

Reading Julian Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending* in Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*

Elena Bollinger

University of Lisbon, Lisbon, Portugal

This paper addresses the narrative construction of the moment of death as depicted in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* and in Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending*. Following Orr's definition of positive influence, described as a "site for cultural renewal", it pursues the analysis of complexity and confluence of literary traditions in these texts. Though both *Anna Karenina* and *The Sense of an Ending* seem to insist on portraying a chronicle of struggle between a moment and a process of dying, it is nevertheless a physical moment of life ending which becomes an intensely condensed, and almost photographic, representation of the intimate, psychologically depicted, dying process. It is argued that the moment of death reveals, for instance, Anna's unresolved internal conflict between psychological and physiological phenomena shaping human behaviour. Similarly, Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending* builds upon a subtle dialogic tension between a process of psychological dying and a moment of physically conceived death. Specifically, this paper brings to light the repetitive occurrence of the intense epiphanic moments which shape the thematic and the structural development of both *Anna Karenina* and *The Sense of an Ending*.

Keywords: comparative criticism, moment, death, life, J. Barnes, L. Tolstoy

The purpose of this article is to compare the narrative construction of a dialogically conceived relationship between the process of dying and the moment of life ending in Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* and in Julian Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending*. This article claims that the concept of positive influence, described by Mary Orr as "a site for cultural renewal", may in fact be one of the possible ways of opening up and disrupting closed orders, "of calling for the past to be added to the future, and to map qualitative understanding of complexity and confluence of literary traditions" (Orr, 2003, p. 87). Orr's critical approach to intertextuality envisages the conceptual importance of comparative criticism as critical genre, thus signalling the potential communicative power of multiple and foreign differences in what appears to be a single channel of expression:

Comparative criticism as critical genre, therefore, goes far beyond reiterating the battle between the Ancients and Moderns on the side of the Ancients. Its insistence on tradition as combinatory, and on influence as open critical method, provides ways of recognizing what was programmatic in grille-based theorization of culture in its various twentieth-century economies. Beyond excellent critical purviews of one national heritage, comparative criticism's most valuable recognition is that bi- or trilingual understanding produces rather different angles of vision to monolingual approaches. (Orr, 2003, p. 90)

Acknowledging Tolstoy as one of the great names of world literature and talking about the idiosyncrasies of literary art and a writer's ability to connect life and art, Barnes confesses that "the making of the bond between

writer and reader on the page is of maximum concern to me" (*Russia Beyond*, 2016). Commenting further on sometimes unconventional alignment of thematically disordering principles and formally traditional narrative techniques present in his novels, Barnes focuses his attention on the readers' emotional involvement with the text, as he states in the following passage: "I may take readers to unexpected places, but I want them to follow the path without the necessary trouble" (*Russia Beyond*, 2016). Moreover, in "A Life With Books", he states that "...nothing can replace the exact, complicated, subtle communion between absent author and entranced, present reader" (Barnes, 2012a, p. xviii). While Barnes's concern for the idea of a fluid but also profound form of communication between writer and reader has mostly developed into positive critical response (Childs, 2011), Tolstoy's persevering reflections on the reader's emotional communion with the text, achieving a strong culminating point, perceived as "infection", has evinced a rather unsympathetical praise¹. Nevertheless, it is relevant to mention that Tolstoy's thoughts on the reader's role in construing a reading process dialogically alive find an echo in Barnes's view of an emotionally involved and deeply participating reader:

Thus, the simplest case: a boy who once experienced fear, let us say, on encountering a wolf, tells about this encounter, the surroundings, describes himself, his state of mind before the encounter, the surroundings, the forest, his carelessness, and then the look of the wolf, its movements, the distance between the wolf and himself, and so on. All this—if as he tells the story the boy relives the feeling he experienced, infects his listeners, makes them relive all that the narrator lived through—is art. (Tolstoy, 1898, p. 39)

It is interesting to note how both Tolstoy and Barnes come to reflect upon the presence of a somehow unlinear and labyrinthine principle guiding the thematic intricacies of their works. Writing about *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy seems to project his own still unresolved and probably unresolvable dilemmas concerning human principles of ethics and moral conduct, stating:

I am at work at the moment on that dreary, vulgar *Anna Karenina* and all I ask God is that he give me the strength to be rid of it as soon as possible, to free some space—I do need free time, and not for pedagogical, but for other, more pressing matters. (Paperno, 2014, p. 37)²

Similarly, Barnes relates his own experience of evaluating the complex thematic spectrum of *The Sense of an Ending*, as follows:

I'm sorry you don't understand what it's about. I think it's about responsibility and remorse. What exactly is our responsibility for our actions, and how precisely can we measure it? ... And when—sometimes, many years later, we discover that our responsibility is not what we thought it was, we may suffer guilt, or, worse, remorse. (*Russia Beyond*, 2016)

Taking as a starting point, a mosaically organized discursive practice, featuring a human quest for self-understanding inside a particular time and space, upon which thematic contours and compositional framework of both Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* and Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending* rest, this article revisits a complex dimension of intertextual processes responsible for what Julia Kristeva designates as "the so-called literary act which, by dint of its not admitting to an ideal distance in relation to the that which it signifies,

¹ See, for instance, Barnes's opinion about Tolstoy's later works, as follows: "I'm more weary of art in the service of an idea than I am of art that tends to go off to the ultra-bouts spectrum of things. You can see things going wrong with Tolstoy, you can see how the need to propagandize seeps into him as the years go by, and I think that is warning" (Guignery, 2009, p. 145).

² Much has been written about the links between Tolstoy's philosophical inquiries and compositional idiosyncrasies of *Anna Karenina* in Irina Paperno's *Who, What Am I? Tolstoy Struggles to Narrate the Self*, 2014.

introduces radical otherness in relation to what language is claimed to be: a bearer of meanings" (Kristeva, 1969, p. 9). The methodological support for this investigation emerges partly from Kristeva's concepts of neutralisation and permeability of a literary act. To specify the manifold connection between two strategic axes present in a literary text, designated by Bakhtin as dialogue and ambivalence (1982), Kristeva focuses, respectively, on analysing a productive intersection of utterances in the space of a text and furthermore on a redistributive—perceived as destructive-constructive—function of a text, locating it in logically organized, rather than purely linguistic, categories. In "The closed text" (1966-1967), for instance, she states:

The text is therefore productivity, meaning that (1) its relation to the language in which it is sited is redistributive (destructive-constructive) and consequently it can be approached by means of logical categories other than purely linguistic ones; (2) it is a permutation of texts, an intertextuality: in the space of a text, many utterances taken from other texts intersect with one another and neutralize one another. (Kristeva, 1969, p. 52)

Further, Kristeva's understanding of a literary act through its neutralising, productive, and permutational aesthetic function allows her to position a literary word as a "minimal textual unit [which] turns to occupy the status of mediator" (Orr, 2003, p. 26). Although Kristeva does not consider the position of the reader at the heart of the interpretability of a text, the question of mediation evoked in her writings opens a possible theoretical perspective of regarding the reader's role in the corollary of both constructive and deconstructive dimensions offered by a literary text, resulting in its contingent polyphonic capacity to provoke in readers both identification with and alienation from its characters. Kristeva notices how

the word as a minimal textual unit thus turns out to occupy the status of mediator, linking structural models of cultural (historical) environment, as well as that of regulator, controlling mutations from diachrony to synchrony, i.e., to literary structure. The word is spatialized: through the very notion of status, it functions in three dimensions (subject-addressee-context) as a set of dialogical, semic elements or as a set of ambivalent elements. Consequently the task of literary semiotics is to discover other formalisms corresponding to different modalities of word-joining (sequences) within the dialogical space of texts. (Kristeva, 1969, p. 85)

Though it is to the word in itself that Kristeva attributes the greatest importance in the creative dynamics of the text, it could be suggested how significant a reader's active participation is in accomplishing the never-ending expansion of meanings and gradual thematic reworkings in his or her communion with the text. This idea of collaboration between text and reader is very well underlined by Worton and Still (1990) and reinforced by Mary Orr in her complex approach to intertextuality:

a text is available only through some process of reading; what is produced at the moment of reading is due to the cross-fertilization of the packaged material [...] by all the texts which the reader brings to it. A delicate allusion to a work unknown to the reader, which therefore goes unnoticed, will have a dormant existence in that reading. On the other hand, the reader's experience of some practice or theory unknown to the author may lead to a fresh interpretation. (Orr, 2003, p. 39)

Taking into account the main theoretical principles depicted so far, this article focuses on exploring the literary relationship between Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* and Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending*, while arguing simultaneously how aesthetically multivoiced and inconclusive the sense of an ending in *Anna Karenina* could become when compared to the expressive significance of the moment in Barnes's original text.

Though both *Anna Karenina* and *The Sense of an Ending* seem to insist on portraying a chronicle of struggle between a moment and a process of dying, it is nevertheless a physical moment of life ending which becomes an intensely condensed, and almost photographic, representation of the intimate, psychologically depicted, dying process. It is argued that the moment of death reveals, for instance, Anna's still unresolved internal conflict between psychological and physiological phenomena shaping human behaviour. The narrative arrangement of Anna's character seems to follow the conceptual contours of Schopenhauer's idea of a self carried out in *The World as Will and Representation* (1818). He acknowledges the existence of a juxtaposition between the concept of the world perceived as a representation of objects by our own mind and the other aspect of the world, the will, described as the inner self, which is not objectively perceivable, and exists outside the chronological time order. Claiming that human will is one of the most important vehicles of experience leading to self-knowledge, Schopenhauer mentions its inherent capacity to probe into the world which lies beyond palpable representation. Interpreting will as an ultimate form of desire, striving and urging, he argues that a single person traces, deliberately, his or her own path towards pain and suffering due to the insatiable will to fulfill life's desires and passions. Rosamund Bartlett, a distinguished Tolstoy's scholar, translator, and biographer, recognizes the existence of a strong metaphoric connection between Schopenhauer's concept of the will and Tolstoy's deliberately arranged repetition of the word "involuntary" as the main discursive device in the psychological depiction of his characters:

Tolstoy depicts everyday life in an unidealized, objective way, indeed his dissection of the shifting states of emotional experience is often executed with a surgical precision...but a key element of his realism is also to depict his characters...doing or saying things they had not intended. This technique certainly illustrates Tolstoy's acute powers of psychological analysis. (Tolstoy, 1877, p. xii)

This article claims that such a dialogic relationship between the human body and the human will revealed in the text's insistence on the discursive juxtaposition between will, disclosing Anna's desire and urging for romantic, idealized love and her involuntary manifestation of an inner self, demanding a proposition and a much more prosaic concern with what ultimately constitutes family happiness (Tolstoy, 1877, p. xv), ultimately discloses the novel's disturbing and unresolvable existential conflict. In narrative terms, the perceptiveness of this theoretically described conflict lies in a carefully conceived, emblematic depiction of a moment carrying out a profound revelation. Frequently, a narrative disclosure of a deep, long-lasting epiphany is embedded in a depiction of an ordinary moment that, in line with Virginia Woolf's revelatory sketching of space outside time, seems of no importance:

Yet what composed the present moment? If you are young, the future lies upon the present, like a piece of glass, making it waver, distorting it. All the same, everybody believes that the present is something, seeks out the different elements in this situation in order to compose the truth of it, the whole of it. (Woolf, 1966, p. 293)

In Tolstoy's text, the philosophical quest for the essence of the present moment is suggested, primarily, by the multilayered psychological depiction of a character, disclosed in a modern sense of a contingency of being. As a literary work of art, *Anna Karenina* can be seen as the summation of Tolstoy's literary journey, initiated with *Childhood*, his first work of fiction published in 1852. At the same time, *Anna Karenina* is also considered as a stepping stone for what he would write over the next three decades of his life (Tolstoy, 1877, p. xi), for it

examines a creative way in which Tolstoy addresses questions of family, moral decisions, and the process of self-knowledge, without, deliberately, establishing a necessary way of solving them. It goes almost without saying that the writer's mastery in portraying Anna's character lies in his ability to fit together an ineffable, oblique, almost inexpressible side of her inner self and the more explicit, overt, expressible portrait of her outer self, mostly perceived through the observable eyes of the encountered other depicted in an apparently ordinary life situation. The strong symbiosis between will and involuntary manifestations of a self observed in *Anna Karenina* encourages its reader to perceive the multiplicity of intertwined versions of the other embedded in the narrative construction of Anna's character. In *The Singularity of Literature*, Derek Attridge, describing a writer's main task, attributes great importance to his capacity of accommodating the other in the narrative construction of each singular character. Moreover, it is precisely this capacity that makes each single character truly singular. According to him, the narrative "encounter with the other, even if it happens repeatedly and to everybody, is always a singular encounter, and an encounter with singularity" (Attridge, 2004, p. 29). Thus, this discursively conceived montage technique, acclaimed by Bartlett to be one of the most expressive narrative techniques in Tolstoy's *oeuvre* (Tolstoy, 1877, p. xviii), provides the reader with the necessary interpretive tools in disclosing the strong conceptual interconnectedness between the process of Anna's life and the moment of her death: "Lord, forgive me for everything! she murmured, feeling the impossibility of struggling" (Tolstoy, 1877, p. 771); she pronounces, falling under the train's wagon. This narrative effect embodied in an intense moment of revelation is mostly achieved through a discursive combination of "murmured" and "struggling", both ambiguously connected in the construction of a sense of her identity as a woman, wife, mother, an intelligent high ranking society woman and a mistress. It seems irrevocable that the impressive, almost photographic, representation of the moment of psychological and physical dying rests upon the employment of the narrative technique of montage. It is worth remembering how, at the very beginning of Anna's first journey, the tragic death of a watchman in the train station acts as an insightful foreshadowing of Anna's both physical and psychological death. Recalling Woolf's characterization of the moment, quoted previously, the choice of lexical devices employed to represent the watchman's crush strikes us both for the ordinary simplicity of its everyday speech and the profundity of its framing significance acting on a deeper narrative level: "'What a terrible way to die!' said a gentleman walking past. 'He was sliced in two', they say" (Tolstoy, 1877, p. 67). It can be therefore concluded that the symbolic characterization of a man sliced in two encourages the attentive reader to recollect an image of the divided body at the moment of Anna's own death: The perceptiveness of her inner self becomes metaphorically sliced into two. Disclosing a complex narrative construction of Anna's personality sliced into multiple pieces during her lifetime, it symbolically foregrounds the sense of ambiguity and inconclusiveness related to whether the conceptualization of a modern woman or as a self lying beyond the confines of time, space, and biological life. The image of a man physically sliced in two, strategically placed at the beginning of Anna's train journey, sheds light on an entire book depicting her life's journey and a process of identity. According to Bartlett, Tolstoy's fictional works function as "'verbal icons'... which is why his realism is inherently filled with 'emblematic' repetitions, proliferation of important symbols embedded in its [narrative] structure" (Tolstoy, 1877, p. xvii). One of these verbal icons employed in the description of a moment of her death consists of the "familiar sign of the cross summoned up in her soul" and joyful childhood memories of the past joys, leading simultaneously towards light and darkness, "huge and inexorable". The image of a little peasant working over the iron which equally kept

appearing in Anna's dreams during her lifetime is materialized, in the narrative terms, as an epiphanic revelation of the meaning of Anna's existence at the moment of her death. Her life, leading deliberately to death, is perceived as a book:

And the candle by which she had been reading that book full of anxiety, deceptions, grief, and evil flared up more brightly than at any other time, illuminated for her everything that had previously been in darkness, spluttered, grew dim, and went out for ever. (Tolstoy, 1877, p. 771)

It is relevant to mention Tolstoy's reflections on literature, registered in his letters and diary, in as much as he regarded the role of each single book as a figurative and valuable contribution in the (re)building of one's sense of identity. Hence he reflects upon memory, writing and a reader-oriented receptiveness of the written work of art. In one of his diary entrances dating back 1888, he aims to move towards many-volumed conceptualization of the cross-cultural dynamics implied in the process of reading. This may be applied, when interpreting *Anna Karenina*, to both Anna's personal life story, written as a book, and the novel itself, being only one volume of a many-volumed edition:

I thought: life, not my life, but the life of the whole world, which, with the renewal of Christianity, comes as spring comes, from all sides, in trees, in grass, and in waters, becomes incredibly interesting.... It is as if you kept reading a book, which became more and more interesting, and suddenly, at the most interesting moment, the book comes to an end, and it turns out that this is only the first volume of a many-volumed edition, and that one cannot get hold of the sequel. One could only read it abroad, in a foreign language. But one would certainly read it. (Paperno, 2014, Back Cover)

It seems interesting to consider, from the point of view of art's natural predisposition for the sequential sense of continuity, here acknowledged by Tolstoy, the close symbolic similarity between the above registered metaphoric statement about a many-volumed edition and the following meditation of Julian Barnes regarding his novel *The Sense of an Ending*:

The novel is also about time and memory, yes. And it's also, as you say, a kind of psychological thriller. I am pleased when some readers tell me that after finishing it, they went straight back to the beginning and read it again, to see what really happened, and the work out the clues they'd missed. (*Russia Beyond*, 2016)

Reflecting on the symbiotic confluence of different narrative devices featuring the creative process of writing, Julian Barnes considers the importance of the constructive dialogue between past and present. In his essay entitled "George Orwell and the Fucking Elephant", Barnes acknowledges the existence of a link between the process of construction of literary memory and the fabrication of the collective identity:

When it comes to the dead, it is hard to retain, or posthumously acquire, treasuredness. Being a Great Writer in itself has little to do with the matter. The important factors are: 1) An ambassadorial quality, an ability to present the nation to itself, and represent it abroad, in a way it wishes to be presented and represented. 2) An element of malleability and interpretability. The malleability allows the writer to be given a more appealing, if not entirely untruthful, image; the interpretability means that we can all find in him or her more or less whatever we require. 3) The writer, even if critical of his or her country, must have a patriotic core, or what appears to be one. Thus Dickens, as Orwell observed, is "one of those writers who are worth stealing". (Barnes, 2012b, pp. 30-31)

This article argues that, by tracing a symbolic continuity with the complex issue of a literary representation of death developed in *Anna Karenina*, Barnes's *The Sense of an Ending* builds upon a subtle dialogic tension between its main characters' past and present, or between a process of psychological dying and a moment of a

physically conceived death. It becomes also perceptible that it is precisely a moment, and not a whole process of a symbolic dying, which assumes the quintessential role in both the structural and thematic development of the novel. The metaphoric relevance of a moment from the point of view of a novel's narrative structure is faintly revealed in Tony's apologetic letter to Veronica, in which he tries to come to terms with his past judged injurious attitude coming out of a moment's reaction to her love affair with Adrian:

I realise that I am probably the last person you want to hear from, but I hope you will read this message through to the end. I don't expect you to reply to it. But I have spent some time re-evaluating things, and would like to apologize to you...That letter of mine was unforgivable. All I can say is that my vile words were the expression of a moment. They were a genuine shock for me to read again after all these years. (Barnes, 2012c, p. 143)

Nevertheless, it is exactly the apparently ordinary, momentarily conceived and lacking in seriousness statement that shapes the main thematic contours of not only Veronica's and Adrian's love story, but also of a whole narrative development of an individual self, depicted in the novel. It becomes the emphatically epiphanic moment in Tony's ambiguous perception of his own life story and the contradictory process of memory embedded in it. The reminiscences of the moment in which his vile words become registered in a written form provide Tony with the necessary tools to evaluate an epistemological significance of an alternative vision of the self. The stagnant continuity of self-consciousness so far serving as a firm, stable, foundation for his sense of self becomes destabilized by his momentary contact with a letter. The process of a chronologically stated development of his self is symbolically interrupted by an epiphanic revelation embodied in a seemingly insignificant moment of expression. The going around in circles and leading to nowhere quest for life's meaning personified by Anna's effaced candle becomes summoned up in Tony's strong sense of a self-deception regarding his apparently common, unharmed, existence:

What did I know of life, I who had lived so carefully? Who had neither won nor lost, but just let life happen to him? Who had the usual ambitions and settled all too quickly for them not being realised? Who avoided being hurt and called it a capacity for survival? Who paid his bills, stayed on good terms with everyone as far as possible, for whom ecstasy and despair soon became just words once read in novels?... Well, there was all this to reflect upon, while I endured a special kind of remorse: a hurt inflicted at long last on one who always thought he knew how to avoid being hurt—and inflicted precisely for that reason. (Barnes, 2012c, p. 142)

Consequently, it becomes relevant to show how the revelation process of a self underlined in the above stated moment of epiphany is symbolically bounded up with Tony's prophetically vile words which at first glance were no more than a mere expression of a moment. The repeated occurrence of the faintly perceived metaphoric moments carrying in itself the profound thematic revelations about human condition and determining the structural development of the novel can be considered as an integral part of a narrative idiosyncrasy in *The Sense of an Ending*. Very similarly to *Anna Karenina*'s depiction of Anna's death, Adrian's suicide is discursively constructed as a moment's action, involved in a narrative context of his deep reflections on a sense of a human existence. The character's meditations on a meaning of life appear most of the times foreshadowed by his almost unconditional attachment to intellectual freedom and liberal thinking, that he properly defines as "a philosopher's active choice", encouraging him to examine the nature of human existence and leading towards life's deliberate renunciation. The moment of life ending seems, nevertheless, to balance somehow this kind of intellectual, strict, empirically based, approach to the sense of a human ending. Extending beyond Adrian's ambiguous scope of a

free will displayed in his voluntary giving up of his own existence, the notion of memory of his action extends beyond the semantic borders of Tony's revelatory letter and even beyond the contours of human life itself. Evoking Anna's suicide as a rationally conceived desire of vengeance, Adrian's reminiscences of his friend Tony registered in a last line of a fragment of his abrupt letter call upon the use of past conditional—"So, for instance, if Tony..." as an open-ended life story. Should it be interpreted as a realization of Tony's responsibility for his vile words? Or is it rather an invitation to reflect upon his future actions? Its deliberately conceived narrative open-ending contradicts the presumably finite sense of an ending which is also the novel's title. In one of his diary entries Tolstoy curiously states that death provides us, in figurative terms, with a possibility of a new birth: "What happiness that reminiscences disappear with death...As things stand, with the annihilation of memory we enter into life with a clean white page upon which one can again write both good and evil" (1903, quoted in Paperno, 2014, p. 89). Ironically, Adrian's acknowledgement of Tony's role in rewriting both an individual and a collective, group, memory process assumes a crucial narrative function in this novel. It invites the reader to reflect upon the strict sense of interconnectedness established between memory and writing. Quoting Irina Paperno's recognition of Tolstoy's mastery in showing how writing literature shapes and reshapes a whole memory process³, it also seems fair to acknowledge Barnes's intrinsic ability to keep reflecting upon a way of how each single work of art carries in itself an everlasting potential for a constant creative renewal, due to its dialogic relationship with a lived life. Thus, for instance, Paperno notices that

Tolstoy did not seem to grasp a contradiction: While rejoicing that individuality and memory disappear with death, he nevertheless imagined that, after death, life-writing might continue, albeit on a blank page. (In other words, death wipes the slate clean but does not bring the end of writing.) (Paperno, 2014, p. 89)

The repetitive occurrence of the intense epiphanic moments shape the thematic and the structural development of both *Anna Karenina* and *The Sense of an Ending*, highlighting their ability of playing seriously with the issue of a literary memory and of life meaning. By establishing a close link between life and literature, Barnes reflects on the importance of keeping a reading process alive, as stated in *The Lemon Table*:

The point, Mr Novelist Barnes, is that Knowing French is different from Grammar, and that this applies to all aspects of life... I am not saying there is life after death, but I am certain of one thing, that when you are thirty or forty you may be very good at Grammar, but by the time you get to be deaf or mad you also need to know French. (Do you grasp what I mean?) (Barnes, 2014, p. 152)

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³ For further readings on this topic, see Assmann's *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, 2010.

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