Levin and mowing

Constantine Levin, a hero of Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina, longs to discover some harmonious part of himself through experiencing the peasant way of life. He believes there to be something profoundly rewarding in the simple act of working as one’s needs dictate. By working with and alongside the peasants for a whole day of mowing in his own fields Levin seeks to gain some of the uncomplicated peace-of-mind that he feels the lower farming classes enjoy. However, Levin’s motives for mowing are distinctly different from those of the hired workers. Levin feels he must mow as a kind of remedy for the type of aristocratic life he has been leading. His first experience with the activity came when he had “ lost his temper and to calm himself had used a remedy of his own — he took a scythe from one of the peasants and himself began mowing.” Levin mows to relieve himself of the pressures brought on by the work of his own class (giving orders to his steward, running his farm indirectly through middle-men). Not only does he mow to soothe his stresses, but also to give himself a greater feeling of connection to his land and farming process. Levin cannot understand why the Russian peasants do not commit themselves entirely to the well-being of the farm — why some men could be so careless as to handle equipment so that it breaks, or why they would defy orders and harvest a field easier to finish than the one they were directed to harvest. The peasants work for their direct benefit: spend a day working in the field, earn a set amount of money. It does not matter to them exactly how much work is accomplished. But for Levin, the work translates more ambiguously into gain. It matters how well the fields are mown, and how much is done by each man. Levin stands to either gain or lose wealth based on the quality and quantity of his hired help. This is a great stress to him, and he longs to be more connected to the land and its

rewards the way the peasants are. Thus Levin’s mowing is soothing to his own work-related stresses, and it builds a positive connection between him and the land. Through mowing, he can work and see a direct result result. The Russian peasants need to mow so that they can provide for themselves and their families. For Levin, mowing is almost as necessary. He does not need to work to be able to eat, but he needs to in order to feel at peace with himself and his own role. However, to the outside eye, a day spent mowing appears to be a sort of aristocratic game. Levin is aware of this fact, and is even intimidated enough so that he is “ in doubt whether to go mowing or not” upon Koznyshev’s arrival. He “ fears his brother might laugh at him.” Levin is embarrassed by his deviance from his upper-class role while he is embarrassed by the high status itself. He experiences a distinct confusion caused by his innate role as “ boss” in conflict with his desire to lose himself as a cog in a wheel. This confusion is perhaps the root of his abnormal relationship to his peasants. He places his property in their control and even decides for a time that he must become one of them. Koznyshev embodies the unconfused aristocratic opinion. He and Levin talk freely about how enjoyable the work can be until he understands that Levin intends to mow “ all day, just like the peasants,” as opposed to sort of playing at it until one gets tired. He reprimands Levin that “ it is splendid physical exercise,” but that he will “ hardly be able to hold out.” Looking at mowing as the benefit of exercise instead of as the necessity of work shows where the aristocratic and peasant classes distinctly veer away from one another. Levin exists as a medium between the two ways of thinking. Levin desires to mow hard the entire day and is driven by the desire to “ keep up” with the peasants and exist as their equal. Levin seeks not only emotional gain, but also the actual

profits of the crop. Levin does posses somewhat of an aristocratic view upon entering into his commitment; he comments: “ I need physical exercise; without it my character gets quite spoilt.” Here, instead of focusing on the value and direct reward of the work, Levin seeks to remedy the physical frustrations of an upper-class, indoor life spent primarily in celibacy. Levin experiences some moments where he looks to mowing as a sort of prescription for his stifled and frustrating life as an aging and wifeless man in a drawing room. Not only does this way of thinking undermine the real work of mowing and the healing properties it can offer, but it shows a temporary misunderstanding between Levin and nature. Mowing can not ultimately cure his frustrations with his present life. Mowing one time, or even several times, can only provide temporary relief from emotional ailments. To be entirely cured by mowing, Levin would have to actually give himself to it completely and become a peasant himself. And while Levin fantasizes about doing just this, he can never commit himself entirely. Even if Levin’s wet nurse were a peasant, his blood still would run blue. Everything Levin wants in life is still wrapped up in the duplication of the aristocratic family life he enjoyed with his mother and father. While he can use mowing to escape what is lacking in his regular life, Koznyshev and the other peasants are ultimately right: mowing can not save an aristocrat. It can only turn him into a peasant. Before he actually begins to mow, Levin is quite clearly confused between the aristocratic and peasant modes of reasoning and necessity. Although the decision to mow causes some anxiety and confusion in Levin, the longer he works at it and the deeper he falls into the rhythm of the scythe, the more he feels at peace. As Levin approaches the field where the men have already been at work and each man has already completed “ his second swath,”

Levin views the peasants “ following each other in a long straggling line, some with coats on, some in their shirts, each swinging his scythe in his own manner.” Levin sees each mower as a distinct individual. He notices specific men he has had working on his farm before. He notices each man’s various clothing, and each man’s distinct mowing technique. He sees each of the peasant mowers, and undoubtedly himself, as distinct and individual men, which in this case has as a connotation of inefficiency, insofar as “ straggling” men cannot mow a field; only a group can. It is only in the midst of the entire day of mowing that Levin is able to leave this view behind, and take on the feeling of a group of men toiling as one and losing themselves in their work. Although there is variance in each peasant’s mowing technique — some are younger and newer and therefore mow more stiffly, while some are older and more seasoned and can mow so well it appears as though they are “ at play” — one comes to realize that it is not the individual that carries importance in the act of mowing. A “ tall old man with a shriveled, beardless face” advises Levin to “ Mind Master! Having put your hand to the plough, don’t turn back!,” suggesting a rejection of the idea of mowing for one’s health or for a game. Levin promises to “ try not to lag behind,” meaning that for the next few hours he will leave his status as “ master” behind, and will instead respect the wisdom and authority that the oldest and most experienced mowers possess. He begins to mow badly at first, because he feels he is being scrutinized as different from the other mowers. He is conscious of the desire to prove himself, and therefore mows too “ vigorously” and with too much thought. His desperate desire to perform well is what keeps him from accomplishing his aim. An experienced mower knows that the best way is to let the scythe “ mow of itself”. As the day progresses,

Levin realizes that he “ must swing the scythe less with [his] arms and more with the whole of [his] body.” This is his first major step toward releasing his unnecessary pretensions of proving himself and his own level of skill. The change from working with a specialized (and fairly weak) selection of limbs to mowing with the whole of one’s body implies the end of acting out of the strained section of the mind and body and the beginning of using one’s entire being. Soon after Levin’s realization, he begins to give himself entirely over to his task. As Titus, the man Levin has placed in charge, mows faster and longer, seemingly as a challenge, Levin begins to think “ of nothing and [desire] nothing, except not to lag behind and do his work as well as possible.” Nothing exists at all but the task of mowing in front of and all around him. All of Levin’s senses become dominated by mowing, and he hears “ only the swishing of the scythes and [sees] only the convex half-circle of the mown piece before him, and the grasses and heads of flowers falling in waves about the blade of his scythe.” Mowing becomes all of nature. The sounds and shapes in the field are made by the scythe, and the grass and flowers exist only when the scythe strikes them. They move in “ waves,” a term that alludes to another great part of nature: the ocean, whose movements can be imitated by the swinging of the scythe. In a sense, the mowing field begins to embody the entire world. With mowing as the world and Levin working in it, the entire experience becomes bathed in innocence and purity. Nothing matters but the work. At one point Levin is “ suddenly conscious of a pleasant coolness on his hot perspiring shoulders, without knowing what it was or whence it came.” Such description bears some resemblance to biblical content, and finally to Eden. Levin “ look[s] to the sky” to find its origin. Everything is beautiful and merciful to Levin. He

works hard, and eventually there comes rest at the end of the swath. The work, the rest, and the swinging of the scythe itself take on a certain rhythm that runs through to Levin's core. In this state of peacefulness, the scythe begins to " mow by itself," and the work is really more like " play." Submerging oneself in this mowing world is no longer a chore. The work becomes its own reward when one can become so close with it. Even the kvas (" lukewarm water with green stuff floating in it and a flavor of the rusty tin box") tastes better to Levin than anything ever has, because of the work he has done to earn it. The rhythm involved in the actual swing of the scythe, the steps across the fallen grass in Titus' footprints, and the rests at the end of each row create a harmonious experience. Another part of the rhythm of mowing is the respect given to the aged and experienced. Where a younger and stronger man might normally be valued as optimal for physical labor in another field, in the art of mowing, a man who is aged, experienced and therefore skilled is appreciated as the most valuable. The emphasis on experience goes to show that mowing is indeed an art where skill may be valued over brute force. The rhythm of the planting season and the harvesting season, the syncopated work and rest of each meal break and the mowing of each swath: each year that comes makes a man wiser and more valuable in the field. Where a young man might mow with a " strained kind of movement" as if in " feverish labor" and not be able to " change the motion of his body and at the same time observe what lay before him," an old man might " go along, holding himself erect" and cut the juicy grass with " a precise and even motion that seems to cost him no more effort than swinging his arms when walking." To these peasants of age and experience, mowing has become something unlike toil. For these men the " scythe

seem[s] to mow of itself.” It is this kind of working nirvana that Levin strives for and is able to achieve in fleeting moments. Levin is able to leave his identity as the “ master” behind, and is taken under the wing of the old peasant in front of him. Levin trusts him to decide the correct rhythm of the proceedings, (deciding when it is dinner time, or what pace to mow at) and does not struggle to be in control as he does with his steward and in other aspects of farming. Levin even makes the decision not to go home for dinner and highlight the difference between him and the other mowers. Instead he elects to stay with the old man and share his rye bread mash, and then nap with him in the grass “ regardless of the flies” and “ of the crawling insects that ticked his perspiring face and body.” Levin gives even his body over to nature. By dining with the old man and the other peasants, especially by actually eating the old man’s food, Levin obliterates the uncomfortable distance of class or status between himself and the others. He seems to establish himself as a young mower in need of guidance, not as a master who is playing at laboring. Although the act of mowing can not cure Levin’s aristocratic self, by submerging himself in the natural order and rhythm of the peasants’ work, Levin, in effect, temporarily becomes a peasant himself.