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SPRING IN ITALY:
ANNA KARENINA AND THE GOD WHO MAY BE

'is it God or is it not God'[1]

Count Leo Tolstoy's great 19th century novel *Anna Karenina* begins with an epigraph from Romans 12. Verse 19, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord." A stern warning, promising not only retribution, but demanding that humans withhold their own vengeance. At stake is the word, what God says. God promises, God reserves for himself, God trans-substantiates vengeance into a divine prerogative. We, on the other hand, are supposed to reserve our inclination towards vengeance. In choosing this quote, Tolstoy relies on the knowledge that vengeance is the patriarchal solution to a philandering wife—not merely the vengeance of the aggrieved husband, but that of the entire society. In an oddly circular move, he anticipates the teleological reading of his novel before it has even begun. Tolstoy's problem as a writer, as he told his wife Sonya, was to represent Anna as "not guilty, merely pitiable."[2]

This is capital T Theology, as queer theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid calls it, the God of vengeance, strength and power.[3] Critics have long looked at Tolstoy's novel through an ethical or religious lens, yet these approaches prove incomplete. Feminist readings of Anna have tended to see her as a woman damned for her transgressions of patriarchal norms. As Gayle Greene puts it, the epigraph from Romans "suggests that the law Anna dies for violating is more than a social law; it is absolute and divine."[4] And yet what, "what we see her die for is social and psychological retribution—the pressure of social opinion from without and guilt from within."[5] Greene argues that "salvation, like damnation, also involves traditional Christian values—love, faith and forgiveness."[6] Greene suggests that despite his moments of perceptive characterization, Tolstoy struggles to see women as fully human, and is in the end "guilty of the same confusion and hypocrisy which he condemns in his society."[7] While this is a persuasive critique of the misogynistic Christian politics of power, we must supplement this argument

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[1] Tolstoy, L. *Anna Karenina*, translated by Joel Carmichael (New York: Bantam, 1981), 1099.

[2] Tolstoy, L. *Anna Karenina*, iv.

[3] Althaus-Reid, M. *The Queer God* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).

[4] Greene, G. "Women, Character and Society in *Anna Karenina*" in *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies* 2.1 (1977), 113.

[5] Ibid, 113.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid, 122.

with the knowledge of the potential emancipatory threads of the novel which are *also* articulated through the domain of the religious.

Yet traditional readings of Christian allegory will offer no easy entry into the text. David Stewart in 1964 argued convincingly that, unlike in Dostoevsky, Tolstoy's novel resists allegorizing. He says "a character in Dostoevsky is usually only half man; the other half is Christ or Satan."[8] In contrast, "Anna Karenina is emphatically Anna Karenina."[9] Stewart's contention here is a strong one, and I follow him in not searching for religious allegory in the novel. Instead, I will conduct my search for God not in the transcendent, or in the citations of Christian scripture, but rather in the relations between characters. For as Jacques Derrida has famously put it, "*tout autre est tout autre* (that is, every other is a little bit Other).[10] He argues that "everyone else [. . .] is infinitely other in its absolute singularity, inaccessibility, solitary, transcendent."[11] In other words, any person may be as Other as God, and any relation may bring the promise of *tout autre*. It is the relations between people then that may have religious implications above and beyond their reference to any given tradition (broadly Christian in *Anna Karenina,* articulated across a number of different positions).

My wager then with this paper is that we can locate another God in Tolstoy's novel, not in some Gnostic way, but a different conceptualization of God against (or perhaps after) the onto-theological tradition of Christianity, as Heidegger called it. The onto-theological argument is fairly succinctly formulated by Thomas Aquinas in *Summa Theologiæ* where he says that the name of God "signifies being itself." God is who "he" is, he is pure being itself.[12] Aquinas argues that "God is pure act without any potentiality whatsoever."[13] This conceptualization of God, still the dominant vision of the divine, marks the alliance between Greek neo-Platonism and the God of Judaism which ultimately produced something quite different. Such a philosophical project brings with it the profound threat of idolatry, of binding up God with the here and now and indeed the sinful, as when governments associate the name of God with imperialist policies of domination and subjugation. This has caused its own backlash in the form of apophatic or negative theology, a position articulated by eleventh century German monk

[8] Stewart, D. "*Anna Karenina*: The Dialectic of Prophecy" in *PMLA,* 79.3 (1964), 266.

[9] Ibid, 266.

[10] Derrida, J. *The Gift of Death*, translated by David Willis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 82.

[11] Ibid, 78.

[12] Boesel, C., Keller, C. "Introduction" in *Apophatic Bodies: Negative Theology, Incarnation, and Relationality*, ed by Chris Boesel and Catherine Keller (New York: Fordham UP, 2009), 4. As theologians Chris Boesel and Catherine Keller have pointed out, this tradition contains a fundamental ambivalence when considered alongside the gendering of God as male. They suggest that "divinity submits—quite problematically—to bodily encumbrances whilst remaining nevertheless irreducible to them."

[13] Kearney, R. *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion* (Bloomington and Indianopolis: Indiana UP, 2001), 83.

Meister Eckhart's admonishment, "be silent and do not chatter about God, for when you chatter about him, you are telling lies and sinning."[14]

Recent critical theories of religion too have posited alternative forms of God to the omniscient, omnipotent essentialist God of Romans quoted by Tolstoy. Important post-metaphysical theological investigations have been undertaken by deconstructionist philosophers and theologians such as Jacques Derrida,[15] Catherine Keller,[16] Jean-Luc Marion[17] and Jean-Luc Nancy.[18] Deconstructionist philosopher John D Caputo has argued in favor off a "weak" God in *The Weakness of* God,[19] along the lines of Walter Benjamin's "weak messianicism." But it is Catholic philosopher Richard Kearney who in his "Philosophy at the Limit" trilogy[20] has provided some of the most compelling contemporary reworkings of God. In his magnum opus *The God Who May Be*, Kearney provocatively argues that God is not an essence (*esse*) but rather *posse*, a possibility.[21] "God neither is nor is not but may be."[22] Kearney sets himself against the Aristotelian lineage of metaphysicians like Thomas Aquinas, who argues that "God is pure act without any potentiality whatsoever."[23] Instead, drawing on apophatic Christian writers like Pseudo Dionysius and post-metaphysical continental philosophers like Jean-Luc

[14] Boesel, C., Keller, C. "Introduction," 1.

[15] Derrida's engagement with religion has been extensive throughout his career, though it is his writings from the 1990s that drew the most critical attention. See the Gil Anidjar's introduction to the collection *Acts of Religion* for a good summary of Derrida's thought on religion. Anidjar, G. "'Once More, Once More': Derrida, the Jew, the Arab" in *Acts of Religion*, ed by Gil Anidjar (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 1-39.

[16] In particular, see Keller's stunning reworking of Genesis 1 in *Face of the Deep*. Keller, C. *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).

[17] Marion's *God Without Being* has drawn the most critical attention, but like Derrida, his engagement with theology has also been extensive. Marion, J. *God Without Being*, trans. by Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991).

[18] Notably, in his *Dis-enclosure* and *Noli Mi Tangere*, both published in English in 2008. *Dis-enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity*, trans. by Bettina Bergo, Gabriel Melenfant and Michael B. Smith (New York: Fordham UP, 2008), and *Noli Me Tangere: On the Raising of the Body*, trans. by Sarah Clift, Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (New York: Fordham UP, 2008).

[19] Caputo, J. *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2006).

[20] This trilogy consists of *The God Who May Be* (2001), *On Stories* (2002) and *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* (2003). Kearney's recent *Anatheism* (2009) revists some of the ideas of *The God Who May Be*, whilst reaching out to Hindu and Buddhist traditions for ecumenical dialogue. Kearney, R. *On Stories* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002). Kearney, R. *Strangers, Gods and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness* (London: Routledge, 2003). Kearney, R. *Anatheism: Returning to God After God* (New York: Columbia UP, 2009).

[21] In *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion*, Kearney borrows the terms "*esse*" and "*posse*" from fifteenth century apophatic theologian Nicholas of Cusa.

[22] Kearney, R. *Strangers, Gods and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness*, 37.

[23] Kearney, R. *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion*, 83.

Marion and Emmanuel Levinas equally, Kearney argues for a God "to come." I will argue with regard to *Anna Karenina* is that God may equally not come, that failure is part of the messianic structure of promise.

Kearney re-reads God's statement in Exodus 3:14, a passage where Moses asks God basically, how should I describe you to the rest of the Israelites. And God replies "'ehyeh asheh 'ehyeh," which is glossed in King James Version as "I am that I am" and in the NIV "I am who I am." And so this phrase, sometimes known as Sacred Tetragrammaton, grounds the ontologizing of God-as-pure-being in cataphatic Christian (that is, positive) theology from Augustine onwards. Kearney, however, suggests that if we re-read the passage in the Hebrew we find less an ontological statement about the nature of God than an ethical promise directed towards his Chosen People. The great medieval Jewish commentator Rashi translated the verse as "I shall be what I shall be." As Kearney states, for Jewish writers from Rashi to Martin Buber "what the suffering Hebrews needed from Moses was not some metaphysical proof about the existence of God as *ipsum esse* but an assurance that He would remain close to them."[24]

Interestingly, Kearney seeks to reconcile this ethical "closeness" with the *tout autre* of God as alterity of deconstructive thought and negative theology alike. The God Who May Be is akin to the "not" of negative theology, wherein God is unknowable because of the insufficiency of language and human comprehension, and the only way to talk of God is through a form of "unsaying" that registers this insufficiency. But as Derrida points out in "How to Avoid Speaking," "'negative theology' seems to reserve, beyond all positive predication, beyond all negation, even Being, some hyperessentially, a being beyond Being."[25] Kearney attempts to leave behind this ultimate affirmation of the divine essence which lies beyond language. Like the cataphatic theology it sets itself against, apophatic theology still remains under the thrall of metaphysics.

But Kearney is equally suspicious of the blind mysticism of deconstructively-minded writers like phenomenologist Jean-Luc Marion, who argues in favor of a God without being. Marion suggests that rather than be conceptualized as "being," it is giving that marks out God. Arguing against the Catholic doctrine of trans-substantiation, he says that

> presence is no longer guaranteed by the excessiveness of the irreducibly other gift [that is, the Eucharist], as far as assuming the corporeally distinct appearance of an irreducible thing. No doubt there remains an irreducible presence of Christ, but it is displaced from the thing [the host itself] to the community.[26]

[24] Kearney, R. *Strangers, Gods and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness*, 27.

[25] Derrida, J. "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials" in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed by Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 77.

[26] Marion, J. *God Without Being*, trans. by Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991), 166.

Marion's God appears to undergo a kind of *kenosis*, an emptying out of being, in order to give to the community through the sacraments. But as Keaney puts it, "the danger of God without being is that of an alterity so 'other' that it becomes impossible to distinguish it from monstrosity—mystical or sublime [. . .] it might be wiser, I suggest to reinterpret the God of Exodus 3:14 as neither being nor non-being, but as something before, between and beyond the two: an eschatological *may be*."[27] I would argue that despite this cautiousness, Kearney's "may be" is prone to that same weakness as Marion's, simply because the structure of possibility requires unfulfilled promises. If "God" may be God, then "God" also *may not* be God. Nevertheless, despite these ambivalences, Kearney's argument suggests the necessity of a flexible methodology for reading Christianity in literature, one that reads how literature *does* religion as well as represents it. Unlike Derrida's "secret, hidden, separate, absent or mysterious God" Kearney's God Who May Be is attuned to the erotics of humanity.[28] If God is in the *posse* then in order to register this openness we need to not read novels teleologically, but rather look for moments of eschatological promise, openings in the text, which may or may not be later fulfilled.

ANNA KARENINA

In order to trace this possibility of the divine, let us return to Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. Like many other nineteenth century novels, *Anna Karenina* was first published in sections in Russian magazines over a period of two years. It's this that accounts for the novel's occasionally uneven tone. As W.J McCormack puts it:

> publication in parts constitutes a level of narrative in itself. This narrative before the fictional event, in which the reader is repeatedly advanced and detained in relation to a narrative implicit but not actual should be recognized as a fundamental narrative layer, even if it has no exact equivalent in fiction published in other ways (114).[29]

More obviously than novels only published in their entirety, *Anna Karenina* is far from an organic whole. The movement of the narrative is stop-start, internally fractured rather than leading towards a given endpoint. To use an obvious simile, the relationship of the text to its audience is something like episodic TV, structured in fragments leading up to the occasional soap-operatic cliffhanger. It is likely that this form of publishing mediated the ways in which serialized novels were written, with this method of reading in mind. The structure of *Anna Karenina*, then, lends itself towards reading in fragments.

Yet despite McCormack's warnings about our approach to serialized nineteenth century literature, typically readings of *Anna Karenina* remain bound up in teleological methods of reading. Peter Caws, for instance, calls

[27] Kearney, R. *Strangers, Gods and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness*, 34.

[28] Ibid, 58.

[29] McCormack, W.J. "'Never Put Your Name to an Anonymous Letter': Serial Reading in the 'Dublin University Magazine,' 1861 to 1869" in *The Yearbook of English Studies* (1996), 114.

Anna "doomed but redeemable (if only by death)."[30] The affair between the titular character and Alexei Vronsky is glossed as an almost inevitable movement from flirtation to the tragic end of Anna's suicide. Given the movement of *Anna Karenina* from serialization to the compiled novel, where it has stayed for over a hundred years, this is understandable, yet it remains incomplete for philosophical as well as literary reasons. Deconstructionists have long argued for the essentially fluid and diffuse nature of all texts, but it is arguable that serialization hastens this process.

To return this discussion of the fragment to the religious, I'd like to locate the Kearneyian God-Who-May-Be in the fragment set in Italy. To do so is to undoubtedly read against the religious grain of much of the text. Despite Tolstoy's concern that Anna be pitiable rather than guilty, much of the ammunition in the text that supports a reading of Anna's guilt is undoubtedly religious. Anna is damned by her husband Karenin who describes her having "no honor, no heart, no religion—a depraved woman!" To underline her lack of religion, this is repeated a number of times, even after Anna's death by Vronsky's mother.[31] As an unfaithful woman and then later a suicide, Anna is neatly excluded from the field of religion.

While the bulk of the novel takes place in Russia, in an intriguing interlude Anna, Vronsky and their daughter Annie take a trip to Italy, spending three months there in the spring. In order to distract himself from the censure of members of his class who do not "look the right way"[32] at their relationship, Vronsky begins painting, an interest which leads he and Anna to visit a local painter named Mikhailov. Anna and Vronsky witness a debate on incarnation and immanence between Mikhailov and Vronsky's friend Golinischev—"the question arises for the believer and unbeliever alike, 'is it God or is it not God.'"[33] This is the one of the few points where God is not enlisted in the service of morality condemning Anna—most notably by Karenin's and Countess Lydia's vindictive evangelism. "Is it God or is not God" is a question we may well ask about Anna's movement to Italy.

It's interesting and telling, I think, that Tolstoy has chosen to insert a theological dialogue here, that a note of ambivalence about God is introduced in a dialogue about art in Italy. As Amy Mandelker has put it, "artistic vision [in *Anna Karenina*] serves as emblem, *imago*, or icon of the spiritual, or conversely acquires the demonic character of profane or pornographic representation."[34] Mandelker suggests that it is Mikhailov's painting of Anna, which unites these two, which is the "most successful"[35] piece of artwork described in the novel. Mandelker argues that Mikhailov, like Levin, may be considered "an artist and art critic who succeeds in incorporating the true spirit of Christianity into his vision of life."[36]

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[30] Caws, P. "Moral Certainty and Tolstoy" in *Philosophy and Literature* 24 (2000), 55.

[31] Tolstoy, L. *Anna Karenina*, 827.

[32] Ibid, 492.

[33] Ibid, 1099.

[34] Mandelker, A. "A Painted Lady: *Ekphrasis* in *Anna Karenina*" in *Comparative Literature* 43.1 (1991), 2.

[35] Ibid, 8.

[36] Ibid, 9.

If we abjure easy moralism, it is easy to see the sublimity of the affair as writ by the same ambivalence as the spiritual icon. Kearney describes a vacillating movement of the sacred containing the possibility of a "to come" that ultimately never arrives. What I'd like to argue is that the trip to Italy is something like a cut, an unplugging from the regulating norms of the Saint Petersburg society. Anna ponders to herself that "the need to live, heightened by her recovery, was so powerful and circumstances of their life were so novel and agreeable that Anna felt unforgivably happy."[37] In traveling to the continent, Anna and Vronsky seek to evade, escape, the norms of heterosexual lifetime monogamy, female fidelity and marriage which their affair has violated. But it is not merely fidelity which has been violated, but rather, the scandalous excess of their love which also violates norms of what constitutes an acceptable affair for characters like Vronsky's mother. In Italy, the possibility of a new kind of life, is itself fulfilling a "need to live," and because of that promise the infinite alterity that is the God Who May Be is solicited.[38]

Rather than seeing the trip to Italy as a deluded respite then, I instead read it as an open unfulfilled promise, for if God is possibility, then we must read that possibility in failure as well as success. The eschatological promise would be something unspoken, something like a drive towards an egalitarian relationship, something "after" the power and control that circumscribe patriarchal relationships. If we accept the deconstructionist formula that *tout autre est tout autre*, then any other person may be as Other as God, indeed we must look for God in the infinite alterity of any Other. "How I should long to know others as I know myself," Anna ponders.[39] It's not hard to hear the echo of the Psalm there quoted by Kearney, "How precious to me are your thoughts, O God!."[40] A post-metaphysical God of possibility may appear in any kind of opening. If we read from Anna's perspective as a woman, albeit a privileged upper-class one, in a patriarchal society, then we can imagine the possible impossibility that is true alterity—namely, true agency—appearing. Like so many women, she sees that alterity in the arms of a man, Alexis Vronsky, her ultimately weak willed lover.

It is however nevertheless the right move for Anna to search for God in *eros*. This becomes clearer when we engage Kearney's notion of a desire for God. Kearney suggests that it is through "desire that the God-who-may-be finds

[37] Tolstoy, L. *Anna Karenina*, 496.

[38] This parallel between the new life Italy offers and God gathers some support if we consider Derrida's comments in *On the Name*, where he suggests that for God, like love for Lacan, "the gift of the name gives that which it does not have, that in which, prior to everything, may consist the essence, that is to say—beyond being—the nonessence of the gift" (85). In other words, what stirs in any name (love, God, Italy) is from the impossible gift of giving to the Other what one does not possess. Derrida, J. *On the Name*, ed by Thomas Dutoit, trans by David Wood, John P. Leavey, Jr. and Ian Mcleod (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995).

[39] Tolstoy, L. *Anna Karenina*, 319.

[40] Psalm 139:17, *New International Version*.

voice, and so does so in many *personas*."[41] He suggests that it is through the Bible's romantic poetry (notably, the chant of the Shulamite woman in the Song of Songs) that reveals the eros of the God Who May Be, quoting Psalms 139:

> Oh you have searched me
> and you know me[42]

For Kearney, in an intriguing moment of cross-gender identification, "God [. . .] is the other who seeks me out before I seek him, a desire beyond my desire" (2003, 54). Against Lacanian conceptualizations of desire as lack, Kearney finds "'an affirmative 'yes' to the summons of a super-abundant, impassioned God--Here I am. Come. Yes, I will Yes, I will Yes."[43] Anna, too, is sought out by Vronsky (a normative position in heterosexual relationships, to be sure), but it is her response that is exceptional. She gives herself "entirely and expected the deciding of her fate from him alone," a truly unconditional response to *tout autre*.[44] It is her yes that affirms.

A NEW WAY OF BEING

Read teleologically, the affair is doomed from start to finish, as is Anna for her defiance of patriarchal marriage and patrimony norms. The meeting of Anna and Vronsky leads irrevocably to her suicide. But what dooms the potentially emancipatory movement in Italy is not the opening up of alterity, but rather its insufficiency. Here we can supplement Kearney's analysis with a philosopher decidedly hostile to the Levinasian influenced politics of alterity. The relationship between Vronsky and Anna can be considered as an Event in the sense described by Alain Badiou. Badiou suggests that an event like a love affair "compels us to decide a *new* way of being."[45] Badiou suggests that the major dimensions of a "truth-process"[46] proceed from the event, "which brings to pass 'something other' than the situation, opinions, instituted knowledges [. . .] which vanishes as soon as it appears," "the fidelity" to the event, and the truth of the event "internal to the situation, that the fidelity construct, bit by bit."[47] The Other who comes for Anna is not a man with the same need for a new life, for Vronsky is in the final telling a man of his class, through and through, happy with the status quo. Anna represents for him *not* a new life, but rather the epitome of his old life. The patriarchal double standard allows him to maintain a lover whilst damning

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[41] Kearney, R. *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion*, 53. Here Kearney is using the Latin *persona*, what he calls the "divine invitation" (2) of God.

[42] Psalm 139:1, *New International Version*.

[43] Kearney, R. *Strangers, Gods and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness*, 54.

[44] Ibid, 318.

[45] Badiou, A. *Ethics*, trans. by Peter Hallward (London and New York: Verso, 2001), 41.

[46] Ibid, 67.

[47] Ibid. Here I think Badiou skirts closer to the deconstruction of Levinas and Derrida than perhaps he would like, for what is this "something else" of absolute newness produced by the event than alterity?

Anna for doing the same. While it is clear that Anna is compelled by the love event into a new way of being, Vronsky is most definitely not.

Paradoxically, however, it is Anna's fidelity to Vronsky which is the problem in the novel, for as Vronsky's mother muses to herself "it was not a brilliant, graceful society liaison, of which she would have approved, but some sort of desperate Wertherian passion, as she had been told, which might draw him [Vronsky] into foolishness."[48] So, it is not precisely the affair which is the chief problem of the text, it is the attempt that begins in Italy to establish a new way of being *after* an affair, an attempt that is thwarted internally by Vronsky's ambivalence about the relationship and his loss of social position and externally by Karenin's refusal to grant Anna a divorce and maintain custody of her child. To begin a new relationship from infidelity, and to retain custody and the authority of a mother (Karenin tells his son that Anna is dead), would be to taint the very foundations of the heterosexual reproductive marriage economy. Marriage is under threat in *Anna Karenina*, for as Stewart puts it, "Tolstoy succeeds in attributing to marriage, mortally fragile that is, a significance that is almost biological."[49] The opening occasioned by the trip to Italy is thus closed by their return to Russia, where Karenin's repeated refusal to grant the divorce eventually precipitates Anna's eventual suicide.

We can contrast the impossible possibility that is Anna's "need to live" with another affair in *Anna Karenina.* With its famous opening lines, the novel begins with the infidelity of Stiva and Dolly's forgiveness. But what seems clear there is that Dolly's forgiving her husband is culturally compelled—there is a whole series of familial interventions dedicating to making a woman accept her husband's infidelity. Anna herself mediates a reconciliation, having "guessed what it what it was that could touch Dolly most of all."[50] Dolly is compelled towards forgiving Stiva, because within the realm of heterosexual economy in the novel, male infidelity is highly possible and female forgiveness expected. However unpleasant it may be for her, because of this predictability Dolly's forgiveness does not break the usual economy of forgiveness within marriage. For as Derrida says, "if I forgive only what's forgivable, I've forgiven nothing."[51] Dolly forgives Stiva because male infidelity is forgivable, but female is not. And yet, even when Karenin forgives Anna initially (a more difficult task in a patriarchal society, perhaps even impossible), it is clear that true forgiveness is not being risked, that Karenin's forgiveness is conditional, calculated.

Indeed, while we linger at the novel's beginning, let us consider for a second the famous opening line--"happy families are all like; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."[52] Constituted this way, each unhappy family is a deviation from the one true way, most especially the tentative formation of an

[48] Tolstoy, L. *Anna Karenina*, 174.

[49] Stewart, D. "*Anna Karenina*: The Dialectic of Prophecy," 272.

[50] Tolstoy, L. *Anna Karenina*, 78.

[51] Derrida, J. "A Certain Impossible Possibility of Saying the Event," trans. by Gila Walker in *Critical Inquiry* 33.2 (2007), 449.

[52] Tolstoy, L. *Anna Karenina*, 1.

alternative family in Italy for Anna, Vronsky and child. But as feminist critic Sara Ahmed has pointed out, "the history of happiness is not simply about the description of unhappiness as the failure to be happy in the right way; it is also about the exclusion of the hap from happiness, as the exclusion of possibility and chance."[53] Ahmed argues for "the freedom to be unhappy would be the freedom to live a life that deviates from the paths of happiness, wherever that deviation takes us."[54] Anna's relationship with Vronsky is an adventure in the form of the "hap" of a "happiness" that Tolstoy's novel otherwise has no space for.

CONCLUSION

In the broader context of the novel, it is clear that the God That May Be ultimately doesn't come for Anna. Instead, she finds bickering with Vronsky and becomes consumed by her own jealousy upon their return to Russia. But was this failure necessarily doomed from the start, or does the segment in Italy open up something more radical? Kearney argues that

> The God-who-may-be offers us the possibility of realizing a promised kingdom by opening ourselves to the transfiguring power of transcendence. Each human person carries within him/herself the capacity to be transfigured in this way and to transfigure God in turn—by making divine possibility even more incarnate and alive."[55]

We can see in Anna the opening up of the possibility of transcendence, of the gender and sexual norms that construct womanhood, of the norms of marriage, of the excess of feeling in an affair. Ultimately, the relationship with Vronsky fails, but in springtime in Italy there is the possibility of something divine, a *posse* rather than an *esse*. Kearney underlines that the God who may be is a "promise, and not an already accomplished possession" for "there is a free space gaping at the very core of divinity: the space of the possible."[56] Kearney notes the role of narrative in mediating God and human, a hermeneutic approach that bridges artistic production and religious experience. In Italy, Anna is transfigured, by art, by love, bringing us closer to the divine, even just for a second. She is "able to behold the other as an icon for the passage of the infinite."[57] God may not be there to spend springtime in Italy with us, but he may.

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[53] Ahmed, S. "Happiness and Queer Politics" in *World Picture* 3 (2009), 15.

[54] Ibid. Ahmed here is arguing with regard to queer texts and politics, but it is arguable that the relationship between Anna and Vronsky, while ostensibly heterosexual, is a queer swerve of sorts. At the very least, it is a clear deviation from the universal path to happiness that Tolstoy begins his novel with.

[55] Kearney, R. *Strangers, Gods and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness*, 2.

[56] Ibid, 4.

[57] Ibid, 17.