PART I

Passe-Partout: Tolstoy’s Image
Portrait of Leo Nikolaevich Tolstoy by I. E. Repin, 1901
The Myth of Misogyny: De-Moralizing Tolstoy

The Image of the Author

We are concerned about the image of the author because it shapes some of the preconceptions with which we approach a work of literature. Jacques Derrida has termed this area of reader response the *passe-partout*; that is, the interior frame or matte used to block and support the central canvas in painting.¹ The outer frame of the artwork demarcates an interior world separated from the external world and focuses our attention on the artistic status of what is enclosed; as Henry James characterizes it, the frame is “the charming oval that helps any arrangement of objects to become a picture.”² Thus, the frame has been defined as a functional marker indicating the “transition from the real world to the world of representation”³ or “the shift from the external to the internal point of view.”⁴ Yet the frame has an existence that is separate from what it encloses, as Iurii Lotman suggests:

A picture frame may be an independent work of art, but it is located on the *other* side of the line demarcating the canvas, and we do not see it when we look at the picture. We need only to examine the frame as a kind of independent text in order for the canvas to disappear from the field of our artistic vision; it ends up on the other side of the boundary.⁵
The frame and the work of art do not interpenetrate and thus they visually exclude one another.

By contrast, the *passe-partout* conceived of figuratively could be understood as the critical consensus that defines the artwork in advance of our reading. To the extent that it establishes a set of expectations in the reader, it permeates and suborns the artwork, becoming an accretion of meaning on the meta level that in turn infuses the work with meaning. In Derrida's summation:

Neither inside nor outside, [the *passe-partout*] spaces itself without letting itself be framed, but it does not stand outside the frame. It works the frame, makes it work, lets it work, gives it work to do... 

*Between* the outside and the inside, between the external and the internal edge-line, the framer and the framed, the figure and the ground, form and content, signifier and signified. . . . What appears, then, . . . only appears to do without the *passe-partout* on which it banks.6

For example, what we have been led to expect about a work of art constitutes its *passe-partout*; we have already begun a dialogue with a text before we ever hear it. Just as the theater audiences of classical antiquity were well acquainted with the plots of Greek tragedy before they attended a performance, so many modern readers begin a novel like *Anna Karenina* well aware of the tragic outcome of the story. In the modern literary tradition where the author's persona is as important a mask as those we see on stage, we are also usually aware of the author's own biography and philosophy, what Boris Tomashovsky termed the "literary functions" of biography.7 And we furthermore need to distinguish between the author's own masquerade and the critical mythologizing that follows upon it. Thus, the *passe-partout* for a Tolstoy novel engages us in a dialogue with Tolstoyan morality and ethics, while his Christian beliefs become constituting factors in our reading, determining our hermeneutic procedures and often demoralizing us by turning us off in advance to the sanctimony of a moralistic text. Yet, despite the dangers posed by the pitfalls of the "biographical and intentional fallacies"8 and the unconscious abyss exposed by a psychoanalytically informed criticism, any reading of
Tolstoy’s works must take into account the raw material of Tolstoy’s biography. In addition, we must also consider the meta-biography, the myth or legend of Leo Nikolaevich, as it has been constructed to date.

The problems of literary biography and of creating a literary biography are themselves obscure. What are the links we would like to establish between the “life” and “works”? Between “theory” and “praxis”? What place do we give to the author’s “unconscious” intention? Should authorial intention be a privileged category at all? Reading in a postmodern era when the author is considered to be dead and theoretical constructs based on linguistic indeterminacy are ubiquitous, shouldn’t we liberate ourselves from the author and authority and simply revel in the *jouissance* of infinitely available textual nuances? Or must we deconstruct the text from the perspective of the author’s own logocentrism, exposing or questioning ethics and choices so that we place ourselves in a position to forgive (or not to forgive) Tolstoy or Fyodor Dostoevsky or, in recent debate, Paul de Man? Often, the reader seems forced into the Solomonic procedure of splitting the author in two—man and artist—in order to prove how much we love him, a position resisted in Gary Saul Morson’s discussion of Dostoevsky’s anti-Semitism. What kinds of critics will we be if we accept the convention of seeing double: Tolstoy the (poor) thinker as opposed to Tolstoy the (great) artist? The problem of measuring the distance between an author’s extraliterary statements and his artistic works, or between his life and his art, is further complicated in the case of Tolstoy by his attempt at Christian reformation, the process of overcoming the gulf between *theoria* and *praxis* that tormented the great author throughout his life and precipitated his flight toward death.

We do not often question the extent to which we are influenced by reading within a community, the degree to which our readings may be predetermined by the *passe-partout* of critical reviews, the consensus of a reading body that has stamped its impress on the text before us and thus preempts our reading and directs our response. In responding to the critical community on the meta level, we create a meta-*passe-partout* that analyzes and interprets the *passe-partout*
built around, beneath, through, and within the original text. The *passe-partout* is a halo of sanctified response that illuminates the text; the meta-*passe-partout* is our attempt to read the text separately from the critical interpretation that overlays it, like prying the painted wooden icon free from the gold, gem-encrusted filigree that conceals the figures beneath. Our meta-*passe-partout* must take into account the sociocultural context that created the *passe-partout*, as well as our own sociocultural frame and the types of mental habits that result from our ideological formation.

In approaching *Anna Karenina*, we necessarily question whether Tolstoy’s novel is not misogynist based on our reading of Tolstoy’s life as the biography of a sexist whose documented contempt for women engenders a misogynist representation of female characters in his œuvre. It is not my intention in this chapter to resolve these questions or to reconsider every instance of alleged misogyny in Tolstoy’s life and art in an exhaustive fashion. Rather, I intend to question the framework within which such viewpoints have been formulated in order to liberate the novel and its heroine from a predetermined, automatic reading. I will begin by challenging the very meaning of the term *misogynist*, as it is understood within a late twentieth-century, postfeminist perspective, and will suggest that we ought to reconsider what may have constituted misogyny in Tolstoy’s time as opposed to our own.

One failure of feminist deconstructionist criticism has been a reluctance to allow historical or cultural relativity to ameliorate the degree to which we perceive representations to be essentializing or stereotypical. Critical practice that seeks to expose gender bias might begin by exploring with greater precision what specificity of discourse or representation may be determined to be misogynistic. For example, changing the gender of the speaker in a text frequently changes our perception of bias. Or, to phrase it differently, a feminist poetics is needed that can locate misogynist elements in textual discourse with as much expertise as it does when following the course of much psychoanalytically and sociologically based feminist criticism that projects misogynist bias into the text on the basis of extratextual evidence. Feminist criticism of the latter variety often fails to discrimi-
nate between popular conceptions of misogyny and feminist definitions of misogyny. Is the opposite of misogyny necessarily feminism? Are the two categories mutually exclusive? Is there any intermediate mode of thought between the two extremes of misogyny and feminism, and how would the gradations be evaluated? Feminist psychoanalytic criticism rarely finds it necessary to consider the degree to which misogyny may be conscious or unconscious: it assumes a male chauvinism so profound that any sympathy for the opposite sex in an author’s writings could be controverted by the damning evidence of his personal life.¹¹

Although romanticism is partly responsible for creating the icon of the artistic genius, and thus for elevating the literary biography—as lived and as mythologized—to the level of an artistic creation, or even allowing it to supersede artistic creation, romantic sensibility also juxtaposes the life of the soul to the life of the body: as Rimbaud proclaimed, “Real life is elsewhere.” Much of modern criticism has shied away from the kinds of questions posed here. It is only as a result of the poststructuralist sensibility that deconstructs all intention and inscription according to its prosaic, practical failures that holding a text accountable to its origins is again in vogue. Thus, feminist critiques of Tolstoy document and register his multiple verbal assaults on his wife (and, by extension, women), his transformation of the married Natalia Rostova into a domestic drone, his “murder” of Anna Karenina, his relegation of his heroines to endless childbirth, nursing, and drudgery, and his hypostatization of the “ideal” woman into a de-sexed, plain Madonna—Princess Maria, Dolly Oblonskaia.¹² Tolstoy thus stands accused of painting grotesque deformations or repressions of the beautiful corporality we have come to expect from the heroines of realist novels. And he is judged to have murdered those creations whose beauty and vitality have escaped the descriptive mutilation of his pen.

These feminist criticisms¹³ fit comfortably into the common Western, twentieth-century resistance to Tolstoy the moralist; a resistance aroused by discomfort with tendentiousness and fanaticism, and augmented by the usual Freudian reading of Tolstoy as guilt-ridden oppressor and overcompensated orphan. The myth or “legend”
of Leo Nikolaevich as titanic moralist “monologizes” Tolstoy, painting him into the haloed shape of a formalized icon, a depiction that he himself was partly responsible for creating.\textsuperscript{14} This study attempts to attenuate the rigidity of this monument by suggesting that Tolstoy’s quest for the status and platform of wise man was his pursuit of a privileged \textit{passe-partout} that would encourage his audience of readers to seek his hero, “truth,” within his writings, and to apply what meaning they could find in his works to their own lives. His assumption of patriarchal form was by no means intended to box and shape the actual content of his thought, which, when read in the context of its own time, is radical, subversive, and, in many fundamental ways, feminist.

In exploring the interstices between the documents of an author’s life and the artistic works, we often argue in favor of a literary work’s polysemous evocation of a universally acceptable message that transcends the author’s limited, human vision; as Schlegel put it: “Every excellent work, of whatever genre, knows more than it says and intends more than it knows.” An author’s extraliterary works, by contrast, are taken as representing the limits of the author’s conscious mind, which cannot achieve the sublime, illimitable realm of his imagination. This is often the case, for example, in the criticism of Dostoevsky, whose journalism is usually ignored in the criticism because of its strident anti-Semitism. Curiously, the opposite situation obtains in criticism of Tolstoy’s views of women, since Tolstoy, the artist who created \textit{War and Peace} and \textit{Anna Karenina}, seems to come closer to being a misogynist promoting the Victorian cult of domesticity than does Tolstoy, the thinker and essayist of the postconversion period who expresses a feminism central to his formulation of radical Christian asceticism. For both Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, the novels speak louder than their journalism. Much of Tolstoy’s journalism on the woman question and his discussions of the problem in his diaries and letters have therefore been overlooked by critics seeking to establish his misogyny, who support their opinion with the standard set of well-cited examples. There have been few attempts,\textsuperscript{15} feminist or otherwise, to appreciate the full complexity of Tolstoy’s shifting views on the woman question. The following considerations cannot claim to lay the debate to rest, but they may at least challenge received notions
of Tolstoy’s views on the woman question and may suggest that we need to reconsider the very definitions of feminism and misogyny both in general and within the specific context of the Russian socio-historical tradition.

**Tolstoy and the Woman Question**

Tolstoy’s thoughts on the various “accursed questions” connected with the woman question—the family question, the sexual question—were continually evolving. Although Tolstoy is usually compared to the French conservatives Alexandre Dumas fils, Michelet, and Proudhon, whose views undoubtedly influenced him, we might more profitably compare him to the feminist John Stuart Mill, author of the classic feminist treatise *On the Subjection of Women* (1869). Mill, when challenged by Harriet Taylor in the first year of their courtship (1832) to compose an essay on women’s emancipation, produced a stiflingly patriarchal portrait of the Victorian woman as ornament, helpmeet, and “Angel on the Hearth”:

The question is not what marriage ought to be, but . . . what woman ought to be; . . . [and since] women in general . . . are more easily contented, . . . it does not follow that a woman should actually support herself [through work] because she should be capable of doing so: in the natural course of events she will not . . . there would be no need that the wife should take part in the mere providing of what is required to support life: it will be for the happiness of both [husband and wife] that her occupation should be rather to adorn and beautify it. . . . Her natural task . . . will . . . be accomplished rather by being than by doing. . . . The great occupation of woman should be to beautify life. . . . If . . . the activity of her nature demands more energetic and definite employment, there is never any lack of it in the world: . . . her natural impulse will be to associate her existence with him she loves to share his occupations.

To these statements, Harriet Taylor responded: “The proper sphere for all human beings is the largest and highest which they are able to
attain to. What this is cannot be ascertained without complete liberty."22 Despite ten years of thought and research on women's rights stimulated by his long association with his feminist lover and wife, Mill, in his ultimate statement on women's emancipation, still continues to locate her sphere of activity in the home. In *The Subjection of Women*, he writes:

It would not be necessary for her protection that during marriage she make . . . use of her faculties. Like a man when he chooses a profession, so, when a woman marries, it may in general be understood that she makes choice of the management of a household and the bringing up of a family as the first call upon her exertions . . . and that she renounces all [other objects and occupations] which are not consistent with the requirements of this. . . . But the utmost latitude ought to exist for the adaptation of general rules to individual suitabilities; and there ought to be nothing to prevent faculties *exceptionally* adapted to any other pursuit from obeying their vocation notwithstanding marriage, due provision being made for supplying any falling-short . . . in her full performance of the ordinary functions of mistress of a family.23

Since Mill's classical feminist treatise still confines woman to the home and limits her employment to the domestic sphere, her education and accomplishments amount either to decorative accoutrements or to hobbies that threaten to distract her from her only legitimate occupation.

Tolstoy's most conservative position as stated in *What Then Must We Do?* is far more radical than Mill's. First of all, far from placing married women gracefully in the drawing room behind the embroidery screen or the pianoforte—an objet d'art for men's pleasure in a de-eroticized depiction of the seraglio—Tolstoy appreciates, values, and empathizes with the oppressive work of pregnancy, childbirth, and domestic cares, which he considers to be far more difficult, strenuous, and important than men's work:

You [women] alone know—not that false, showy kind of work in top hats and illuminated rooms that the men of our circle call work—
instead you know that genuine work given to people by God. . . . You know how, after the joys of love, you wait in agitation, terror, and hope for that tormenting condition of pregnancy that will make you an invalid for nine months, will bring you to the brink of death and to unendurable suffering and pain; you know the nature of true work . . . when, immediately after these torments, without a break, without a rest, you take on another burden of labors and suffering—nursing, during which time you renounce . . . the most overwhelming human need, sleep. . . . You do not sleep through a single night for years, and sometimes, often, you do not sleep at all for nights on end. (PSS 25:408–409)

Rather than merely extending latitude to those exceptional women who seek occupation beyond domestic activities, or “self-improvement” (razvitie), that buzzword of the Russian woman question, debate, Tolstoy demands such development for all women, and, even more radically, he does not curtail such activity to what can be accommodated within the busy schedule of a wife and mother, but argues instead that extra considerations should be made to liberate women from drudgery, beginning with men’s willingness to share the housework:

This is where the true emancipation of women lies—in not considering any line of work to be women’s work, the sort that one is ashamed to touch, in helping them with all one’s strength . . . and in taking from them all the work that it is possible to take upon oneself. Similarly with education—just because they will probably bear children and so have less leisure, for that very reason, we should organize schools for them that are not worse, but better than men’s, so that they can build up their strength and knowledge in advance. . . . I thought about my churlish and egotistical attitude to my wife in this respect. I acted like everybody else, i.e., badly and cruelly. I gave her all the hard work, the so-called women’s work to do and went out hunting myself. (Diary entry, 24 September 1894 [PSS 52:143])

Tolstoy’s rejection of the terms of the woman question in his treatise What Then Must We Do? is often cited as proof of his misogynist outlook. In fact, Tolstoy radicalized the woman question in very pro-
found ways. In order to appreciate his polemic with the term, it is necessary to consider the way in which the term arose and became central to the Russian women's emancipation movement.

The woman question was initially formulated in Victorian England as the question of how to resolve the problem of the so-called redundant or superfluous woman; that is, the fact that in nineteenth-century English society, women considerably outnumbered men and constituted an unemployable, superannuated spinster population. Judging from journalistic publications, the woman question did not become the focus of active sociopolitical debate among the Russian intelligentsia until after the appearance of Mill's *The Subjection of Women* in Russian translations in 1869. For most of the nineteenth century, the issue of women's emancipation had been treated primarily in literary works, such as the novels of Ivan Turgenev, the plays of Alexander Ostrovsky, Alexander Druzhinin's *Polinka Saks* (1847), or Nikolai Nekrasov's "Sasha." Early Russian literary treatments of the theme of oppressed women were probably most influenced by the novels of George Sand, whose heroines suffer in the name of free love. Sand's novel *Jacques*, for example, provided the plot for the most read Russian novel on women's emancipation, Nikolai Chernyshevsky's *What Is to Be Done?* (1864).²⁴

The course taken by the debate in Russian journalism after the translation of Mill's book perpetuated the concerns as stated in Victorian English journalism, with its emphasis on the superfluity of women rather than a focus on local Russian concerns.²⁵ Thus, the Russian debate was curtailed: the issue was not one of women's civil rights, or capacity to participate in public life, as women's rights and abilities were automatically presumed to be limited to the domestic sphere, following Victorian mores. According to this view, all women should marry and raise children, and the only problem posed by the woman question was how to dispose of those unfortunates who were unable to catch a husband. Thus, the strides already made toward women's education and liberation within the nihilist movement were overlooked in the journalistic debates or ridiculed in literary caricatures of the *nihilistka*. As evident from the debate at the Oblonskys' dinner party in *Anna Karenina* (a debate that clearly re-
lies on Mill and Dumas fils’ *L’homme-femme* as subtexts), the focus of Russian society remained on the plight of the superfluous woman—unmarried, without a place in a family—unable to earn a living because of her lack of education or access to the professions, and, as a last resort, forced into prostitution or poverty.

In both Europe and Russia, the number of single women increased rapidly in the second half of the nineteenth century as a result of socioeconomic factors. In an 1881 census entitled “The Prospects of Marriage for Women,” the ratio of women to men in Great Britain was found to have increased in the course of the century from 102.9 to 100 to 149.8 to 100. Furthermore, the tendency of men to delay marriage as long as possible diminished women’s chances for marriage to men of their own age group, since these men chose younger brides on average. A similar situation obtained in Russia after emancipation of the serfs, when, due to declining fortunes of the aristocracy, single women could no longer be supported within the extended family and became a “new ‘female proletariat’ of aunts, sisters, old maids, divorcées and widows, cut loose from the patriarchal family and left to their own economic devices.”

In Petersburg, the number of unemployed women increased from 204,527 in 1858 to 320,832 in 1870. The number of prostitutes increased by 20 percent during the same period. The ghettoization of women into “women’s professions” paying less than subsistence wages was observed in such historical instances as the introduction of the telegraph to Russia and the instantaneous placement of thousands of working women in telegraph offices. The analogous situation in Victorian England was summarized in a pithy discussion in Anthony Trollope’s *Can You Forgive Her?* (1864):

> Alice was glad to find that a hundred and fifty thousand female [telegraph] operatives were employed in Paris, while Lady Glencora said it was a great shame, and they ought all to have husbands. When Mr. Palliser explained that that was impossible, because of the redundancy of the female population, she angered him very much by asserting that she saw a great many men walking about who, she was quite sure, had not wives of their own.
Despite women’s demand for professional work and economic parity, the published debate on the woman question in Russia was in fact monopolized by men who defined the course of feminism in Russia and diverted attention from issues of woman’s autonomy as these might have been determined by women authors. Jane Costlow has recently examined the woman question debate in Russia to recover those feminine voices that did participate. The main issue addressed was women’s right to education, or development (razvitie). The consequence of focusing on education rather than on socioeconomic status was that the initial impulse of feminism was tightly curtailed, as those women who were the first to obtain advanced degrees were to discover when they attempted to practice the professions they had qualified in. The classic example is Sofia Kovalevskaia, the mathematician and author who received a Ph.D. in Europe, wrote three dissertations, one of which won an international competition, and yet discovered on her return to Russia that the best job she could obtain was teaching arithmetic at an elementary school for girls.29

The two men considered to be the leading Russian feminists of their age, or the fathers of Russian feminism, were Pirogov and Mikhail Mikhailov. Both polemicists asserted that education was beneficial for women because it made them better wives and mothers. To quote from a leading left-wing journal of the day, the goal of emancipation was to transform every woman “from a simple nurse to a genuine mother, from a household servant to a free member of the family, from a harem odalisque to an authentic, loving wife.”30 In his book The Physiology of Woman, Pirogov asserted that education better enabled women “to share men’s struggle. It is not the position of woman in society, but her education that needs to be changed.” Mikhailov saw a need for education to “save [a woman] from unreal fantasies about sex and love.” Neither man made any claims for the political rights of women in Russia.

Tolstoy’s views on the woman question in the early 1880s, just after his self-proclaimed conversion, actually place him in the mainstream, if not the advance guard, of those in favor of women’s rights at the time he was writing, and not to the far right as exemplified by the works of Michelet, Proudhon, and Dumas fils. As expressed
in the closing chapter of *What Then Must We Do?*, Tolstoy's position on men and women allows, first of all, for the education of all women and for free and equal access to the professions for those women who, because they are unmarried, cannot devote themselves to domestic activity. As distinct from the conservatives, Tolstoy warns against women seeking employment outside the domestic sphere, not because he feels they are not capable, but because he feels they would be demeaned by it, just as are men, who, in Tolstoy's view, should return to physical labor in the fields. Tolstoy in fact rejects the very terms of the woman question: "The so-called woman question arose and could only arise among men who had rejected the law of genuine labor" (*PSS* 25:407). In Tolstoy's opinion, women and men who honestly fulfill their roles as wives and mothers, and fathers and laborers, are infinitely more moral than bourgeois men engaged in vain and trivial pursuits. Women's entry into the bourgeois, male-dominated work force would only demean them by lowering them to the level of men.

It should be noted that this point of view has been consistently debated over the course of feminist history and still has its adherents in the mainstream of feminism. For example, this same argument was made by the suffragettes, who felt that entry into the male-dominated public sphere would compromise female virtues and goals. The focus of the suffragist movement thus centered on the vote, which allowed women access to political reform without ejecting them from their protected, domestic sphere of activity. In contemporary feminist debate, Betty Friedan's *The Second Stage* suggests a revision of the "feminist mystique" that lured women into the marketplace as male clones. Some feminist thinkers, such as Elshtain, argue that a return to women-centered values such as motherhood should reshape feminism. Much postmodernist feminist French thought, as represented by Cixous or Kristeva, is also directed to escaping male-dominated models.

Tolstoy attributes the inequality between the sexes in the status quo to the fact that men have abandoned the Old Testament precept to labor in the sweat of one's brow, whereas women continue to bear the full burden of the injunction to bring forth children in pain.
These women represent “the highest manifestation of a human being,” and thus, Tolstoy concludes, the potential salvation of the human race lies in their hands:

Such women who fulfill their mission reign over men, and serve as a guiding star to humankind; such women form public opinion and prepare the coming generation; and therefore in their hands lies the highest power, the power to save men from the existing and threatening evils of our time.

Yes, women, mothers, in your hands more than in those of anyone else lies the salvation of the world.31

In the wake of the furor aroused by his exhortation to Russian women to be the saviors of humanity, to be the kind of mother who would not say no to another pregnancy, even after bearing twenty children, Tolstoy continued to work out his position on the woman question.32 As a result, by the time he wrote The Kreutzer Sonata in 1889, his attitudes had undergone a significant shift to an antimarriage, antifamily position, advocating chastity, even within marriage. This belief was not idiosyncratic; there were quite a few movements in Europe, Scandinavia, and the United States, such as the Skoptsy, the “glove morality,” and the Shakers, whose adherents held this view.33

Because of the changing status of single women at the end of the century, feminism of the time emphasized not the free love of George Sand but the valorous path of chastity and self-sufficiency through work. The autonomous working woman, one who was committed to service or to art and did not regard these as mere pastimes until she married, became the new heroine in literary works of this period. The late Victorians thus promoted an alternative to the rotund, matronly “Angel on the Hearth” and her fallen alter ego. Instead, the pre-Raphaelite, ascetic, pale, passionless heroine emerged, along with and sometimes in the same body as the hard-working, etherealized single woman. Sue Bridehead of Thomas Hardy’s Jude the Obscure or Rhoda Nunn of George Gissing’s The Odd Women, their very names indicating their virginal natures, are examples of heroines who find
marriage confining or destructive and who pursue fulfillment and autonomy elsewhere. The heroines of Mrs. Humphrey Ward’s novels of the 1890s, much admired by Tolstoy, also follow this formula.

These literary exaltations of the old maid, formerly an object of ridicule, transpose the unmarried woman from her previously dependent status (regarded with such horror by Kitty in Anna Karenina) into an ennobled emblem of independence and endurance. Thus, John Fowles, in his meta-textual rewriting of the Victorian novel, The French Lieutenant’s Woman, was forced to offer two resolutions to the novel to reflect his critical awareness of two phases in the genre’s development. The first high Victorian, traditional ending closes on the reunion and marriage of the two protagonists. The second, in which the heroine joins an artist’s colony and rejects the hero’s suit, represents the late, high Victorian, feminist resistance to the closure of wedlock.

This paradigm shift in social attitudes and literary representations of women and marriage is reflected in Tolstoy’s postconversion rejection of the Victorian ethos, the institution of marriage, and the cult of domesticity. The charge of misogyny usually falls with some justice on this extremism in Tolstoy’s views of woman as either earth mother or nun, whereas the woman who enjoys sex without bearing children is “unacceptable and an evil against humanity” (PSS 25:407). However, labeling Tolstoy a misogynist on the basis of this fissure says more about our stereotyping of men’s thoughts about women than it serves to clarify Tolstoy’s actual views. Tolstoy’s attitudes reflect a rejection of all sexuality and sexual politics, not just female sexuality. If anything, in Tolstoy’s writings male sexuality is attacked more viciously than female sexuality. Furthermore, the notion of a moral, Christian marriage that is sexually consummated is rejected entirely. Sex cannot be justified at all, even by procreation: Tolstoy now insists that all true Christians should refrain from having children. Instead of marrying to have children, “It is far more simple to abstain and, instead, to support and save those millions of children who are in need all around us. A Christian can only enter marriage without the consciousness of having sinned if he has seen and is certain that the lives of all living children are secure” (PSS 27:87). Instead of consummating their mar-
and Peace, rendering the characters almost grotesque in their process of dissolution from heroic figures of potential to everyday mundane folk concerned with dirty diapers rather than war. Similarly, Anna Karenina ends as a “cry of despair,” with the foundations of marital and family relations eroded. Lyovin’s conversion does not bring him into closer harmony with his family, but rather into a temporarily benign heterophony where each sings his or her own tune without harmony or unison. In the final scene with Kitty, an unbreachable distance gapes suddenly between the thoughts of husband and wife, as Lyovin contemplates the starry night, filled with ecstasy at his newfound faith but fearing to tell his thoughts to Kitty, who is preoccupied with worries about bed sheets and dirty laundry.

Tolstoy’s ultimate rejection of the family ideal—of sexual, romantic love, and procreation as its rationale—accompanied his rejection of the novel (together with all bourgeois art); indeed, the two are connected since the Victorian realist novel notably romanticizes domestic life and ends so gratifyingly with wedding vows. In a letter to a young unmarried girl, Tolstoy counseled her to choose the single life and, in order to strengthen her resolve, to avoid those pleasures of society that encourage girls to desire marriage: music, balls, novels.41 “Novels,” he wrote, “end with the hero and heroine married. Instead, they should begin with the marriage and end with the couple liberating themselves from it” (Diary entry, 30 August 1894 [PSS 52:136]). Tolstoy’s observation has been echoed by the twentieth-century feminist literary critic Nancy Miller, who observes that the plot of the traditional novel only allows two endings for the heroine: marriage or death. Tolstoy would have been in sympathy with her conclusion: “Because the novel . . . is forced . . . to negotiate with social realities in order to remain legible, its plots are overdetermined by the commonplaces of the culture. Until the culture invents new plots for women, we will continue to read the heroine’s text. Or we could stop reading novels.”42 This extremist suggestion might well be received with as much resistance as met Tolstoy’s prescription for chastity within marriage. Tolstoy’s wedding of narrative to sexuality renders abstinence a radical claim for sexual and textual liberation.

In this chapter I began by considering the ways in which the
image of an author is constructed and the degree to which ideology complicates critical assessment of an author’s biography and works. In the following chapter I continue to explore the problems of ideological criticism, in particular the issues central to feminist literary criticism and theory. This examination necessitates changing critical lenses in order to read Tolstoy as an artist and aesthetician, as well as the literary figure we considered in this opening chapter. The problematic of misogyny will then be considered within the framework of the novel Anna Karenina, whose heroine has suffered the vicissitudes of criticisms under the sway of ideologies and gender biases. The opening moves of this chapter were frankly played out on the passe-partout; in what follows our gaze will have to move back and forth between the passe-partout and the canvas.