Snakes at Yasnaya Polyana

There are no cats at the Tolstoy estate at Yasnaya Polyana. Curled, or rather, coiled in the sunny patches in the Tolstoy house, protecting it from pestilential infestations, instead of the expected feline emblems of domesticity, there are now, and were in Tolstoy’s time, snakes: large garter snakes that rub their scales against the ankles of readers in Tolstoy’s library and usurp the warm windowsills and sunny spots usually occupied in country houses by somnolent, contented cats. The ancestors of these ophidian house pets were adopted by Tolstoy’s ailurophobic wife, Sophia Andreevna, to rid the house of rodents.¹

Picturing snakes in the center of Yasnaya Polyana home life disrupts our mental image of the Tolstoy family idylls in the years before Tolstoy’s conversion to a radical Christianity and seems all too suggestive of what may have transpired after his conversion. To the extent that we allow knowledge of an author’s life to color our reading of his works, the presence of snakes in Tolstoy’s life radically alters the imaginary scenes with which we may have illustrated our readings of his novels. Those who have seen the carved wooden portico of the Yasnaya Polyana house have easily recognized the setting for the domestic scene in Anna Karenina where the Shcherbatsky women make jam on the porch. The attendance of snakes at such a family event seems as disruptive and disjunctive as the insinuation of the original intruder into Eden.

Imagining an unsettling presence among the unremarked details of daily life depicted by art or literature among other things chal-
lenges the very premise of representational realism, and the promise of realism to tell the whole story or show the whole picture. Since we do not expect trivial objects to have more than a relative, transient value, their original meaning or importance is often irrecoverable by viewers from another time and place. Thus, the simple minutiae of daily life may suddenly acquire potent symbolic power when considered from a different perspective. Film adaptations of novels exploit the impact of visualizing trivia by transforming trivial details into symbols; for example, in a sequence from the Soviet film version of *Hamlet*, Ophelia is shown being strapped into a metal corset and dress form. These standard accoutrements of court dress are used by the director to signify Ophelia’s feelings of confinement and oppression, which precipitate her madness. They also prefigure the direct cause of her death, when “... her garments, heavy with drink, / Pull’d the poor wretch from her melodious lay / To muddy death” (IV, vii, 180–182).

Making an emblem out of a domestic detail and then rereading an author’s work to note an idiosyncratic or even fetishistic usage of
these same details in the text has often been the work of psychoanalytic criticism. Taking a psychobiographical approach would make the snake in the grass, the viper in the bosom, the serpent on the hearth, into images suggestive of the well-known strife in the Tolstoy household and, in larger terms, of the falling out and mutual recriminations between man and woman and their fall into the sex roles determined for them by the God of the Old Testament. The serpentine presence can easily be construed as the impetus to carnal knowledge; a demonic, sinuous aspect of sexuality, repressed into its animal avatar, yet nonetheless given the run of homes and gardens.

Much has been made of Tolstoy’s biography and attitudes toward sexuality in the literary criticism of his greatest works, but this is not the use to which I wish to put the image of snakes at Yasnaya Polyana. Instead, I would like to emphasize their presence as a phatic symbol, to call attention to our own habits of reading, picturing, and imag(in)ing, to welcome the sense of disturbance we may feel when the reality does not fit our preconceived image, and to direct our attention to the ways in which Tolstoy and his art have been stereotyped both in the biographies and in the criticism.

This book participates in the current critical revision of Tolstoy initiated by Richard Gustafson’s challenge to the traditional view that bifurcates Tolstoy’s oeuvre and aesthetics into two estranged pre- and postconversion periods. Recently, Rimvydas Silbajoris has extended the implications of reading Tolstoy’s art and aesthetics as a unified text. Both Gustafson and Gary Saul Morson have noted Tolstoy’s deviation from the conventions of European literature and questioned his placement in that canon: Gustafson creates the concept of “emblematic realism” to accommodate the symbolic features of Tolstoy’s art, while Morson institutes a theory of prosaics in his studies of Tolstoy’s resistance to the strictures of causality and narrative.

The thesis of this book is first that Tolstoy’s literary-historical placement at the apex of realism is problematic, and second that Anna Karenina reflects Tolstoy’s polemic with realist art and his quest for mythopoeisis—two key elements of his aesthetic philosophy that are made explicit in his later treatise, What Is Art? By reading Anna Karenina from this perspective, a different interpretation of the novel
emerges. This interpretation argues that just as *War and Peace* was the place where Tolstoy explored the failures and dangers of causal narrative representation (history), so *Anna Karenina* problematizes the theme of visual representation to critique the aesthetic category of the beautiful, the framed, the embodied, and the feminine.

As I pursued this approach to the novel, I often encountered shocked incredulity from the majority of colleagues and students with whom I shared my impressions. My thesis was shipwrecked before I ever set sail, the response went, because Tolstoy was a known sexist in his private life, in his journals, and in his novels, especially *Anna Karenina*. This view is deeply entrenched in the criticism as well. Indeed, with one or two exceptions, the critical consensus is that Anna dies at the point of Tolstoy’s punishing pen, and that the novel upholds what is perceived to be Tolstoy’s conservative position on the woman question. Thus, in order to be able to explicate my reading of the novel, I was forced to challenge the critical consensus of Tolstoy’s novel as misogynist, a move that necessitated a larger evaluation of the charges against Tolstoy as a sexist. My extended survey of Tolstoy’s thinking on the political aspects of women’s representation reveals the ways in which, in *Anna Karenina*, he makes the theme of the artistic representation of women stand for issues in aesthetic philosophy.

Thus I find that, in *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy conflates the aesthetic question—what is the beautiful and can it be represented? what is its nature? what can it show us?—with the woman question—what is woman and what is her proper role in life?—to interrogate the literary conventions of realism and the social conventions of romantic love and marriage. *Framing “Anna Karenina”* thus refers first to the literary-historical framing context and the frame of expectations and critical conformation that focuses our reading. The frame is also the “frame-up” of Anna by a critical tradition that condemns her and also frames Tolstoy as a misogynist. Finally and most important, the frame is Tolstoy’s act of framing within the text that makes Anna, the heroine, and *Anna*, the novel, a work of art. Her status as objet d’art and the novel’s emphasis on the visual as the venue for knowledge make *Anna Karenina* a novel about the boundaries of vision and a tragic narrative of beauty framed.
My approach to the novel will be tropological, intertextual, and feminist. Tropological in the examination of tropes, figures, and imagery in the novel, especially those related to the themes identified above. Intertextual in the exploration of these figures' intertextual resonances, particularly with the Victorian novel that *Anna Karenina* both imitates and resists, and with the folktale, fable, and myth—the genres Tolstoy emulated and valorized in his quest for a universalist art that began at the time of writing *Anna Karenina* (1873–76), when he was engaged in compiling fables and parables for his *Primer* (1875). Feminist in that the themes of the novel—the fallen woman, the question of marriage, and the aesthetic problem of the beautiful versus the sublime—demand a critical practice, a canon of interpretive strategies, and a vocabulary for reading with attention to these issues that make feminist criticism most appropriate. Furthermore, the direction of much recent criticism of Tolstoy and of *Anna Karenina* forces the reconsideration of Tolstoy's own relationship to feminism along with the reevaluation of his novel as a misogynist text.

My methodology will be the close reading of key passages, some of which are notable for considerable critical traversal, others of which have been overlooked or have usually received a more literal interpretation. Each chapter is intended to stand alone as a self-contained essay, and this book may be read in that fashion. My practice here has been rhetorical and associative; my argument does not rely on a linear, chronological progression. Rather I intend to explore each issue thematically in all of the theoretical, textual, and contextual complexity that it demands.

The feminist intention of my close reading is not to argue for the existence of a repressed, subversive text of gendered imagery that “exposes” Tolstoy. When feminist criticism pursues this line of interpretation, it sometimes demonstrates its affinities with psychoanalytic criticism in shifting the focus from the text to the author and his or her unconscious. I do not subscribe to the view that the strands of imagery many critics (not necessarily feminist or psychoanalytic) have noted in the novel can be relegated to the sphere of the authorial unconscious. Rather, I argue that these “labyrinths of linkages” belong to the active powers of the creative imagination. I shall therefore
demonstrate that Tolstoy’s subtle attention to the visual field in this novel directly engages his theme of beauty framed.

Part I of this book, “Passe-Partout: Tolstoy’s Image,” explores and explodes the mythologizing that has formed Tolstoy’s biography and has served as the supportive, interior frame, or passe-partout, for critical readings of the novels. Chapter 1, “The Myth of Misogyny: De-Moralizing Tolstoy,” questions the traditional view of Tolstoy as a misogynist holding reactionary views on the woman question. Chapter 2, “The Judgment of Anna Karenina: Feminist Criticism and the Image of the Heroine,” considers the ways in which the image of Tolstoy as misogynist has shaped critical evaluations of the ideology of his novels and his representations of women, particularly in Anna Karenina. The concluding chapter of this section rejects the popular view of a sexually repressed, misogynist Tolstoy and instead upholds a perception of the author as a conscious, aware, and caustic critic of social institutions, particularly those based on gender. This view of Tolstoy is supportable when we allow that the feminist views he expressly stated in his postconversion years were forming prior to his conversion and are emergent and discernible in his literary works. In his statements and literary works of the postconversion years, Tolstoy quite explicitly rejects the concept of a sexually consummated Christian marriage and declares chastity to be the ideal Christian state. In The Kreutzer Sonata (1889), What Then Must We Do (1886), and Resurrection (1899), he repeatedly compares the married women of high society to prostitutes and characterizes marriage as a form of institutionalized prostitution that oppresses and enslaves women.

I am therefore also employing the serpents on Tolstoy’s hearth to emblematize the disquieting darkness Tolstoy perceived at the heart of the domestic idyll, the problematic nature of the sexual contract of marriage and the resulting conflicts of domestic life. In his earliest depiction of family life in Childhood (1852), Tolstoy draws on Victorian—specifically Dickensian—models and conventions to idealize and romanticize domesticity and family life. Yet even in his first sustained exploration of the contractual marital relationship at the heart of the family in Family Happiness (1856), Tolstoy does not hesitate to
probe the negative, darker side of sexual politics and the failures of romantic love through its bourgeois institutionalization in marriage. Although his masterpiece, War and Peace (1863–69), may seem to conclude on a note of connubial bliss, this mood is undercut by the apparent dissolution of the main characters’ potential for heroic action and the limitation of their ultimate interests and passions to the everyday world of mundane events and concerns. In returning to the theme of the family, marriage, and sexuality in Anna Karenina (1873–76), Tolstoy again reveals his affinities for his beloved Victorian authors Dickens, Eliot, and Trollope, who, while exalting the Victorian ideal of the family, simultaneously, if not always consciously, expose its pathology. Yet Tolstoy carries the exploration one step beyond the Victorians in addressing the issues of sexuality and the psychological effects of repression in direct and explicit terms, especially by the time of writing The Kreutzer Sonata. The Victorian literary influences on Tolstoy are summarized in chapter 3, “Beyond the Motivations of Realism: Tolstoy, the Victorian Novel, and Iconic Aesthetics,” where I examine the ways in which the conventions of the Victorian novel are adapted and polemicized, even parodied, in Anna Karenina. In its exploration of interiority, Anna Karenina turns away from the textual conventions of realism to a different, more mythic mode that allows the unsuppressed exploration of the most disturbing and anarchic forces of the human psyche. And in its use of imagery and tragic narrative structure, the novel itself violates the conventions of realist fiction. Tolstoy’s revision of realism in Anna Karenina marks the beginning of a development in his thinking that would culminate in his infamous rejection of Western aesthetic theory in What Is Art? (1898) and his formulation of an original theory of art termed here “iconic aesthetics.” “Tolstoy’s Image” thus refers both to the popular image of Tolstoy and to Tolstoy’s theory of the image and representation, an aesthetic that revises Western bourgeois aesthetic philosophy by rejecting the traditional categories of the sublime and the beautiful. Instead, Tolstoy deconstructs Western philosophy to reveal the gender bias implicit in its bifurcated categories, and draws on his native Eastern Orthodox philosophical tradition to create a super-
sublime category, that of universal Christian love that transcends gender and individual difference in promoting a community of aesthetic response.

Many critics have observed that Tolstoy’s views on art and aesthetics are “expressed more powerfully in the narration of Anna Karenina than in his theoretical statements on art.” While, as Gary Saul Morson has demonstrated, War and Peace is a work concerned with the failures of representation in the formation of narratives—histories and causalities—in Anna Karenina Tolstoy uses the visual—pictures, images, icons, female beauty—to interrogate the human need to aestheticize meaning. We look to narrative structures or frames to consolidate meaning, to square off and finish the pattern. We as readers are frustrated by unfinished business; we demand afterwords, like little tassels of bright, glossy thread at the tapestry’s end, that signal the potential for continuity while satisfying our need for a feeling of closure. In fact, in life and in death, we cannot ever know the end of the story. The forces each individual sets in motion continue far beyond his or her physical presence in life, so that in sensing the limit—death—we also sense limitlessness.

The perception of the unrepresentable beyond the borders of representation is termed the experience of the sublime in aesthetic discourse. In its most widely accepted, Kantian definition, the sublime is understood as that moment of the intellect’s failure to know and represent that thereby stimulates awareness of the unknowable sublime lying beyond the limits of consciousness. Since, according to Kant, it is only at the moment of confronting its own limitations that consciousness begins to apprehend what lies beyond it, the region of the boundary, the border, the frame, is valorized. In aesthetic philosophical discourse beginning with Burke, the category of the sublime is thus elevated over the more simple, mundane category of the beautiful. The sublime becomes invested with heroic, masculine attributes, while the beautiful is characterized as small, trivial, feminine. Furthermore, the model of aesthetic perception in the discourse of aesthetic philosophy establishes a male gaze directed at a female subject and thus injects prurience and eroticism into the play of disinterest and admiration. Tolstoy’s treatment of these aesthetic categories
in *Anna Karenina* and in his later treatise on aesthetics, *What Is Art?*, proceeds from his recognition of the engendering of aesthetics and the enslavement of beauty within that tradition of thought.

In *What Is Art?*, Tolstoy characterizes the aesthetic category of beauty as the subjective response to the physically pleasurable. The implicit and traditional association of the aesthetic category of beauty with the feminine in Western aesthetic philosophy makes the representation of women in works of art problematic, since the category is devalued in contrast to the sublime. The representation of a woman as a work of art within a work of art therefore generates a *mise en abîme* that forces the reader’s awareness of both the aesthetic question and the highly sexualized status of beauty. I read Tolstoy’s depiction of Anna as constituting that moment in the literary tradition of treating heroines as objets d’art that exposes the fatal dangers of entrapment in physical beauty and draws attention to its own practice.4 Chapter 4, “The Execution of Anna Karenina: Heroines Framed and Hung,” compares Tolstoy to the modernists Proust and Joyce to demonstrate that Tolstoy shared their recognition of the Victorian blindness to the implications of beauty framed. Like Proust and Joyce, Tolstoy elaborated upon the Victorian literary convention of describing women as artworks whose beauty so often precipitated their ineluctable fall and execution. Even more than Proust and Joyce, Tolstoy indicts the pornographic modalities of the Western aesthetic tradition and recasts the portrait of the beautiful in iconic terms. The way in which he rewrites his heroine’s end suggests that although Anna shares the fate that had come to be obligatory for the adulterous heroines of nineteenth-century literature, Tolstoy reinvested her suicide with a heroic and philosophical tenor usually reserved for male suicides. Thus, Anna’s suicide figures both as an example of the victimization of woman and as a heroic step toward transcendence of the beautiful body in pursuit of a spiritual truth that cannot be contained.

The escape from the plane of the body to the spiritual is reflected in the concept of the sublime aesthetic response, the illimitable beyond limits that produces a sense of awe and wonder in the observer. The pursuit of such transcendence in art is characteristic of Romanticism or lyric poetry. It is not usually considered native to realist aes-
thetics. Yet the sublime, obliquely redefined by Tolstoy in What Is Art? in purely spiritual terms as the union of souls in aesthetic response, is arguably the keystone of Tolstoyan aesthetics and is a mode he often achieves in his greatest lyrical passages. Among the examples we might readily think of are Natasha’s folk dance in “Uncle’s” hut or Nikolai Rostov’s feeling of transcendence at hearing his sister sing that transports him into a state of pure joy, despite his misery over his gambling debts. The ultimate example, Lyovin’s feelings of awe and compassion before Anna Karenina’s portrait, will receive extended treatment in this study. It is no accident that characters in Tolstoy’s novels experience the sublime in response to works of art or render their perceptions of life sublime by turning them into works of art. Tolstoy’s own art is sublime in showing us the sublime powers of all great art. Indeed, his artistry and his aesthetic theory move beyond the sublime, working past the problematically engendered categories of traditional Western aesthetics toward what I term a lyrical, iconic aesthetics. 

The presence of lyric moments in Tolstoy’s novels, especially moments that rely for their effect on stopping time and the flow of narrative via the description of artworks or of natural or feminine beauty framed and thus rendered artistic (the trope of ekphrasis), is one aspect of Tolstoy’s iconic aesthetics. By iconic I mean that the framed image achieves the status of the visionary, and its elements become symbolic in a manner that reaches beyond the text to transport the reader beyond pictured reality. Although we may find lyric moments in many so-called realist novels, Tolstoy’s employment of the lyric and iconic, combined with his stated contempt for most realist art, makes his usual literary-historical status as a high realist problematic. In fact, I will argue in this book that Tolstoy should not be considered a realist at all; rather, I would call him a peri-modern, or presymbolist author. Nowhere are his proclivities for symbolism more apparent than in his manipulation of textual details in Anna Karenina. The random minutiae and telling details for which Tolstoy is celebrated indeed create the “effect of the real” but also, upon close reading, interact to reiterate, at the subliminal level, the thematic of the novel. Thus Tolstoy’s details sharpen the reader’s focus on the texture and
warp of prosaic life while acquiring the status of legitimate symbols integrated into a larger pattern.

Parts II and III of this book, “Frame: Image and the Boundaries of Vision in Anna Karenina” and “Illuminations: Reading Detail and Design in Anna Karenina,” examine four examples of sustained imagery sequences in the novel, to pursue the way in which each strand of imagery symbolizes the themes of the novel: the woman question, representation, illusion, and enlightenment. The themes of art, beauty, vision, and the visionary are addressed in chapter 5, “A Painted Lady: The Poetics of Ekphrasis,” which notes those scenes and moments in the novel where artworks, artists, and aesthetic philosophy come under direct discussion. In chapter 6, “Knife, Book, and Candle: The Resisting Russian Reader,” Tolstoy’s concerns with representation are shown to be reflected equally in the topos of reading. Chapter 7, “The Woman with a Shadow: Fables of Demon and Psyche,” follows throughout the novel the subtle use of a mythic and folkloric subtext that addresses the problems of vision as blindness, crime, and punishment determined by gender. With his evocation of the myth of Amor and Psyche, Tolstoy reiterates the theme of appearance versus reality in a mythological manner intended to explore the nature of female heroism. Chapter 8, “Picking a Mushroom and Escaping the Marriage Plot,” suggests that Tolstoy creates a folkloric episode based on Russian folk customs and courtship rituals to counter the rhetoric of literary, especially Victorian, fictional courtship and to suggest an escape for women from the entrapment of that conventional courtship plot that leads either to the strictures of marriage or to the fatalities of passionate, adulterous love.

Thus, I will argue that in Anna Karenina Tolstoy rewrites the Victorian realist, domestic novel according to his own aesthetic principles, subverting mimesis and realist aesthetics by means of direct discussion and representation of art and artists in the novel, the insertion of subtexts drawn from the genres of myth and folklore, and the creation of an elaborate system of imagery that illustrates his themes and serves to elevate symbolism over verisimilitude, iconicity over conventionality.

This study contends that Anna Karenina expresses and exempli-
fies Tolstoy's iconic aesthetics; his exalted transcendent vision and his employment of linkages of symbolic detail raise his artistic theory and practice to a more mythological, symbolist, or postrealist register. His concern with the status of beauty—natural and human—as an aesthetic category and as a sociosexual construct informs both his aesthetic views and his sociopolitical views on the Victorian woman question, arguably the two dominating themes of Anna Karenina.