Beyond the Motivations of Realism: 
Tolstoy, the Victorian Novel, 
and Iconic Aesthetics

When we appraise a work according to its realism, we only show that we are talking, not of a work of art, but of its counterfeit.
Tolstoy, What Is Art?

“English Happiness”: Anna Karenina 
and the Victorian Novel

Tolstoy’s admiration for the Victorian novel is well known: Dickens’ portrait hung over his desk at Yasnaya Polyana; Anthony Trollope “killed him with his mastery.”¹ Tolstoy’s admiration for George Eliot, William Thackeray, Charles Dickens, and Trollope is attested to in numerous diary entries and in his correspondence, and he included Dickens, Eliot, Lady Braddon,² and Mrs. Henry Wood on his list of important literary influences. He particularly admired the writing style of Victorian women authors for the “naturalness of [their] way of writing.”³ Finally, according to his wife, the English novel served him as a source of inspiration: “I know that when Lyovochka turns to reading English novels, then he will soon turn to writing.”

In his earlier life, Tolstoy’s admiration for English novels had been accompanied by a view of English society as a kind of utopia.
When contemplating the possibility that he would be exiled in 1872, he planned to take his family to England, which he considered to be the only civilized country in Europe. Yet by the time he was writing *Anna Karenina*, his anglophilia was being undercut by xenophobia, as evidenced in the acidic description of Vronsky's English-style estate and the mild sarcasm with which he characterizes as "English happiness" the fulfilled desires of the hero of the English novel Anna reads on the train from Moscow to Petersburg. Indeed, the brief synopsis of the English novel in Anna's hands could almost serve as a parody of the standard conventions of Victorian, especially Trolloppian fiction, complete with parliament, hunt, illness, marriage, and estate.

Furthermore, despite Tolstoy's avowed admiration for the Victorian family novel, whose structures he openly borrows in *Anna Karenina*, the Victorian novel becomes a source of anxiety for his heroine, whose subsequent cognitive dissonance is described in a passage that could never be contained in a conventional Victorian novel. While Victorian heroines are given to blanching, blushing, or fainting with emotion, their thoughts are rarely expressed in the kind of psychological interior monologue developed by Tolstoy. For example, Edith Dombey, oppressed and harassed by her husband, expresses her conflict and anger in immobility:

> Far into the night she sat alone, by the sinking blaze, in dark and threatening beauty, watching the murky shadows looming on the wall, as if her thoughts were tangible, and cast them there. Whatever shapes of outrage and affront, and black foreshadowings of things that might happen, flickered, indistinct and giant-like, before her, one resented figure marshalled them against her. And that figure was her husband.⁴

By contrast, Anna Karenina's shadows reveal the profundity of her despair as she contemplates suicide:

> She lay in bed with open eyes, by the light of a single burned-down candle, gazing at the carved cornice of the ceiling and at the shadow of the screen that covered part of it, while she vividly pictured to herself how he would feel when she would be no more, when she
would be only a memory to him. "How could I say such cruel things to her?" he would say. "How could I go out of the room without saying anything to her? But now she is no more. She has gone away from us forever. She is . . ." Suddenly the shadow of the screen wavered, pounced on the whole cornice, the whole ceiling; other shadows from the other side swooped to meet it, for an instant the shadows flitted back, but then with fresh swiftness they darted forward, wavered, mingled, and all was darkness. "Death!" she thought. And such horror came upon her that she could not realize where she was, and for a long while her trembling hands could not find the matches and light another candle. . . . "No, anything—only to live! Why, I love him! Why, he loves me! This has been before and will pass," she said, feeling that tears of joy at the return of life were trickling down her cheeks. (781)

The plot of the Victorian novel Anna reads on the train is a prolepsis that determines the trajectory of her future life. While the topos of the heroine seduced by romance and the novel is common to the novel of adultery (viz. *Mme Bovary*), Tolstoy, by introducing a Victorian novel at this critical juncture, makes clear that he is invoking Victorian narratives of acquisition (wife and estate) rather than continental narratives of fall in adultery. Moreover, by beginning Anna’s fall with the reading of a Victorian novel, he reverses the source of danger from the continental romance to the Victorian novel and thus locates the source of seduction in the Victorian domestic ethos rather than in the illicit passion of the continental romance.

There are Victorian novels of adultery, but the French theme of the fallen woman as it appears in Victorian literature is de-sexed; as Matthew Arnold observed, the English mentality is unsympathetic to the French novelist’s "service to the goddess Lubricity." In contrast to the French femme fatale, the English adulteress is curiously passionless; in fact, there often is no adultery committed at all (see *Dombey and Son, Can You Forgive Her?*, *Middlemarch*). In Anna Karenina, Tolstoy parodies Victorian prudery in representing the consummation of an affair by laying bare the conventional ellipsis: he draws a pointedly dotted line between chapters to emphasize the enormity of the omitted episode.
When a Victorian heroine does in fact commit adultery (e.g., *East Lynne, Lady Audley’s Secret*), the emphasis of the narrative is usually on the enormity of the fall and the loss of estate and children rather than on the sweetness of seduction or the adulterous liaison. The melodramatic chords of the Victorian sensation novel are usually struck on the theme of maternity and maternal sacrifice rather than on passion and its vicissitudes. In the Victorian novel of adultery, it is the loss of children and real estate that constitutes the fallen woman’s punishment. Thus, the famous apostrophe to the reader that was the high point of any theatrical performance of *East Lynne*:

Lady—wife—mother! Should you ever be tempted to abandon your home . . . Whatever trials may be the lot of your married life, though they may magnify themselves to your crushed spirit as beyond the endurance of woman to bear, resolve to bear them; fall down upon your knees and pray . . . rather than forfeit your fair name and your good conscience; for be assured that the alternative, if you rush on to it, will be found far worse than death!

Poor thing! poor Lady Isabel! She had sacrificed husband, children, reputation, home, all that makes life of value to woman.⁶

Lady Isabel repents her adultery almost immediately and, yearning desperately for her children, takes advantage of the erroneous report of her death to disguise herself as a governess in her husband’s employ in order to be near them. The climactic, melodramatic scene of the novel where she struggles not to reveal her true identity to her dying son could easily have inspired Tolstoy’s creation of the passionate surreptitious reunion between veiled mother and son in *Anna Karenina*.

Anna’s grief over the loss of Seryozha places her within this Victorian tradition. What most distinguishes Anna’s narrative from that associated with the continental tradition of adulteresses is precisely the conflict she experiences between her maternal love for Seryozha and her sexual love for Vronsky. Anna is thus unique in literature in that she combines the maternal aspect of the Victorian fallen woman with the passionate sensuality of the French mistress. By giving Anna two
love stories, Tolstoy reinstates the narrative of passion into the Victorian paradigm and questions the objects of desire erected by the Victorian ethos.

The desire for an English happiness may be seen as motivating all of the main protagonists in *Anna Karenina*, even Lyovin, whom Stiva describes somewhat disparagingly as a “Dickensian gentleman.” In-
indeed, the accretion of English phrases, words, and details in the novel, in tandem with certain plot conventions of Victorian literature, have provoked a critical consensus of praise for the novel as a continuation or culmination of the Victorian tradition. Indeed, as Morson observes, “It is easier to read Anna according to the conventions of the English novel.”7 In fact, so potent is this effect that the editors of one translation of the novel refer to “Victorian Russia.”8
Many critics have noticed the English touches in *Anna Karenina:* in addition to the English names Annie, Kitty, Dolly, Hannah, and Betsey, there is Vronsky’s English groom, Cord; the Oblonskys’ English governess, Miss Hull, Anna’s dressmaker, Wilson, and various unnamed English nurses; Kitty works at *broderie anglaise,* Lyovin and Stiva dine at the Anglia, Vronsky belongs to the English Club; the horses at the race are mostly English racers, the riders sit their horses “in imitation of English jockeys,” and others besides Vronsky have English grooms; Princess Betsey drives an elegant English carriage; Sir John is lionized in the Russian salons; Vronsky refers to the Russian elections as “our Parliament.” English books are read throughout the novel: in addition to Anna’s Victorian novel, Lyovin reads Tyndall; the English fairy tale of the three bears is applied to the three Shcherbatsky girls and Kitty’s nickname is Tiny Bear (a bilingual pun was intended since Tolstoy’s wife’s maiden name was Behrs); Lidia Ivanovna reads two English Sunday School tracts aloud: “Safe and Happy” and “Under the Wing.” English expressions and phrases are quoted throughout the novel in suggestive ways for characters and events: Karenin is disliked for his “sneering,” Anna has a “skeleton in the closet,” Vronsky’s horse, Frou-Frou, has “the blood that tells,” and, ironically, Vronsky considers that he has the “pluck” that is necessary for good horsemanship and winning the race. Vronsky is fond of the expression “not in my line,” and Anna thinks of their dying relationship that “the zest is gone.” An ominous significant English proverb is quoted:

“No, I imagine, joking aside, that to know love, one must make mistakes and then correct them,” said Princess Betsey.

“Even after marriage?” said the ambassador’s wife, playfully.

“It’s never too late to mend,” the attaché quoted the English proverb. (125)

Most important, the estate where Vronsky and Anna live after her separation from Karenin is English in custom, manner, and style and thus represents the fulfillment of Anna’s desire, aroused by the English
novel she read on the train, to “accompany the hero to his estate.” Anna rides an English cob wearing an English-style riding habit, and this behavior, like that of Lady Mary in the English novel, scandalizes her sister-in-law, Dolly. In the nursery are “little carts ordered from England, and appliances for teaching babies to walk, and a sofa after the fashion of a billiard table, purposely constructed for crawling, and swings and baths . . . They were all English” (645–46). The guests play billiards and lawn tennis and “toute-à-fait à l’Anglaise” they meet at breakfast and separate for the day. Yet the estate is obviously not truly English, but English as it is perceived by Russian readers of English novels. For example, Dolly’s view of the estate gives her an “impression of wealth and sumptuousness and of that modern European luxury of which she had only read in English novels” (644). Thus, *Anna Karenina* does not merely cite or bow to the English tradition; the English novel is the novel within the novel that represents the fantasies and desires of the major characters, including Kitty and Lyovin, and scripts the future anglophile life of Vronsky and Anna. In this capacity, the English novel in *Anna Karenina* represents values that are alien, false, illusory, and ultimately dangerous.

It has become common in recent criticism to treat the Victorian novel as a “palimpsestic” text that reveals various strata that subvert the very institutions the text overtly supports. Thus, Victorian novels are seen as especially structured on ambivalences, so that, despite plot events and treatments that support the status quo, some critics discern “symbolic structures opposed to the sexual values of the direct narrative gradually form and emerge, often constituting a distinct ‘counterplot’ to the overt handling of theme and characterization. The authors’ ambivalence is expressed through narrators who mingle desire, fear, and hostility toward female characters in a way that both represents and exposes Victorian sexual values.

The critic’s task becomes that of retrieving the unconscious text through the analysis of verbal symbols, textual images, and other clues that lead us either to the author’s unconscious, repressed drives, or to a view of the larger repressions of an entire society or era. As discussed in chapter 1 and chapter 2, recent criticism of Tolstoy has fol-
ollowed a similar directive. Yet it is necessary to remember that Tolstoy was a non-native reader of Victorian literature and not himself a Victorian; he does not read well as a bundle of repressions since, far from being unconscious, Tolstoy was hyperconscious of his psychic drives and conflicts and subjected himself to a self-analysis that is equal to any undertaken by Freud. Furthermore, the conflict Tolstoy experienced between his love for aristocratic life and art and his critical awareness of the exploitative and exclusionary practices associated with these institutions was well ventilated in his oeuvre. There is no need to analyze his work for repressed meanings: Tolstoy’s texts do not subvert themselves; they are themselves overtly subversive. My intention in advancing this argument is to assert the power of Tolstoy’s artistry (masterstvo) rather than leave his texts at the mercy of critical blindness and refocusing. Without relying too heavily on the idea of authorial intention, I argue that rather than assuming textual repressive returns that ultimately jettison the text out of Tolstoy’s control, we should champion his powers, victories, and subtleties. In assessing Tolstoy’s possible indebtedness to the Victorian novel, therefore, we might conclude that he borrows Victorian social and textual conventions in order to expose them; he does this by criticizing the ethos and morés of bourgeois society and by rewriting the Victorian novel so that it transcends the boundaries of its conventions.

In his later writings, Tolstoy quite explicitly denounces Victorian fiction:

In the majority of cases, the men, who are supposed to represent something noble and elevated, from Childe Harold to the latest heroes of... Trollope are in fact, nothing but depraved parasites, who can be of no use for anything or anyone, while even the heroines, one way or another, are nothing more than objects of pleasure for the men, mistresses, similarly idle and addicted to luxuries.

In addition to attacking the basis of marital relations and the foundations of bourgeois Victorian society, Tolstoy increasingly directed his criticism against the very form of Victorian fiction. In
his earliest diary entries on the English novel, he is impelled to move beyond the constraints of convention as he notes that Trollope relies on “too much that is conventional”\textsuperscript{14} and that “to tolerate [conventional] mannerisms [in novels] means to follow the times: to correct them means to be in advance of them.”\textsuperscript{15} While the Russian novel afforded him the freedom of working in an unconventional mode and genre (as he was proud to note, “We Russians in general do not know how to write novels in the sense in which this genre is understood in Europe”\textsuperscript{16}), he nonetheless capitulated to the genre in its European form by characterizing \textit{Anna Karenina} as a “novel, the first [novel] I have ever written.” The mastery with which Tolstoy works within the genre is so great that he is usually considered “grandly representative of that time, as if George Eliot, Thackery, Trollope and even John Stuart Mill had been rolled into one.”\textsuperscript{17} Or, in Georg Lukaes’s assessment, Tolstoy redeems realism: “Tolstoy saved the traditions of the great realists and carried them on and developed them further in concrete and topical form in an age in which realism had degenerated . . . He is the last great classic of bourgeois realism, the last worthy link in the chain that stretches from Cervantes to Balzac. He is a classic of realism.”\textsuperscript{18} The combination of this standard assessment and a tendency for criticism to reject interpretations of Tolstoy’s novels that seem to verge on the allegorical and symbolic have resulted in a view of Tolstoy that overlooks the very profound distinctions between Tolstoyan realism and European, especially Victorian, realism.\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Anna Karenina} is not a realist novel, although it has come to be read that way. Rather, it reflects on every level, both thematic and formal, Tolstoy’s polemic with realism and with Victorian literature, and his quest for mythopoesis as an alternative.

\section*{The Motivations of Realism}

Tolstoy’s treatment of art, realism, and the Victorian novel in \textit{Anna Karenina} presages his later condemnation of the Western canon of great art and reveals his lifelong quest for a native Russian art that
would achieve the universal appeal and status of myth. Although myth in the realist novel in the form of archetypal imagery is often read as irrepressible projections from the author's unconscious, Tolstoy's mythopoesis was conscious and intentional; it was crafted from his use of the transparent language of impersonal authority, his rewriting of legendary plots, and his attention to the symbolic value of textual details. His aesthetic demanded the creation of a new art, a fusion of the universal accessibility of popular genres with the profundity and elegance of belles lettres. He would later reject his novel Anna Karenina for being an inadequate step along the path toward true Christian art, and the criticism has respected Tolstoy's own bifurcation of his thought and oeuvre into pre- and postconversion phases. However, Gustafson's recent work on Tolstoy argues for reading this self-appointed conversion as a slow evolution in thought and artistry rather than as a cataclysmic shift.

In the standard assessment of Tolstoy, he is supposed to have fulfilled the demands of realism in his preconversion works and then to have reacted against them following his conversion. Dmitriy Mirsky summarizes the process:

In his early work [Tolstoy] was a representative man of the Russian realistic school, which relied entirely on the method of "superfluous detail"... that gave the particular and individual convincingness that is the very essence of the realistic novel. The general effect of such detail is to bring out the particular, the individual, the local, and the temporary at the expense of the general and the universal.... This particularity which excludes a universal appeal and emphasizes social and national differences was what the old Tolstoy condemned in the methods of realistic fiction. In his early work he had entirely adopted them and carried them farther than his predecessors.20

Thus, following his conversion, Tolstoy explicitly rejected the elitism of a novelistic discourse that depends for its effect on the reader's familiarity with details of privileged social groups21 and termed realism provincialism.22 His views are conveyed as an unrestrained antirealist, antinaturalist program in What Is Art?:
The essence of [mimesis] consists in supplying details accompanying the thing described or depicted. In literary art, this method consists in describing, in the minutest details, the external appearance, the faces, the clothes, the gestures, the tones, and the habituations of the characters represented, with all the occurrences met with in life. . . . This abundance of detail makes the stories difficult of comprehension to all people not living within reach of the conditions described by the author. . . . Strip the best novels of our times of their details and what will remain?23

In the case of the realist novel of the nineteenth century, the affluence of textual detail, especially when unmotivated by plot considerations or participation in a symbolic system, reflected the aesthetic preference for mimesis of the trivial and random in the pursuit of verisimilitude. In his essay “What is Realism in Art?” Roman Jakobson places Tolstoy within the European realist tradition when he notes that Tolstoy, “describing Anna’s suicide, primarily writes about her handbag”24; this forms an intrusion of what Jakobson considers extraneous or “unessential” detail, introduced to create a heightened sense of verisimilitude. Jakobson ascribes Tolstoyan detail to the desire to achieve realistic effects, in keeping with the theories of Tolstoy’s fellow Russian formalist critics, especially Shklovsky and Tomashevsky; the latter critics’ concepts of motivation (motivirovka) endure in the debate on realism, which has been reargued, for example, by Roland Barthes in his essay “L’effet du réel.”25 These formalist elements of motivation may be defined as follows:26

1. Realistic motivation (bytovaia, realisticheskaia),27 where the textual element is motivated by the intention to create effects of verisimilitude, as in the example cited by Jakobson above.
2. Psychological motivation (psikhologicheskaia),28 where the device is employed to reveal the psychology of a character or social group.
3. Compositional motivation (kompozitsionnaia),29 where the device is needed to advance the development of the plot or characterization or to elaborate some aspect of the artistic design.
4. Artistic motivation (khudozhestvennaia)30 or, in some cases,
meta-aesthetic motivation, where the device is utilized because the conventions of the genre require it. Artistic motivation may also occur as the parodic deployment of conventional elements or the refusal to motivate an element, in which case, the artistic structures may appear unmotivated; however, they are in fact motivated by the desire to "lay bare the device" of artistic convention.

The absence of a psychogenic motivation in formalist theory—what psychoanalytic criticism would consider a device motivated by the author's need for ego mastery of a problem projected onto the text—may be accounted for by the lack of the development of Freudian psychology in the Soviet Union. Just as psychoanalytic criticism might account for all textual elements through a subconscious motivation, so structuralist-semiotic criticism might account for all elements in a text in terms of a more broadly understood compositional motivation. Such co-optation of every detail in service to an overarching poetic design or intention has been termed semiotic totalitarianism by Morson.31

Prosaics versus Poetics

Morson's alternative proposition, a theory of prosaics, would allow textual detail the same unmotivated status as random detritus in real life and everyday experience. Morson's notion of the prosaic makes use of Bakhtin's theory of the novel (although it extends beyond Bakhtin), and Morson thus enthusiastically affirms the novel's realist proclivities, in the sense that it is large, loose, and messy. But if it is a mistake to read life as a novel (a mistake especially common to novelistic heroines)—that is, to invest every event and detail with significance or motivation—surely it is just as dangerous to read the novel as life; to denude textual details of significance. This approach suggests either loss of faith in the omnipotence of a creative intelligence or at least posits the inattention or lack of unity of this intelligence.32

The theory of prosaics suggests that the author is an entropy-
producing entity who generates as much useless text as meaningful text; thus, Tolstoy in writing War and Peace “did not set out with a plot already mapped out; rather, he sought to scatter potentials, some of which would be realized, many of which would not.” Yet where is the authority that can separate the two? Although the development of realism in art may be seen as accompanying the secularization of culture, it is still important to recall that the death of God is not coterminous or coterminus with the death of the author. A creative intelligence does pull the puppet strings of the fictional world within the covers of the novel. Thus, Morson with his theory pulls at the seams between conscious and unconscious artistic control that bind the text’s plethora of details.

To illustrate his principle of “creation by potential,” Morson takes as an example the scene in Anna Karenina where the artist, Mikhailov, finding his drawing accidentally transformed when a drop of wax spills on the paper, is newly inspired. Morson comments: “One completely random event redefines the relations of all the elements of the painting. The same is true of history. Mikhailov is a good painter for the same reason that Rostov is a good soldier: each is aware that configurations change rapidly and unexpectedly, and is alert to the opportunities presented in a world of uncertainty.” Morson thus draws an analogy between the processes of life and creativity, and he valorizes the artists of life who improvise around the unexpected and random, as opposed to the more rigid characters who must rely on maps and models. Tolstoy, according to Morson, is an artist like Mikhailov; he creates without models or predetermined plans, according to the inspiration and needs of the moment. Yet Morson’s reading does not account for the differences between the universe of life and the universe of the artist’s creative endeavor. Mikhailov’s drop of wax originated not in the real world but in the imagination of Tolstoy, who utilized that particular example to illustrate his notion of creativity.

Tolstoy’s anecdote about Mikhailov and his sketch of “a man in a rage” was probably inspired by Pliny the Elder’s legend about Protogenes, “the artist in a rage.” In the legend Protogenes is frustrated by his failure to represent the froth of saliva on the face of a dog:
In the picture there is a dog marvellously executed, so as to appear to have been painted by art and good fortune jointly: the artist's own opinion was that he did not fully show in it the foam of the panting dog, although in all the remaining details he had satisfied himself, which was very difficult. But the actual art displayed displeased him, nor was he able to diminish it, and he thought it was excessive and departed too far from reality—the foam appeared to be painted, not to be the natural product of the animal's mouth; vexed and tormented, as he wanted his picture to contain the truth and not merely a near-truth, he had several times rubbed off the paint and used another brush, quite unable to satisfy himself. Finally he fell into a rage with his art because it was perceptible, and dashed a sponge against the place in the picture that offended him, and the sponge restored the colours he had removed in the way that his anxiety had wished them to appear, and chance produced the effect of nature in the picture!37

In this fable, the artist's hand remains in creative control. The drop of wax and the water from the sponge demonstrate that the artist, far from generating entropic waste, actively recycles and recoups everything into his work—any detail may be worked into the artistic design. Or, to return to the notion of motivation, any textual element is motivated; or a motivation may be found for any textual element.

Semiotic theory has treated the notion of motivation as essential to forming discriminations about the very nature of signification; the concept of the "arbitrariness of the sign" (l'arbitraire du signe) posits that verbal symbols are unmotivated, that is, they are purely conventional. Motivated signs, or icons, to borrow Peircean terminology, by contrast find their elements—the vehicle and the referent—essentially wedded; that is, there is a natural cohesion or isomorphic resonance posited between signifier and signified. Thus, the concept of iconicity implies a belief in an Edenic or philosopher's language, where there is a natural and necessary relationship between word and referent. While this relationship is presumed lost in modern languages, it is often suggested that poetic discourse retrieves or exploits its vestigial potentialities.38

If the movement toward iconicity as a natural, preverbal har-
mony between sound and sense is a tendency of poetic discourse, then one of the distinctions between poetry and prose might be that prosaic discourse is conventional, arbitrary, and oriented to representation while poetic language is oriented to itself (the Russian formalist notion of “orientation on the expression,” ustanovka na vyrazhenie). Since the conventions determining arbitrary meaning in language are formed socially, prose texts can claim greater immediate accessibility than poetic texts. Since realist prose claims to represent with a minimum of discursive and textual conventions, it is therefore the mode that exalts the notion of a consensual collectivity. The collective (author and audience) that imposes its own values and meanings on language all the while maintains a belief—or delusion—that the manner of representation is objective. A belief in pure arbitration of the sign suggests a humanist naïveté, or, as Elizabeth Ermarth has characterized it, realism as a historical moment sustained a communal “linguistic innocence,” a referentiality “innocently pointing toward an objective world beyond it. . . . To the extent that all points of view summoned by the text agree, to the extent that they converge upon the ‘same’ world, that text maintains the consensus of realism.” Yet this consensus is erected upon the transient formation of a community—a construct as ephemeral as the linguistic indeterminacy that undermines its practices. J. Hillis Miller locates the blindness of Victorian literature in precisely this problem:

Perhaps the power behind language is only brought to the surface in the gaps between words, in the failures of language, not in its completed articulations. Correspondingly, human beings, it may be, are characterized by unappeasable desire and consequently, by permanent alienation from their deepest selves. Any replacement of desire by fulfillment is only temporary and illusory. For the Victorian novelists, on the other hand, the existence of an authentic satisfaction of desire makes the happy ending possible.

Prosaics therefore skirts the dangers of a naive realism, just as poetics risks investing language with a mystical lyricism.
Lyrical Motivation

Since the formalists base their theories of motivation on prosaic models, and their theories of literature on a stringent division between poetic and prosaic discourse, they overlook the potential for a self-reflexive motivation in prose that is extratextual rather than intertextual. In other words, the formalists bind most reflexivity in prose to parody and evolution, and they overlook the moments in prose that are stilled or arrested, that exist for themselves and not to advance the plot, and that are in some sense transcendent, lyrical, or even mystical, as exemplified by symbolist or modernist prose. The formalists thereby promote the concept of artistic motivation at the expense of other kinds of textual dynamics that might have an affinity with the aesthetics of Symbolism, from which the formalists were anxious to distance themselves. Thus, there is an absence in formalist theory of a framework for what we might term lyrical motivation.

The notion of a lyrical motivation is not introduced here to characterize the involvement of textual details in a larger symbolic system (Symbolism); that function might better be termed tropological motivation and could be accounted for in formalist theory by the notion of compositional motivation. The very term compositional—related to the plot (siuzhet) of the story-plot (fabula-siuzhet) distinction—provides a model based on prose, plot formations, and plot devices, where symbolic details and tropes might serve as foreshadowings, leitmotifs, and the like. But a different use of detail, to create a heightened effect through rhetorical devices or lyrical evocations, seems less well accommodated within this category, if only because of the affinity of this use of detail with poetry and Romanticism.41 Categorizing detail in a prose work in this way would furthermore have the effect of moving the realist work closer to Romanticism or, at the very least, toward Symbolism, thus making the boundaries between prose and poetry problematic.

Indeed, if we evade the direct, referential signification implied by the needs of the siuzhet and strain toward a more abstruse referentiality, we find the very notion of a lyrical motivation demanding a specific discussion of textual symbolism, imagery, and rhetoric that expects greater play in its extratextual parameters. In other words,
such elements are motivated not by the needs of the composition but by those of its effects. To put this distinction in functional terms based on Roman Jakobson’s communication schema: compositional motivation implies a twin orientation on the reference and the message; lyrical motivation suggests an orientation to the receiver.

Lyrical motivation therefore is intended to transcend the boundaries of the text or composition and to transport the reader beyond the local understanding that the text or composition had provided. Lyrical motivation thus reveals its basis in poetry and especially in the Romantic, neo-Romantic, or Symbolist lyric. Therefore, it should presumably be a category that is irrelevant for realist prose. This is certainly the way Bakhtin dismisses concepts of lyricism from his characterization of double-voiced prose discourse:

[N]o matter how one understands the interrelationship of meanings in a poetic symbol [a trope], this interrelationship is never of the dialogic sort; it is impossible under any conditions or at any time to imagine a trope [say, a metaphor] being unfolded into the two exchanges of a dialogue. . . . The entire event is played out between the word and its object; all of the play of the poetic symbol is in that space.⁴²

It is this aspect of Bakhtin’s thought that de Man finds most problematic and refers to as a “metaphysical impensé”: “[F]or Bakhtin, the trope is an intentional structure directed toward an object, and, as such, a pure episteme and not a fact of language; this in fact excludes tropes from literary discourse, poetic as well as prosaic, and locates them, perhaps surprisingly, in the field of epistemology.”⁴³

De Man’s relocation of Bakhtin’s trope within the field of pure epistemology on the basis of its object orientation is perhaps a result of the inherent difference in the philosophical systems of the two thinkers. Traditions of Russian thought and their bases in Eastern Orthodox religious philosophy posit an iconicity that does not founder on the same subject-object existentialist crisis that plagues modern Western thought. Thus, the problem of mimesis needs to be reconsidered in a non-Western, perhaps more genuinely Greek way—in the
terms expressed by Dostoevsky when he claimed to be a realist "in the higher sense." Realism as a prosaic mode would thus appear to be impure, and the boundaries erected in critical theory between realist prose and Symbolist verse would appear to be less than impermeable. Perhaps it would be useful to create a category of post-realism for writers like Tolstoy who work within realism to push beyond it. More accurately, Tolstoy should be considered a peri-modern whose prose experiments point in the direction of symbolist and modernist innovations. Most important, Tolstoy's differences with Western realism can be shown to be based on the Eastern Orthodox foundations of his aesthetic theories.

**Tolstoy's Iconic Aesthetics and Eastern Orthodoxy**

Gustafson has recently shown that the theological basis of Tolstoy's thought and artistry encompasses "a range of thought from ontology to epistemology to aesthetics, ethics, and political theory." Suggesting the principle of iconicity as the fundament of Eastern Orthodox theology, Gustafson proposes that Tolstoy's prose be read as motivated throughout by the impetus to emblematize, to replicate a world that is itself a replica, permeated by divine signification. Since Eastern Orthodox theology conceives of reality as not being separate from God, "Reality reflects the Divine, because God is in the world and the world is in God. Thus, everything in the world speaks of the Divine. . . . Reality is God's language, His word and His world. Life is revelation, and reality is emblematic." Tolstoy's realism, in Gustafson's view, is thus not "verisimilitudinous, but baldly emblematic."

Within the belief system of Eastern Orthodoxy, the icon, whether it is verbal or visual, is directly carnate—a window opening onto the celestial plane. If we characterize poetic tropes as "verbal icons" in Tolstoy's creative universe within the larger context of Eastern theology, the anxiety of representation and nostalgia for divine absence that de Man sees at the heart of lyrical emblems and tropes becomes irrelevant. As de Man's asserts, "The existence of the poetic image is itself a sign of divine absence, and the conscious use of poetic imagery
an admission of this absence. . . . Poetic language seems to originate in
the desire to draw closer and closer to the ontological status of the ob-
ject, and its growth and development are determined by this inclina-
tion.”49 By contrast, in Gustafson’s characterization of poetic images
within the Eastern Orthodox understanding, verbal icons “transcend
their material bounds and [disclose] the spirit,”50 thus affirming di-
vine presence and unifying object and reference.

The debate sketched here between East and West seems to hinge
on the Neoplatonic “extreme realist” conception of vision and repre-
sentation, that, in its profound skepticism of perception and reality,
forms the problematic epistemological status of linguistic versus vi-
sual epistemes. Or, to put it in other terms, the “picture theory of lan-
guage” and the “language theory of pictures”51 both presuppose that
cognition intercedes in perception to create a linguistically con-
structed field of meaning that ruptures the union between the real
and the real-as-perceived. In the Western philosophical tradition, this
gap is never closed. In the Eastern philosophical tradition, the gap is
not problematic. Instead, the attempt to suture is valorized as a con-
tinuing process not of impossible straining toward a perfect state and
an unattainable Godhead but as the experience of daily life. To un-
derstand the concept, it is necessary to adopt the Eastern Orthodox
value placed on a kenotic Christ—a Christ incarnated, whose path
through earthly existence may be followed in the simplest processes
of living itself.

The division between East and West may also be historically con-
ceived of as occurring during the iconoclast controversy, such that the
bifurcation in theological and aesthetic thought results in a mistrust of
representation in Western culture, as opposed to a belief in the power
of iconic representation in Eastern thought. In Anna Karenina Tol-
stoy treats the visual and the verbal as equally compromised; yet while
he explores the ambiguous field of vision in the Platonic sense, he rec-
ognizes its promise of transcendence through an iconic veracity.

In Anna Karenina Tolstoy employs the themes of vision, the vi-
sionary, visual art, and framing to address the problems in aesthetics
sketched above. He would later examine and critique these issues
directly in What Is Art?
The Prison House of Sight: Iconicity and the Beautiful versus the Sublime in Tolstoy’s Aesthetics

Tolstoy’s aesthetics as laid out in What Is Art? essentially constitute a Christianized version of the Kantian distinction between the beautiful and the sublime. In What Is Art? Tolstoy, citing authorities from Baumgarten to Darwin, rejects all possible definitions of art constructed on a notion of beauty and charges that the very attempt to define beauty must founder on the problem of taste and relativism as debated in the English eighteenth-century school of aesthetic philosophy:

There is and can be no explanation of why one thing pleases one man and displeases another, or vice versa. So that the whole existing science of aesthetics fails to do what we might expect from it. . . . namely, it does not define the qualities and laws of art or of the beautiful . . . or the nature of taste. . . . So the theory of art founded on beauty, expounded by aesthetics, and in dim outline professed by the public, is nothing but the setting up as good of that which has pleased and pleases us, i.e., pleases a certain class of people.52

Yet Tolstoy is curiously silent on that other pole of aesthetic perception, the category of the sublime. Although he mentions the sublime as a category in Burke’s aesthetics, he completely excises the concept from his discussion of Kantian aesthetics, which he limits to the notion of “pleasure without desire . . . so that art may be called a game, not in the sense of an unimportant occupation, but in the sense of a manifestation of the beauties of life itself without other aim than that of beauty.”53

For Kant, the categories of the beautiful and the sublime are articulated comparatively: “The beautiful in nature is connected with the form of the object which consists in having definite boundaries. The sublime, on the other hand, is to be found in a formless object, so far as in it or by occasion of it boundlessness is represented, and yet its totality is also present to thought.”54 Yet Kant is careful to reiterate that sublimity is an effect that resides in the viewer’s sense of the limits of his or her own imagination, such that it is “our attitude of thought,
which introduces sublimity into the representation of nature.”\textsuperscript{55} Since the viewer cannot comprehend the magnitude of the unbounded, “this very inadequateness for that idea in our faculty for estimating the magnitude of things of sense excites in us the feeling of a supersensible faculty. . . . Nature is . . . sublime in those of its phenomena whose intuition brings with it the idea of its infinity. This last can only come about by the inadequacy of the greatest effort of our imagination to estimate the magnitude of an object.”\textsuperscript{56}

This concept of the sublime emerges in Tolstoy’s treatise in the defining function of art he proposes to replace the sensual and pleasurable effects of the beautiful. The sublime response, understood as the experience of limits and the sensation of awe provoked by the intimations of what lies beyond them, is reworked by Tolstoy into Christian terms: as the transcendent reception or “infection” of overpowering emotion, which transmutes selfish, material, impulses into \textit{caritas} and forms a universal collective of Christian brotherhood.

The same distinctions are operative in Tolstoy’s use of vision, visual experience, and the visionary in \textit{Anna Karenina}, as will be discussed in chapter 5. In the experience of the beautiful—for example, in Vronsky’s infatuation with Anna’s beauty—the viewer is seduced by the beautiful and loses the sense of an enclosing frame that indicates sheer physicality and the veneer of embodiment. In other words, the sublime spirit is not envisioned once the seductive force of the beautiful body holds sway. In this sense, Tolstoy rigorously rejects the Kantian notion of aesthetic disinterest.

We can take Tolstoy’s description of Anna reading on the train as a textual illustration of his critique of Kant’s pure beauty: as she reads Anna desires to put into action every event described in the text. The aesthetic response as Tolstoy describes it in this passage is far from disinterested; the work of art, whether for good or evil, does not simply please, it infects, and its capacity to do so is not affected by its moral status. Thus, emphasis on the frame (the index of sublimity as the sensation of limits) is essential to remind the reader that what is viewed is a representation and to activate the sense of limits that extends the text’s meaning into a more abstract realm, beyond the impulses generated by its seductive, infectious representation.
Thus, throughout Anna Karenina Tolstoy exalts the perception of borders, boundaries, frames, and limits by characters in the novel. For example, when Lyovin views peasants working through a doorway that frames his vision into a genre painting, the beauty of the healthy, physical bodies of the working peasants strikes him as temporary and ephemeral. The body itself is a frame of life; the sublimity of death is what is suggested by his viewing of the scene. A similar moment occurs in War and Peace when Prince Andrei views his soldiers bathing in a stream and transforms their flesh into “cannon fodder.”

An emphasis on the frame is a modernist move that sets up the experience of the sublime and signals that the viewer must access ultimate vision through an aperture leading from the earth-bound into a transcendent realm. This is the function of icons as they are understood in Eastern Orthodox theology: icons are not representations but rather direct windows into heaven. Thus, the frame sets a limit that we recognize as the field of our own vision while we never lose sight of the fact that what is shown expands far beyond the borders that enclose it. Such an aesthetic challenges and reworks the realist conviction in regard to adequate representation that characterizes the Victorian novel. Tolstoy thus departs from the realist camp and affiliates himself with the modernists, as will be shown in the following chapter.

Tolstoy’s aesthetics thus offer a reworking, or a mirrored translation into Eastern terms, of the Western philosophical distinction between the beautiful and the sublime, while he simultaneously turns the ontology of perception away from the crisis in epistemology toward a metaphysical resolution. The Western category of the beautiful is understood in Tolstoy’s terms as the seduction of representation, the failure of Plato’s cave dwellers to recognize their enclosure and hence their blind acceptance of the shadow play they witness and prize as real. Tolstoy’s Easternization of Kant’s notion of the sublime retrieves the other aspect of Plato’s thought and saves vision from the prison house of sight by exalting the moments when vision knows its own bounds, the only way in which it can know the unbounded.