THE LOCOMOTIVE AND THE GIANT: POWER IN CHEKHOV'S "ANNA ON THE NECK"*

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> "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."
>
> —Lord Acton

Like many of Chekhov's late works, "Anna na shee" ("Anna on the Neck," 1895) can be read as a tale about power.[1] The story depicts a battle between the sexes, opposing the power of money and rank of the 52-year-old bureaucrat-bridegroom. Modest Alekseich, to the power of sexual attraction of his eighteen-year-old bride Anna, who discovers at a ball that beauty empowers. In effect, the two-part tale depicts an agon between nineteenth-century conceptions of "male" and "female" power. *Part I* portrays the patriarchal domination and oppression of Anna by Modest Alekseich, stressing that "she did everything that her husband wanted and . . . was afraid of her husband and trembled before him" (8: 17–18).[2] *Part II* depicts Anna's "conquest" of her husband (and the male sex in general), culminating in her oft-quoted statement to Modest Alekseich: "Go away, blockhead" (8:24). Several dominant metaphors reinforce this theme of power, especially those of a locomotive and a giant; both at first threaten Anna, but are ultimately defeated by her.

The story is structured on the reversal of power and is divided into two symmetrical parts that are, in effect, reversals of each other. It is thus fitting that *Part I* takes place in summer and *Part II* in winter, and that the *peripeteia* begins when Anna discovers herself in a "huge mirror" at a ball. The reversal of power begins while the newlyweds are heading by train towards the monastery where they will spend their honeymoon. The train stops at a "junction" (*raz"ezd:* a section of double track on a single-line railway), where the lively music of a military orchestra can be heard from an evening of dance at neighboring dachas. This "*raz"ezd*" (etymologically a "movement in different directions") is symbolic, reflecting the changing direction that Anna will give to her life. Until this "junction," Anna has been regretting the situation that led to her wedding, which she implicitly compares to a funeral.[3] In contrast to the austerity of the wedding, where "instead of a joyous wedding ball and dinner, instead of music and dancing,

there was a 150 mile trip for prayer" (8:12), the junction is characterized by music, which throughout the story is linked with joy:

> She suddenly felt *joy . . . because music could be heard* and the moon was reflected in the pond and because Artynov, that famous Don Juan and rake, was looking at her with avidity and interest, and because *everyone was happy.* And when the train had begun to move and some officers whom she knew had saluted her in farewell, she was already humming a polka, the sounds of which reached her from a military orchestra playing beyond the trees. And she returned to her compartment with a feeling that . . . *she would be happy without fail, in spite of everything* (8: 15; emphasis mine).

Anna later recalls this junction at the ball, where she is transformed from slave to queen: "When Anna . . . heard the music and saw her entire figure in a huge mirror . . . , there awoke in her soul a joy and that same foretaste of happiness that she had experienced on that moonlit night at the station. . . . And for the first time in her life she felt herself rich and free" (8:20).[4] This last sentence, with its emphasis on riches and freedom, prefigures Anna's "empowerment" after the ball[5].

Within the story, power is described through four central metaphors of strength or force (*sila*—one of the central words in this story): a locomotive that crushes everything in its path; a brewing storm; a huge white bear; and a chthonic giant. The adjective "huge" (*gromadnyi*) is associated with two of these four metaphors (the huge white bear, the huge officer);[6] it is used in only one additional instance in the story—to describe the "huge mirror" at the entrance to the ballroom, where Anna joins the ranks of the powerful. The first three metaphors are all associated with Modest Alekseich:

> It seemed to her that she had been borne this fear (*strakh*) of [her husband] in her soul for a long time. At one time in her childhood she always imagined that the principal of the high school [where her father was a teacher] was the most imposing and frightful force (*siloi*) in the world, *approaching like a storm cloud or a locomotive that was ready to crush anything in its path;* another such force (*siloi*) about which they always spoke in the family and of which they were for some reason frightened was His Excellency. There were another dozen forces (*sil*) that were a bit more minor, including the high school teachers with shaved moustaches, who were strict and implacable. Finally, there now was Modest Alekseich, a man with rules, whose face even looked like that of the principal. And in Anna's imagination all of these forces merged into one and assumed the form of a *frightening, huge (strashnogo, gromadnogo) white bear* that pulled down weak and guilty people such as her father . . . (8:18).

As in this passage, power is associated with fear throughout the work.[7] In *Part I,* Anna is depicted as being frightened by these forces (emphasized in this excerpt by the threefold repetition of words connected with the root "*strakh*"—"fear"); in *Part II,* she herself becomes such a force and exerts power over others. Anna's transformation (which is described as being the metamorphosis from "girl" to "lady" [*devochka* to *dama,* 8:21] and later called a "change . . . , an astounding change" ["peremena . . . , udivitel'naia peremena", 8:23]) begins with her entrance in *Part II* onto the dance floor—an entrance described through imagery suggesting the

uncertain challenging of power by the weak: "it seemed to her that she was in a sailboat moving into a strong storm, while her husband was left far away on the shore" (8:20–21). Despite this uncertain beginning, Anna quickly conquers the "elements."

The fourth metaphor of force occurs in the description of "the huge officer in epaulets," who "arose as if from underneath the earth (*tochno iz-pod zemli vyros*) and invited Anna to waltz" (8:20). Chekhov's imagery recalls the Greek myth of the Giants—a race famed for their great size and strength who arose from underneath the earth to challenge the Olympian gods, but were ultimately defeated by them and imprisoned once again in the earth.[8] Like many classical myths in Chekhov's works, this myth is used ironically."[9] The "huge" giant is once again defeated, but the victory belongs to a woman; and unlike the conquest of the chthonic Giants in Greek mythology, which established order in the cosmos and affirmed the power of the Olympians, Anna's victory establishes only her own personal power and allows her to pursue her own pleasure.[10]

Anna's conquest of the giant is described in part through implicit imagery of a military assault:[11]

> She was dancing the mazurka with that same huge officer. He moved in a self-important and heavy manner, as though he was a carcass in a uniform coat (*tusha v mundire*). He raised his shoulders and breast, just barely stamped his feet—he was strongly disinclined to dance. And she flitted around, teasing him with her beauty and with her bare neck. Her eyes shone with ardor, her movements were passionate, and he became more and more indifferent and extended his hands to her with condescending mercy, just like a king. . . . But little by little *even the huge officer's defenses were penetrated* (*prorvalo*). He became lively, grew agitated, and, after succumbing to her charm (*poddavshis' ocharovaniiu*), got carried away and moved lightly, like a young man. And she only raised her shoulders and glanced cunningly at him, as if she were a queen and he a slave . . . (8:21).

The reversal of power here is marked: at first the huge officer is "like a king" and lords over Anna with his indifference; but as the dance continues, she becomes "a queen" and he "a slave." This power reversal is stressed further when at the charity bazaar connected with the ball she sells tea "for no less than a ruble" and (as a sign of his submission) "*forces*" the huge officer to drink three cups (8:22; emphasis mine).

Anna's successful "assault" is part of a broader battle between the sexes—a battle for power that is intimated throughout the story. Thus, after the charity bazaar, a brigadier general proposes a toast to women as "the force (*silu*) before which even the artillary surrenders (*pasuet*)" (8:23), reflecting the fact that even the military (here, a symbol of masculine power and strength) cannot quell the "assault" of feminine beauty. Indeed, there is a hint throughout the story that although men formally hold power and high office, women are the more powerful sex. This point is reflected, for example, in Chekhov's repeated stress on the "weakness" of Anna's

father (e.g. 8:14,16)[12]—which is implicitly contrasted with the strength of her mother, who has taught Anna how to conquer men (8:19)—as well as in Modest Alekseich's frequent requests that Anna pay obeisance to the wives of higher officials in order to help him receive his promotion, reflecting the *real* source of power behind powerful men (8:17, 20). Ultimately, Modest receives his Order of Saint Anna of the Second Degree (which is worn around the neck—hence the surface meaning of the story's title) not because of his own accomplishments but because his wife has attracted His Excellency.[13]

Among Anna's other conquests is Artynov, "that famous Don Juan and rake ("balovnik")" (8:15), the rich owner of a colony of dachas near the junction where the train had stopped on the way to the monastery. After Artynov becomes her lover, *his* servitude is stressed when, at the end of the story, he comes to take her for rides in a carriage, sitting *not* inside with her but "on the coachbox instead of the coachman" ("na kozlakh vmesto kuchera")(8:24). After he is conquered, the imagery of virility originally used to describe him is replaced by imagery of infirmity: where he had originally been portrayed as a "Don Juan and rake" whose face is "like that of an Armenian" and who is accompanied by "two borzoi dogs with keen snouts pointed towards the ground" (suggesting, perhaps, that he is a hunter of women), he is portrayed at the ball as having a "shortness of breath" and "suffering from asthma" (8:15, 22).[14]

The reversal of power relationships at the ball is accentuated by the fact that many of the people who had previously frightened Anna with their power appear there and are conquered by her, including His Excellency and her father's fellow teachers. Anna's conquest of His Excellency is marked by his smiling a saccharine smile and "chewing his lips, as he always did when he saw beautiful women;" he even asks permission to call on her again, saying that she is "a treasure" and that she should be awarded "a prize for beauty . . . as in America" (8:22). Through her conquest of His Excellency, Anna reverses the power that Modest Alekseich had exerted over her. Modest begins to look at her "with that same ingratiating, saccharine, *slavishly-respectful* ("kholopski-pochtitel'nym") expression that she had gotten used to seeing on him in the presence of the powerful ("sil'nykh") and the high-ranking" (8:23, emphasis mine). Sensing her new power, she calls him a "blockhead," "distinctly pronouncing every word with delight, with indignation, and with hatred, . . . and fully aware that there would be no recriminations" (8:23–24). To emphasize the complete reversal of power relationships, the narrator notes that after the ball Anna no longer fears the "force" of an oncoming locomotive or any other force: ". . . her long-standing fear ("strakh") of a force ("siloi") that advanced and threatened to crush anything in its path now seemed ridiculous to her; she no longer was afraid of anyone . . ." (8:22).[15]

"Anna na shee" depicts the way that power corrupts. This corruption is abetted by (and/or spreads to) many of the central institutions of society: the bureaucracy, religion, and the family. The story has been interpreted as reflecting the hierarchical power structure of the nineteenth-century Russian bureaucracy, where "[e]very rank cringes slavishly to the one above, and each higher rank ruthlessly enhances its position by brutality to those below" (Tulloch, 146). Even religion and morality are invoked as a means of enhancing power. For example, Modest chooses a monastery for their honeymoon to show his wife the role that rules will play in their life together and to demonstrate to her that "even in marriage he will give first priority to religion and morality" (8:12). The narrator intimates that this "morality" is itself a source of power for Modest:

> At dinner Modest Alekseich ate a very large amount and spoke about politics, about appointments, transfers, and awards, about how one had to labor, how family life is not a pleasure but a duty, how a penny saved is a penny earned, and how he places religion and morality higher than anything else in this world. And *holding his knife in his fist, like a sword,* he said: "Every person must have his obligations" (8:16, emphasis mine).

To indicate the hypocrisy of Modest's moralism, Chekhov has him proclaim his values while eating "a very large amount" (a frequent negative marker in Chekhov's late works);[16] to stress the role of power behind Modest's rules, Chekhov has him moralize while holding his knife "*like a sword.*"

The comparison of Modest's knife to a sword—a traditional symbol of masculine power—becomes ironic when juxtaposed with a passage several pages earlier that describes Modest's physical appearance using *anti-masculine* imagery:

> He was a bureaucrat of medium height ("Eto byl chinovnik srednego rosta"), rather stout and puffy ("pukhlyi"), very well-fed, with long side-whiskers and no moustache ("bez usov"); his freshly-shaven, round, sharply-defined chin looked like a heel. The most characteristic feature on his face was the absence of whiskers, a bare, freshly-shaven place that gradually led into his fat cheeks, which shook like jelly (8:13).

The emphasis here on Modest's "*absence* of whiskers,", his "*bare,* freshly-shaven place", and his "fat cheeks that shook like jelly" provides an ironic commentary on his exercise of patriarchal power; the passage as a whole (which uses the word "bureaucrat" where the reader would expect "person" or "man") stresses the image of Modest as a weak *chinovnik,* a bureaucrat who uses his marriage to attain his main goal in life—to advance in power and rank.[17]

Anna's own rise reflects the corruption that power permits. After she has achieved her "rank" in society, she (like the powerful male figures in the story) uses it for her own pleasure, rather than the good of her father and brothers for whose sake she had originally made the sacrifice of marrying Modest Alekseich. By the end of Part II (which occurs in winter, a symbol

of emotional frigidity), Anna—who has become more and more like Modest Alekseich—acts towards her impoverished father and brothers as her husband had acted towards her, and does not give them either money or attention. Already during her successes at the charity ball, she is "ashamed of having such a poor, such an ordinary father" and is afraid that he will say something "inappropriate" (8:22).[18] The story ends with lines that emphasize her abandonment of her family:

> [S]he came to visit them less and less often. They already were dining alone. Petr Leont'ich [her father] drank even more than in the past. They had no money, and he had sold his harmonium to pay a debt. The boys no longer let him go outside alone and were constantly following him so that he wouldn't fall. And whenever they saw Anna driving towards them in a carriage drawn by a team of three horses, . . . Petr Leont'ich would take off his high hat and would be preparing to shout something when Petia and Andriusha would take him by the arm and say imploringly: "Don't, Papa! . . . Enough, Papa!" (8:24).

The detail of Anna's father being forced to sell his harmonium stresses the opposition between Anna's joyous life of music ("she already understood that she had been created exclusively for this noisy, brilliant, laughing life with music, dancing, and admirers"—8:22) and her family's life of poverty, without music or joy. The phrase "Don't, Papa! . . . Enough, Papa!" ("Ne nado, papochka, . . . budet papochka")—which, for emphasis, is repeated three times in the story in approximately the same way—reflects the ever-growing distance imposed by Anna on her family as she advances in society;[19] at each repetition, Anna has become more and more powerful (first by marriage, then by her conquests at the ball) and has left her family with less and less. The repetition ironically underscores the fact that Anna's marriage, which was designed to help her family, has led to their emotional and financial abandonment. Power has displaced love. Indeed, by the end of the story Chekhov has parodically reversed (purposefully or not) Dostoevsky's famous statement that beauty will save the world; in "Anna na shee," beauty corrupts.

Perhaps the ultimate parody in Chekhov's story is found in its ironic reversal of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina.* The marriage of a cold bureaucrat who lives "by rules" (always a bad sign in Russian literature) to a beautiful younger woman recalls the plot of *Anna Karenina,* as does the fact that both women after whom the stories are named are "Anna" and that the patronymic of Chekhov's bureaucrat who plays by the rules is "Alekseich" (making him on one level a "son" of Aleksei Karenin, as Thomas Winner has noted).[20] Given the important role of the locomotive that crushes Tolstoy's Anna Karenina, the initial fear by Chekhov's Anna of a locomotive that crushes everything in its path is significant. But this fear, like Anna's fate, is reversed in Chekhov. Chekhov's Anna is a vulgar variant of Tolstoy's. Where Tolstoy's sensitive, suffering Anna is snubbed by society, disenfranchised, and ultimately destroyed as a result of her honest and

open affair, Chekhov's calculating, unfeeling, predatory Anna achieves power precisely because she plays by society's rules. Tolstoy's tragedy becomes Chekhov's *poshlost'*. This opposition reflects a broader distinction between the worlds of Tolstoy and Chekhov. In Chekhov, there is no external moral Force repaying "immorality" through "vengeance." Instead, Chekhov depicts (through a seemingly-objective narrator) a Darwinian universe controlled by manipulative human beings in their everyday struggle for power.

NOTES

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1 Since completing this article, I have read Lindheim, who notes that "Chekhov's later writings often focus on power (*sila,* meaning strength or force is a key word)" (63). Among characters "driven to dominate others," Lindheim mentions (in addition to Anna in "Anna on the Neck") Ariadne in the story by that name, Natasha (*Three Sisters*), Aksinia ("In the Ravine"), von Koren ("The Duel"), Belikov ("The Man in the Case"), Lida ("The House with an Attic"), and others.

2 All references in parentheses are to Chekhov, 1960–64. The domination of Anna by Modest Alekseich in *Part I* to some extent recalls the domination of the "meek one" by her pawnbroker husband in Dostoevsky's "Krotkaia" ("A Meek Woman," 1876). Both reflect not only the domination and humiliation of a poor wife by a wealthy husband but also the general influence of the patriarchal *Domostroi* tradition, where the husband is an absolute ruler of his wife. But as we shall see below, *Part II* of Chekhov's story reverses Dostoevsky's, which ends in the wife's suicide.

3 ". . . it seemed to her that her father and the boys were sitting at home hungry now without her and that they were experiencing exactly the same melancholy that they had experienced on the first evening after the funeral of her mother" (8:14).

4 The Russian text stresses the relationship between the scenes at the junction and the ball by emphasizing Anna's "entire" figure. At the station "ona . . . stala tak, chtoby videli *ee vsiu* v novom velikolepnom plat'e i v shliape"; at the ball, she sees "*vsiu sebia*" in the huge mirror (8:15, 20).

5 The antithesis of poverty and wealth in "Anna na shee" is one of the factors that leads V. V. Golubkov to read it as a tale of social contradiction. His interpretation stresses "the contradiction between the higher and lower strata of society, between the strong and the weak in their historically established interrelationships . . ." (148). Despite some Marxist clichés at the outset, Golubkov does a convincing job of reading the work, stressing the way that stylistic changes made by Chekhov contribute to the story.

6 Bitsilli (70–71) also has noted this connection between the "huge officer" and the "huge bear;" however, he sees both as incarnations of the theme of fate, which in his opinion governs the heroine's actions—a reading that I believe cannot be supported by the text, which makes neither implicit nor implicit references to fate.

7 The relationship between power and fear is also stressed by Golubkov, who sees this passage as built on "allegorical images which illustrate that feeling of panicked fear before the strong who have power; this feeling abides in Anna . . . , and to a significant degree it determines all her behavior" (148). At first, this fear of power seems to have at

least a slight moral dimension: power seems to be used to punish guilt or weakness. For example, although Modest Alekseich is repulsive to Anna, she at first feels "guilty" for marrying him for his money (8:14), and the frightening white bear is described as punishing "weak and guilty" people like her father, who has become a drunkard after his wife's death (8:18). As the story progresses, power becomes more arbitrary, and the initial sense of power being used to punish guilt disappears.

8 The likelihood that this similarity between the "huge officer" and the Greek Giants was more than coincidence is reflected in the fact that Chekhov added the chthonic imagery only *after* the original 1895 publications of "Anna na shee" in *Russkie vedomosti.* See Chekhov, 1974, 9:409.

9 Although he does not discuss this particular myth, Thomas Winner has observed that in Chekhov "mythological echoes" often contribute to irony and satire. As he notes, "they may be alluded to only indirectly, and frequently they may be inverted. . . . The Chekhovian hero who echoes an archetypal hero is frequently only a weakened version, a pathetic echo, a satire, or parody of his prototype" (*Chekhov and His Prose,* 183).

10 On the cosmic implications of the conquest of the chthonic giants, see Takho-godi, 1:301.

11 Anna had been given the weapons for this assault since childhood by her mother. An explicit description of her arsenal is given at the beginning of *Part II* (although some of these weapons have already been used in the "junction" scene in *Part I*): "Her late mother had herself always dressed in the latest fashions and always took great care with Anna and dressed her elegantly, like a doll, and taught her to speak French and to dance the mazurka superbly. . . . Anna, like her mother, . . . knew how to squint provocatively (*shchurit' glaza*), to lisp, to assume pretty poses, to become enraptured when necessary, to look sad and enigmatic" (8:19).

12 In portraying Petr Leont'ich's "weakness" for drink, Chekhov creates an ironic echo of the association of power with fear discussed above. When Anna and her "thin and pale" brothers try to convince Petr Leont'ich to stop drinking, he attempts to invoke his patriarchal power and beats on the table with his fists to frighten them, stating: "I won't let anyone supervise me. I'll throw you all out, boys and girl." But the narrator goes on to undercut this power: ". . . in his voice could be heard *weakness* and kindness [*dobrota*] and *no one was afraid of him*" (8:16; emphasis mine). Just as power is associated with cruelty and fear in the story, weakness is associated with kindness. Indeed, it could be argued that Petr Leont'ich (who has taken to drink out of grief after the death of his wife) is the one loving character in the work, but his weak love, which impoverishes his family and thus is responsible for Anna's marriage to Modest Alekseich, has no better results than does the oppression of the weak by the strong in the story.

13 This opposition between strong females and weak males in "Anna na shee" is also reflected in Chekhov's use of "anti-masculine" imagery to describe several of his males. See the descriptions of Modest Alekseich and Artynov (*after* his "conquest") in the text below.

14 From the time of Pushkin's poem "Chernaia shal' " ("The Black Shawl," 1820), the Armenian was occasionally used as a variant of the Don Juan in Russian literature. See Chekhov's own "Duel' " for another example.

In the junction scene, Artynov's "strange clothing" is also used to emphasize his virility: "a shirt unbuttoned at the chest, high boots with spurs, and a black cloak draped over his shoulders which dragged along the ground like a train" (8:15). At the ball, however, he is dressed "like everyone else" (8:22).

15 The reversal of power after Anna's success at the ball is even reflected in the language of her notes to Modest Alekseich, which use the infinitive as an imperative—an abrupt, military-style command form used by superiors for addressing inferiors: "*vydat' podateliu sego 200r*" ("Give bearer 200 rubles"); "*nemedlenno uplatit' 100 r.*" ("Pay 100 rubles immediately") (8:24).

16 On the connection between eating and *poshlost'* ("banality") in "Anna na shee" and other works of Chekhov, see Winner, *Chekhov and his Prose,* passim, and "Parallelismen," 78.

17 This reading of Modest as more bureaucrat than person is reinforced by Chekhov's portrayal of Modest's language, dominated by long bureaucratic phrases like "in as much as" (*po mere togo*), "following the proposition that" (*iskhodia iz togo polozheniia*), and "in view of the aforementioned" (*"vvidu tol'ko chto skazannogo"*) (8:18). The fact that the description of Modest as bureaucrat occurs when "the newlyweds were alone" for the first time on their way to a honeymoon makes the irony in the description especially strong.

18 Anna's shame at her father's poverty and at the fact that he is "so ordinary" ironically echoes her brothers' shame at Anna's having sold herself for money to a "tedious, boring man, whom she doesn't love" (8:16).

19 The first appearance of this phrase occurs when (out of grief and guilt) Anna's father runs after the train that is carrying his daughter to the honeymoon. This scene recalls Dostoevsky's *Bednye liudi* (*Poor Folk,* 1846), where, out of grief, Pokrovskii's father runs after the cart that is carrying his son's casket to the graveyard. Both fathers have taken to drink after the death of their wives (although Pokrovskii's father has become a drunkard after his remarriage to a shrewish woman). Winner points to additional similarities between Anna's father and the drunkard Marmeladov in *Crime and Punishment* ("Parallelismen", 86).

20 On some relationships between "Anna on the Neck" and *Anna Karenina,* see Winner, *Chekhov and His Prose,* 184–85. As Winner observes, "Modest Alekseich is a *lowered* version of Tolstoy's Karenin" and "shares . . . only in Karenin's negative qualities and not in his limited nobility" (184; emphasis mine).

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