisting it. She does not recognize the ability of Tolstoy as an artist to be several people at once. There is a sensualist and relativist like Stiva in Tolstoy. The sharpness of the portrait attests to this. But there is also in Tolstoy an equally sharp awareness of the dangers of this relativistic behavior and of the dangerousness of men like Stiva.

Armstrong accurately notes that throughout the book Tolstoy draws Oblonsky in healthy terms, describing his "healthy and bright appearance, his beaming eyes," "his white and rosy complexion," "his broad chest," "powerful lungs," and "springy step." But he also mentions "the slight tremor in each leg," and the limp that appears in his left leg after an hour or two of hunting. There are touches of corruption and dissipation in Tolstoy's portrait of Oblonsky.

A closer look at Oblonsky's popularity, even-temperedness and warmth, for example, contributes some darker shades to his portrait. Oblonsky, as we have seen, rarely has a bad thing to say about anyone. He is the quintessence of open-mindedness. Everyone is a "good fellow," and "excellent fellow," a "nice fellow." But at times, Tolstoy seems to suggest, he is entirely too affable. Where there are no negative judgments there are no positive ones either and "genuine liberalism" can be tantamount to genuine indifference towards others. "However high the praise," says the uncompromising Alceste to the practical and political Philinte (an Oblonsky himself in many ways) in Molière's "Misanthrope,"

There's nothing worse  
Than sharing honors with the universe.  
Esteem is founded on comparison:  
To honor all men is to honor none.<sup>8</sup>

For Oblonsky, one person is more or less the same as another. Hours after encouraging Levin to propose to Kitty, he does the same to Vronsky, completely forgetting the genuine sympathy he had felt for his friend the day before and now feeling the same sympathy only this time for Vronsky" (74). It is not so much that Oblonsky is falsely sincere with Levin, but that he has equally strong emotions for Vronsky.

One of the most extraordinary points that Armstrong makes in her defense of Oblonsky is that "despite his own dubious record, it is Oblonsky who does the most to facilitate Kitty and Levin's marriage."<sup>9</sup> Armstrong notes, in support of this point, that Oblonsky encourages Levin to pursue Kitty, that he comforts Levin after his first refusal, that he physically brings the two together again, and that he warmly steers Levin through his pre-wedding jitters—all true, and indicative of the warmth Stiva can show his boyhood friend. Armstrong does not, however, note Oblonsky's similar encouragement of Vronsky. And there is overwhelming evidence that Oblonsky, seeing marriage as a threat to his relativist creed, exercises a destructive influence, not only on Levin's marriage, but on all of the principal marriages in the book.

For example, when Oblonsky visits Anna and Karenin, he assumes that they both desire, as he does, freedom from their marital responsibilities. But neither Anna or Karenin is sure of

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wanting a divorce. Karenin, in particular, is worried that a divorce will ruin Anna. (Ironically, his charitable instincts have been aroused by Oblonsky's wife, Dolly.) Despite the hints from Anna and Karenin, as well as his own conscience, that a reconciliation is possible, Oblonsky decides that what is necessary is "the clarification of your new relationship. And this relationship can only be established by both sides regaining their freedom" (436). Karenin gives in to Oblonsky, "feeling that his words were the expression of the powerful, brutal force which governed his life and to which he would have to submit" (437). Oblonsky is here equated with the "way of the world," which, we know, he sees no reason for, or hope of, resisting, and to which he encourages Karenin to submit. Oblonsky, as we have seen in his discussions with Levin, is an enemy of anyone who is seeking to define a moral system. He induces Karenin, who for the first time is showing signs of spiritual growth and genuine charity to Anna, to pursue his own rather than another's interests. He nips Karenin's spiritual awareness in the bud. The divorce is never made final but Karenin's talk with Oblonsky represents the beginning of the moral degeneration that will finally lead Karenin to the sordid den of Lydia Ivanovna.

Oblonsky tries to damage Levin's marriage as well. Levin is the one character in the novel to whom Oblonsky does not seem essentially indifferent. Levin, himself, notices in Oblonsky "a kind of respect and sort of tenderness towards him by which he was flattered" (172). Levin is the one character who interests Oblonsky enough to rankle him. Oblonsky is competitive with his childhood friend who leads such a different life from his own. After Levin marries Kitty this competitiveness turns into a "covert sort of hostility." Throughout the book Tolstoy opposes Kitty's purity to Oblonsky's decadence. As Levin watches Oblonsky flirting with the French woman at England's, he thinks of Kitty and "his eyes shone with a smile of triumph and happiness" (49). Kitty herself cannot think of Oblonsky "without imagining the coarsest and most disgusting things" (139). She knows that a night with Oblonsky meant "drinking and then driving somewhere afterwards. She could not think without horror of the places men drove to in such cases" (667). Kitty and Levin, both, then, consciously oppose Oblonsky's way of life, and their alliance represents a major threat to his cynical view of marriage and life. At their wedding, Oblonsky is unable to maintain his usual patronizing look of

amusement. "The smile with which Oblonsky whispered to them to put on their rings involuntarily died on his lips. He could not help feeling that any kind of smile would hurt them" (457). Only Kitty and Levin can wipe the seemingly permanently affixed smile off Oblonsky's face. Uncharacteristically, Oblonsky takes them very seriously.

Threatened by their marriage, he tries to chip away at it. He criticizes Levin for being tied to Kitty's apron strings. "You're going to have a lot of trouble you know. . . A man must be independent. He has his own masculine interests. A man must be manly." Oblonsky induces two major arguments between Kitty and Levin, first by bringing the flirtatious Veslovsky with him to Levin's home, second by taking Levin to see Anna. He tries to draw the domestic Levin into his free-wheeling way of life. He relishes the tension Veslovsky causes at Levin's, spreading it around that "Veslovsky fait un petit brin de cour à Kitty," and taunting Levin about his jealousy, "Heavy is the head that wears the crown," he says jestingly to Levin who is staring at Veslovsky.

Oblonsky's weaknesses are probably most apparent in his scenes with Levin. If there are scenes in which Oblonsky successfully mocks Levin's strict and stuffy moral code, there are also scenes where Levin makes Oblonsky distinctly uncomfortable in his worldly pose. Levin is the only character in the book who can make Oblonsky feel uncomfortable, who can push Oblonsky to question his relaxed attitude towards life and his unwillingness to feel guilt.

At England's, for example, Oblonsky is relieved to chit-chat mindlessly with an aide-de-camp "after his conversation with Levin who always imposed too great an intellectual and mental strain upon him" (58). Later, a long conversation is abruptly ended by Oblonsky as soon as Levin brings up the subject of guilt. "The main thing, as far as I'm concerned is to not feel guilty," says Levin, " 'Don't you think we'd better go, after all,' said Oblonsky, evidently feeling tired with mental strain" (589). The mental struggle between the two friends is drawn out concretely in their dinners together, with Levin continually trying to get Oblonsky to talk, and Oblonsky trying to get Levin to eat. " 'Well have some sauce,' he said, holding back Levin's hand, which was pushing the sauce away. Levin obediently helped himself to some, but he did not let Oblonsky go on eating" (53).

There is, then, it would seem, an element of confusion and repression in Oblonsky's sensual pleasures. They are not simply the



pleasures of an experienced and realistic man who has learned to savor the concrete things in life. There is an element of repression in Oblonsky's appetites. He drinks, eats, smokes, reads, makes love in order to not think of the kind of things Levin thinks of. His face does not express the clarity of the Epicurean but the vagueness of the addict. His eyes are always "glittering," his face always flushed from the wine or brandy he has just been drinking. All of his pleasures are intoxicating. "He enjoyed his newspaper as he enjoyed his after dinner cigar, for the slight haze that it produced in his head" (23). Oblonsky always needs a slight haze. He is, in many ways, a nervous, fidgety character, always occupying himself somehow. If he is not munching on some cheese or slipping oysters down his throat, he is pouring a glass of wine, lighting up a cigar or cigarette, or tending himself—brushing bread crumbs off his vest, kicking the snow off his shoe. Tolstoy draws him in perpetual motion. All of his favorite hobbies—hunting, drinking, sex, food, smoking, gambling—have to do with pursuit or consumption.

Tolstoy contrasts his insatiability in his pursuits with Levin's satisfaction in his. When they go hunting together, for example, Levin sinks into a meditative calm, soaking in the silence of the forest, listening to the leaves and grass grow, whereas Oblonsky breaks the silence, exclaiming over the sound of the cuckoo, which signifies prime hunting time. He lights a cigarette and cocks his gun. He is oblivious to the woods. All his attention is riveted to the hunt. After they have bagged an adequate number of birds, Oblonsky is anxious to move on to the next entertainment, dinner. Levin, meanwhile, still feeling at home in the forest, wants to stay longer. The hunt is only a means for him to get outside and to enjoy the forest. Oblonsky is incapable of enjoying nature, in itself, but only as a part of a game or pursuit.

Similarly, he enjoys only the pursuit of women and not women themselves. "You see, women is the sort of thing that however much you study it, it's always quite new," he explains to Levin, "Some mathematician has said that true pleasure lies not in the discovery of truth but in the search for it" (174). This is typical of Oblonsky, who conceives of life as process, flux, "light and shadow," offering no final "truth" or solid ground on which to stand.

In contrast, Levin is satisfied with one woman. Cheating on one's wife, Levin says to Oblonsky, is like stealing a roll after a full dinner. "Why not?" Oblonsky responds, "Rolls sometimes smell so

good that you can't resist them" (56). Armstrong cites this "disarming metaphor" of the roll as typical of Oblonsky's relaxed and charming attitude towards life. But this line also points to the essential insatiability of Oblonsky. Paradoxically, the freer Oblonsky is with his appetites, the more trouble he has satisfying them. At the club, for example, Levin notices that "though from the score of hors d'oeuvres on the table it ought to have been possible to choose one to any taste, Oblonsky asked for something special" (684). Oblonsky's palate has been dulled by years of gormandizing. Though he allows himself a great many pleasures, he has difficulty finding satisfaction in them. Ironically, it is the provincial Levin and not the cosmopolitan Oblonsky who can really take advantage of a feast like this.

As the book progresses we have more and more of a sense of Oblonsky as not being able to satisfy his appetites. The irony of Levin's and Oblonsky's relationship is that Levin, through relentless self-probing and what at first seems like a morbid preoccupation with guilt, becomes increasingly conscious of an innate moral system, an "infallible judge" within him that relieves him of his struggles and decides what is best for him. He finds a kind of freedom in his life, while Oblonsky, the arch proponent of freedom, gradually exhausts his pleasures and finds himself in an increasingly constricted position.

Money, for example, becomes harder to come by. In the end, Dolly refuses to sign a release for the last part of her woods and he is forced to sell out his heritage by seeking a commercial position. His search for a position forces him to toady to the likes of the businessman Bulgarinov, and the religious fanatic Lydia Ivanovna and her new disciple, Karenin. Later, he is haunted by a dream which unites Lydia, Bulgarinov, his drunken uncle Peter Oblonsky and the bawdy Princess Betsy. Money, sex, drink, and religion haunt him in this dream, in stark contrast to the lovely dream that opens the book in which the little decanter woman invites him into a realm of sensuality and pleasure. In his final appearance in the novel he is back on his feet again, having attained the post he sought. But he has lost some of his grandeur. The Princess and Koznyshev only want to get rid of him. Vronsky ignores him completely. He has to apologize to the Princess for his new position. "You know," he explains, "les petites miseres de la vie."

Oblonsky, then, is both a confusing and compelling character. On the one hand, he is a warm and consoling person, with words

and a smile that sooth like almond oil. He is acutely perceptive and endearing in his light-heartedness and unwillingness to take anything too seriously. His portrait sparkles and we often feel more at home with him than with the dour and humorless Levin. On the other hand, there is something cold and cruel in Oblonsky's smile. He is essentially indifferent to people. Everything is a joke to him and while that is sometimes charming and consoling it is other times vicious. Also, Levin and his marriage to Kitty bring out an envy and urge to destroy in Oblonsky that betrays his light-heartedness and his confidence in his relativistic philosophy. And despite his doctrine of freedom, Oblonsky's life is characterized, increasingly as the book progresses, by constriction and an inability to satisfy the passions that he so freely indulged.

There is, then, a dark side to Oblonsky. He cannot be dismissed as critics have for such a long time, as a frivolous socialite of middling intelligence. He is too acute in his perceptions, too warm and considerate, too conscious of the tragedy of life. But neither should we, as Armstrong has, emphasize Oblonsky's warmth and intelligence to the point that we believe that he gets the better of Tolstoy's morally stiff hero, Levin, or of Tolstoy himself. Oblonsky shines but he also fades.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Anthony Thorlby, *Leo Tolstoy: Anna Karenina* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 26.

<sup>2</sup>Judith Armstrong, *The Unsaid Anna Karenina* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1988), 59-60.

<sup>3</sup>Armstrong, 65.

<sup>4</sup>Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, translated by David Magarshack (New York: New American Library, 1961), 172. All subsequent quotes will refer to this text and will be noted within the body of the article. I am using this text because it is the one with which I, and many others, I believe, teach and because I believe the Magarshack translation is an able enough translation to serve the purposes of this article.

<sup>5</sup>Oblonsky is particularly reminiscent of Platon Karataev in *War and Peace*. "The truth Karataev embodies," writes Gary Saul Morson in his book, *Hidden in Plain View: Narrative and Creative Potentials in "War and Peace"* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 251, "but cannot express is not a doctrine at all." Platon teaches Pierre that the God he seeks "is not the Divine Architect and does not transcend the flux of the moment. Rather, God is in the flux, is the flux itself."

<sup>6</sup>Pierre, in *War and Peace*, after spending time with Karataev, acquires a smile very much like Oblonsky's, a smile that Morson describes as "indulgent and gently ironic" and which expresses his "appreciation of the ravelment that is each self, whose complexity and interest far exceed the understanding of self or others." (Morson, 253)

<sup>7</sup>Armstrong, 56.

<sup>8</sup>Molière, "The Misanthrope," in *The Norton Introduction to Literature*, translated by Richard Wilbur (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1986), 1425.

<sup>9</sup>Armstrong, 58.