9. One final example, the account of Anna's suicide in VII, 31.

... что-то огромное, неумолимое толкнуло ее в голову и потащило за спину. “Господи, проши мне со все!” проговорила она, чувствуя невозможность борьбы. Мужичок, приговаривая что-то, работал над железом. И свеча, при которой она читала исполненную тревог, обманов, горя и зла книгу, вспыхнула более ярким, чем когда-нибудь, светом, и осветила ей все то, что прежде было во мраке, затерпела, стала меркнуть и навсегда потухла.

Tolstoy begins with the horrendous image of the terrible, inexorable, crushing wheels of the train, advancing and colliding with Anna’s body. She has time for one last prayer and then surrenders to the inevitable. The next sentence is ambiguous: there may be a real workman whose presence Anna dimly perceives, linking him with an ominous figure that has appeared in her life several times before, both in reality and in dreams, going back to the workman crushed by a train at the very beginning of the novel (and the beginning of her acquaintanceship with Vronsky); or this may be only a fantasy, a creature of Anna’s soon-to-be-extinguished brain. Finally, Tolstoy invokes an entirely metaphorical candle by whose light Anna can now read, in her last moments of consciousness, the entire “book” of her life, before the candle goes out forever.

I will intersperse my comments on the translations in brackets within the texts.

PV: ... something huge and implacable pushed at her head [although “pushed at” may be a correct rendition of толкнуло в, it does not seem to me adequate to convey the collision between the wheels and Anna’s head] and dragged over her [this phrase too seems to me obscure. The wheels could drag the body, but how could they drag over it? And the “за спину” has been entirely omitted.] “Lord, forgive me for everything!”

TRANSLATIONS COMPARED
2. Louise and Aylmer Maude, revised by George Gibian. 2nd ed. (N.Y.: W. W. Norton, 1995). Hereafter MG.
5. David Magarshack (Signet Classics, 1961). Hereafter DM.
she said, feeling the impossibility of any struggle. A little muzhik, muttering to himself, was working over some iron." [This rendition is perhaps too literal, since rabotat' nad chem-to usually means to work on something. The "iron" possibly indicates the rails, as MG and RE render it (illegitimately, in my opinion), apparently assuming that this muzhichok is really present. But the word "iron" is needed, as an echo of Anna's previous encounters with this workman, real and oneiric, in which the word "iron" invariably occurs, sometimes in French: "Il faut le battre le fer..." The Russian term for "railroad," zheleznaia doroga, "iron road," is also relevant, as well as countless metaphors about the hardness of iron.] And the candle by the light of which she had been reading that book filled with anxiety, deceptions, grief and evil, flared up brighter than ever [why not "with a brighter light than ever," as in the original?] lit up for her all that had once been in darkness, sputtered, grew [began to grow] dim, and went out for ever. [It is interesting that all the translators change Tolstoy's word order here, making the sentence conclude with the powerful word "forever." This is understandable if "potukhla" is rendered with such a low-style term as "went out"; "forever went out" seems too anticlimactic. However, "was forever extinguished" might be dignified enough.]

MG: . . . something huge and relentless struck her on the head and dragged her down [again, za spinu is omitted]. "God forgive me everything!" she said, feeling the impossibility of struggling. A little peasant muttering something was working at the rails [see above concerning these rails]. The candle, by the light of which she had been reading that book filled with anxieties, deception, grief and evil flared up with a brighter light than before, lit up for her all that had before been dark, flickered, began to grow dim, and went out for ever. [Quite good on the physical images, but the change from "iron" to "rails" is editing, not translating.]

GKB: . . . something huge and merciless struck her on the head and dragged her down on her back. "Lord, forgive me everything!" she said, feeling it impossible to struggle. A peasant muttering something was working above [on?] the iron. And the light of the candle by which
she had read the book filled with troubles, falsehoods, sorrow, and evil flared up more brightly [with a brighter light] than ever before, lighted up for her all that had been shrouded in darkness [the addition of this shroud seems to me unnecessary], flickered, began to grow dim, and was quenched forever. [I have some qualms about the word “quench” in the meaning of “extinguish.” In this sense it is marked “chiefly poet. flared up more brightly [with a brighter light] than ever before, lighted up for her all that had been shrouded in darkness [the addition of this shroud seems to me unnecessary], flickered, began to grow dim, and was quenched forever. [I have some qualms about the word “quench” in the meaning of “extinguish.” In this sense it is marked “chiefly poet or rhet.” in the Oxford dictionary, whereas Tolstoy’s potukhla has no such overtones.]

RE: . . . something huge and relentless struck her on the head and dragged her down on her back. “God forgive me everything!” she murmured [Tolstoy says simply “said”], feeling the impossibility of struggling. A little peasant, muttering something, was working at the rails [again!]. And the candle by which she had been reading the book filled with trouble and deceit, sorrow and evil, flared up with a brighter light, illuminating for her everything that before had been enshrouded [again that shroud!] in darkness, flickered, grew dim, and went out for ever.

DM: . . . something huge and implacable struck her on the head and dragged her down on her back. “Lord, forgive me everything!” she cried [i.e., said], feeling the impossibility of struggling. The little peasant, muttering something, was working over [on] the iron. And the candle, by the light of which she had been reading the book filled with anxieties, deceits, grief, and evil, flared up with a brighter light than before, lit up for her all that had hitherto been shrouded [again!] in darkness, flickered, began to grow dim, and went out forever.

JC: . . . something huge and implacable struck her on the head and dragged her down [the identity with MG is perhaps a little suspicious]. “Lord, forgive me everything!” she murmured [said], feeling the impos-
sibility of struggling. A little peasant was working at the rails, muttering something to himself [the changed word order does not improve the passage, and again the concrete “rails” seems to preempt the decision as to whether there is actually a workman present]. And the candle by which she had been reading that book that is [does this added phrase imply that the book is common to all?] filled with anxiety, deceit, sorrow, and evil flared up with a brighter flame [too concrete] than before, lighted up everything for her that had previously been in darkness, flickered, dimmed, and went out forever.

None of the translations is flawless, but I am inclined to award the round to GKB: the physical events are clearer than in PV, the “iron” is preserved, and there is no shroud. My misgivings about “quench” are not strong.

One could doubtless continue, almost ad infinitum, adducing examples and passing judgment on the translations. Perhaps more illustrations would lead to different opinions. However, from the cases examined here I reach the following conclusions:

1. None of the existing translations is actively bad. From any of them the ordinary English-speaking reader would obtain a reasonably full and adequate experience of the novel. The English in all of them sounds like English, not translationese. I found very few real errors and only a few omissions, and of the latter most were only a few words or phrases. One’s choice among the existing translations must therefore be based on nuances, subtleties, and refinements. . . .