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January 2014 – December 2014

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EDITORIAL

On the Literary Dangers of Searching for Russians

Karen Hewitt

Oxford University

In Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, a novel with which all my readers must be familiar, there is a wonderful episode in which Dolly goes to visit her dear friend, Anna, who is living with Vronsky on his country estate. On the drive to her friend, Dolly broods over her endless family worries, and looks forward with guilty excitement to meeting Anna who has dared to 'live in sin' with Vronsky. When she arrives at the house she is greeted with warmth and respect by her hosts but she starts to feel uncomfortable. Their life is somehow false, although Dolly cannot exactly define what is wrong and Tolstoy is careful to keep her mood fluctuating from one encounter to another. When they visit the nursery, Dolly is painfully struck by the luxury of the solid English furniture, the supercilious English nanny and the baby who seems to be inadequately dressed. Then Anna and Dolly go downstairs to join the other guests. What does this account have to do with *Footpath* or with our project on English Literature? Let us suppose that I am writing an article about *Anna Karenina* for English readers. The novel is 800 pages long and I have 20 pages for my article. Should I discuss Tolstoy's attitude towards English nannies (or Dolly's attitude towards English furniture) because my readers are English? To do so would be a gross and stupid distortion of a great novel. That detail is only important because of what it tells us about *Anna* – that she has lost her natural Russian instincts, that she has somehow become alien and false. The whole chapter explores this separation of Anna from normality as seen through the simple decent eyes of Dolly. One could certainly discuss Tolstoy's exasperating mixture of psychological truth and self-enforcing prejudices; but an English nanny is but one tiny example.