PART II

Frame: Image and the Boundaries of Vision in Anna Karenina
The Execution of Anna Karenina: Heroines Framed and Hung

It is only after my death that another can begin to aestheticize my personality.
Mikhail Bakhtin

Beauty Framed

In Anna Karenina Tolstoy uses framing and frame devices to thematize and illustrate the views on representation and aesthetics that he would later state explicitly in What Is Art? He thus engages the aesthetic debate over beauty and figures it in his novel in the framed beauty of the female body of his heroine, Anna Karenina. In adopting this strategy, he may be compared to other writers of symbolist prose, such as James Joyce or Marcel Proust, whose treatments of female beauty represent a conscious and reflexive variation on the traditional narrative strategy of depicting novelistic heroines as artworks and, by extension, a problematicatization of the fields of representation and symbolization.

Verbal presentations of heroines in artworks—portraits, busts, miniatures—occur with great frequency in the novelistic tradition; usually they serve as surrogates for the actual female body. The modernist response to this tradition is represented by Joyce and Proust, who exploit the symbolic power of such doubly coded descriptions. Tolstoy’s textual delineations of Anna as objet d’art fall between the (postindustrial) modern and the (historically avant-garde) modernist;
by juxtaposing Anna’s portraits and art of self-portraiture to Lyovin’s habit of viewing nature as a symbolic landscape painting, Tolstoy succeeds in thematizing the categories of the beautiful and the sublime as an issue keyed to gender and to sexuality. By creating a series of framed portraits of Anna—texts within texts—he repeatedly arrests his narrative flow in order to frame his heroine and alert the reader to the existence of the frame of beauty, corporality, and the marketplace of both, that confines her. Tolstoy thus conflates the aesthetic question and the woman question in a manner that places him among the Symbolists rather than the realists. Anna Karenina thus marks a shift from the approved and probably unconscious mechanism of describing women as works of art so common in realist prose to the modern anxiety over the possible meanings of such representations. In the modern crisis of reading and interpretation, Tolstoy even exceeds such symbolists as Proust and Joyce in his greater awareness of how the gaze is engendered, and in his redesignation of the power of beauty from its entrapped, pornographic role in Western bourgeois art to a transformative, even redemptive role in Eastern iconic representation. The viewers in Proust and Joyce experience a failure of interpretation and transmute their sense of the limitation of seeing into sublime experience; Tolstoy’s viewers respond in another mode altogether: in the realm of iconic perception. What I suggested on a theoretical plane in chapter 3, I will demonstrate in chapter 5 through close textual analysis of the moments in the novel where Anna is framed. Before turning to Tolstoy’s portraits of Anna, however, I will consider in this chapter what such framing prefigures: Anna’s ultimate enclosure—her death. I will do so by considering the literary tradition of the pictorialization of female characters to which Anna Karenina may be compared.

Frame as Foreclosure: The Pictorialization of Women in Literature

He stood still in the gloom of the hall . . . gazing up at his wife. There was grace and mystery in her attitude as if she were a symbol of something . . . If he were a painter he would paint her in that attitude.
In this central, time-stopping scene from Joyce’s “The Dead,” Gabriel’s gaze casts a framing net around a living woman, rendering explicit the hypostatization of the picturing mode of describing women that is so common in nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature. The topos, an extended ekphrasis (a verbal description of a visual art form), transforms the female form into a tableau vivant and renders her natural beauty intentionally and artificially artistic. In premodern novels such as La Princesse de Clèves it is often an actual portrait or reflection that serves as a pretext for this type of description; in the modern and modernist novel the heroines themselves are posed against scenic or framing backdrops, and this allows the author to elicit the full effect of the picturesque. That depictions of feminine beauty most often arouse a prurient interest rather than a transcendent vision constitutes the agon of Joyce’s narrative since Gabriel’s desire for his wife as the artistic object he has made of her is denied, just as the composition he had created, Distant Music, proves to be a hermeneutic failure. In fact, Gabriel’s creations and representations are always failures, as exemplified by his memory of an early love letter to his wife: “Why is it that words like these seem to me so dull and cold? Is it because there is no word tender enough to be your name?” (232). These words, “Like distant music . . . were borne toward him from the past” (232). The phrase “distant music” thus refers to both of Gabriel’s representative crises and failures in love. The distant music of his wife’s portrait has an entirely different meaning for her; it evokes the memory of a love that scorned embodiment and pursued the purity of disembodied emotion in death. Transcendence for Gabriel, in Joyce’s story, is inspired by a different kind of painting—the landscape, the dehumanized, dead world framed behind the window panes at the story’s close. It is the vision of falling snow covering the “living and the dead” that expands Gabriel’s eros into agape—his sexual desire for his wife is replaced by a universalized empathy for all humanity.

Epiphanies produced by viewing nature suggest the romantic notion of the sublime, the evocation of an invisible world that is exalted over the tangible, the visible, and the present. Luce Irigaray suggests that the realm of the invisible is invested with a superior valuation of masculinity resonant with the nostalgia and awe produced
in infancy by the absent father. Conversely, the category of the beautiful may be associated with the ever-present maternal body, an image of enclosure.³

Thus, the apparent superiority of landscape over portrait and of the beauty of the natural world over feminine beauty in the Western novel establishes a literary tradition where the beauty of the female body has lost its status as a natural category, as a result of the economics of marriage and sexual transaction, which forced feminine design and conscious intent to produce the effect of beauty. Women have lost their status as beautiful objects of the phenomenal world and become, instead, objets d’art. Beauty as signifier (body of soul) becomes unstable and charged with anxiety in the male gaze as the would-be purchaser fears being duped by mere appearance. So Seldon muses in *The House of Mirth*:

> He was aware that the qualities distinguishing her from the herd of her sex were chiefly external, as though a fine glaze of beauty and fastidiousness had been applied to vulgar clay. Yet the analogy left him unsatisfied, for a coarse texture will not take a high finish; and was it not possible that the material was fine but that circumstances had fashioned it into a futile shape?⁴

For Proust and Joyce, the momentum of this tradition culminates in the crisis of representation and interpretation characteristic of Symbolism and modernism, when vision focuses on its own blindness and generates the moment of the sublime. Therefore, both Proust and Joyce abandon the beautiful as a dangerous and impenetrable aesthetic. Both turn to the romantic sublime as the solution: in Joyce’s final landscape of snow-covered Ireland and in the vision of Proust’s narrator of church spires rising from the valley.

As discussed in the preceding chapter, Tolstoy would ultimately reject this duality and argue for a different action of representation altogether, one that unerringly unites the viewer and the viewed and produces a community of response in empathic brotherhood. If the gallery of the aesthetic philosophical category of the beautiful is constituted of portraits, the sublime enlists landscapes. Tolstoy makes
rogues' galleries of both of these, as the next chapter will illustrate. Anna's final visions—portraits of humanity in the vanity fair—alienate her from humanity and drive her to death while Lyovin's symbolic landscapes transport him to a sublime isolation. It remains for the iconic power of great art to create the Tolstoyan moment of supersublime harmony and transcendence.

Tolstoy's novel reflects the author's formation within a different, non-Western philosophical and theological tradition and anticipates his creation of an original category within both Western and Eastern aesthetic philosophy. The visionary and visual moments in Anna Karenina illustrate the dangers of envisioning within the categories of the sublime and the beautiful established by Western aesthetics and literature, and they offer an alternative view that revives the beautiful, the embodied, and the feminine. The romantic sublime, hinging as it does on intellectual effort and recognition of its own failures, is deconstructed when the symbolic systems Lyovin construes from his landscapes are overturned by visions of framed feminine beauty that work directly and intuitively. As I will demonstrate in the next chapter, these visions are iconic in that they live or seem to live—they are directly carnate embodiments of the spiritual force of love. Reading feminine beauty in any other way dooms the female body to death.

The type of portrait described above occurs almost compulsively within a literary tradition where beauty evokes extraordinary anxiety that can only be assuaged through the destruction of feminine beauty and the superimposition of a masculine disembodied sublime. Literary works that participate in this tradition present portraits within texts and offer texts as portraits, thus creating a tail chase of artifice pursuing the real, the natural, and the genuine (the clay beneath the glaze). By contrast, the landscape—whether a windowed view or insetting, a framed vision, or even the mirrored interior or setting bracketed by door posts and entryways—acquires the status of the "real" world, adequately represented. The portrait, on the other hand, becomes a figure of reproduction and evokes the ambivalence and anxiety attendant on the exclusively feminine mysteries of human creation.

For example, in Proust's Combray, a pregnant kitchen girl is com-
pared to Giotto’s etching of Charity, and this provides the pretext for an extended disquisition on the disjunction between the emblem and the emblematic:

[M. Swann] it was who pointed out the resemblance, and when he inquired after the kitchen-maid he would say: “Well, how goes it with Giotto’s Charity?” And indeed the poor girl, whose pregnancy had swelled and stoutened every part of her, even including her face and her squarish, elongated cheeks, did distinctly suggest those virgins, so sturdy and mannish as to seem matrons, rather, in whom the Virtues are personified in the Arena Chapel. And I can see now that those Virtues and Vices of Padua resembled her in another respect as well. For just as the figure of this girl had been enlarged by the additional symbol which she carried before her, without appearing to understand its meaning, with no awareness in her facial expression of its beauty and spiritual significance, as if it were an ordinary, rather heavy burden, so it is without any apparent suspicion of what she is about that the powerfully built housewife who is portrayed in the Arena Chapel beneath the label “Caritas” . . . embodies that virtue, for it seems impossible that any thought of charity can ever have found expression in her vulgar and energetic face.5

The fact that the motto of the emblem caritas provides an explanation for the composition that would otherwise fail to convey its meaning, “that Charity devoid of charity,”6 is reproduced in the conception of pregnancy itself. Pregnant with a meaning that is indiscernible and incomprehensible to the male gaze, filled with a mystery that is, on the one hand, only tangential to the figure herself, but of which she, on the other hand, is the opaque embodiment, Giotto’s Charity symbolizes anxiety in representation and a failure of interpretation: “[I]n later years I came to understand that the arresting strangeness . . . of these frescoes derived from the great part played in them by symbolism, and the fact that this was represented not as a symbol (for the thought symbolized was nowhere expressed).”7 The exegesis of Proust’s narrator’s makes explicit the unease generated by the mysteries of the female body and reproduction and recalls Joyce’s narrative of failed visualization. Thus, Gabriel notes that his wife stood on the stair “as if
she were a symbol of something. He asked himself what is a woman standing on the stairs in the shadow, listening to distant music, a symbol of?" She is a symbol of symbolization as well as the failure of symbolization. Gabriel cannot hear the music she hears, but only sees its effect, which, like the effect of beauty itself, is external and arresting, but indeterminate, subject to misreading. The difficulty in reading woman is transferred into a textual strategy of creating a fixed and forever stilled portrait, where style and immobilization combine to provide the semblance of available meaning. Yet both Gabriel and Proust's narrators are blind—denying the female body its sublime potentials while imprisoning the framed woman in the mode of an icon or emblem. The portrait, whether actual or invented, thus participates in the tradition of Mariolatry, in that its sublimity depends on an external—arbitrarily symbolic rather than innately iconic—investiture of meaning.

The pictorialization of women in fiction is accompanied by the theme of eroticism and acquisition. In some novels, beginning with La Princesse de Clèves and following folkloric formulas, portraits arouse desire and act as surrogates of the desired object or as charmed substitutes. Thus, Prince Myshkin of Dostoevsky's Idiot is doomed to fall in love with Nastasya Filipovna once he has seen her portrait and recognized the suffering in her face. In the nineteenth-century novel the concept of marriage as the sale of a beautiful object creates the "double bind" in the "temptation to be a beautiful object" described by Judith Fetterley: "Marriage is deadly because it is an economic transaction in which the beautiful object becomes the possession of the man who has money enough to buy her." Or, as Wendy Steiner comments with regard to The House of Mirth, "[Lily Bart] has fallen under the spell of the ideology that most empowers her beauty—the literary romance—and in that system of values she cannot be a transcendent love object if her beauty is merely the coin that buys her wealth and station."

Resisting any reduction of self to a beautiful object for sale results in death for Lily Bart, or destruction for the Victorian heroine, as is the case for example with Edith Dombey, whose beauty is described in explicitly economic terms by Dickens:
It was a remarkable characteristic of this lady's beauty that it appeared to vaunt and assert itself without her aid and against her will. She knew that she was beautiful: it was impossible that it could be otherwise: but she seemed with her own pride to defy her very self. Whether she held cheap attractions that could only call forth admiration that was worthless to her, or whether she designed to render them more precious to admirers by this usage of them, those to whom they were precious seldom paused to consider.\textsuperscript{12}

During Edith's courtship by Mr. Dombey, hers is "the face of a proud woman, engaged in a sordid and miserable transaction."\textsuperscript{13} She rebels against the fate she cannot resist: "There is no slave in a market, there is no horse in a fair, so shown and offered and examined and paraded \ldots as I have been."\textsuperscript{14} A similar feeling is at the basis of Kitty Shcherbatsky's illness:

Father began saying something to me just now. \ldots It seems to me he thinks all I want is to be married. Mother takes me to a ball: it seems to me she only takes me to get me married off as soon as possible. \ldots Eligible suitors, as they call them—I can't bear to see them. It seems to me they're taking stock of me and summing me up. Before to go anywhere in a ball dress was a simple joy to me, I admired myself, now I feel ashamed and awkward. (134)

Woman's beauty is thus appropriated, acquired, and framed as the object of the male gaze and desire and as the subject of economic transactions. Sometimes possession is taken through the portrait rather than the actual body, as in La Princesse de Clèves. Alternately, feminine beauty creates the desire for the creation of a work of art, as in Emma or Middlemarch. In the latter examples, the creation of a portrait is based on a deception or delusion, as when Emma paints an idealized portrait of Harriet for her own suitor, who is much more intrigued by the "portrait" of Emma painting, or when Vaumnann pretends to take Mr. Casaubon's likeness for a painting of Thomas Aquinas in order to paint Dorothea.

The viewing of portraits, like the describing of them, constitutes a form of textual art criticism, just as Swann's comparison of Odette
to a Botticelli painting becomes another example of one of his unfinished essays in art criticism and thus another failure in his approach to aesthetics—he cannot complete his work, and he falls in love with a woman who is “not his type.” Alternatively, painterly styles may be used to frame character, as is the case with the demonic, pre-Raphaelite portrait of Lady Audley:

No one but a pre-Raphaelite would have painted, hair by hair, those feathery masses of ringlets with every glimmer of gold and every shadow of pale brown. No one but a pre-Raphaelite would have so exaggerated every attribute of that delicate face as to give a lurid brightness to the blonde complexion and a strange, sinister light to the deep blue eyes. No one but a pre-Raphaelite could have given to that pretty pouting mouth the hard and almost wicked look it had in the portrait . . . it was as if you had burned strange-colored fires before my lady’s face, and by their influence brought out new lines and new expressions never seen in it before. The perfection of feature, the brilliancy of coloring were there; but it seemed as if the painter had copied medieval monstrosities until his brain had grown bewildered, for my lady, in his portrait of her, had the aspect of a beautiful fiend.\(^{15}\)

The portraits of women in Western novels, and the tendency of the novel to describe women in pictorial terms, establishes a tradition for making the notion of beauty and corporality figure as the problematic moment of blocked signification and ultimate transcendence in aesthetics and representation.\(^{16}\) Anna Karenina participates in this tradition, deconstructs it, and offers an alternative vision.

**Frame as Finality: The Death of the Heroine**

For Mikhail Bakhtin the issues discussed above are endemic to all portraiture, regardless of the subject’s gender:

Individuals in painting (including portraiture) are finalized or “closed.” [Paintings] present man exhaustively; he is already com-
pletely there and cannot become other. The faces of people who have already said everything, who have already died [or] may as well have died. The artist concentrates his attention on the finalizing, defining, closing features. We see all of him and expect nothing more (or different). He cannot be reborn, rejuvenated, or transformed—this is his finalizing (ultimate and final) stage.\textsuperscript{17}

In this passage, one of Bakhtin's rare descriptions of a visual rather than a verbal text, his unacknowledged bias against the static, the spatial, and the lyrical emerges as the flip side of his valorization of the modes of narrativity and temporality. Bakhtin's perception of the problem of characterization that is raised by the notion of portraiture seems to suggest that any verbal description of character (as in a novel or other prose work) is superior to any pictorial representation; the novelistic characterization permits the character to be enfolded in a series of dialogic events and encounters that are unfolded over time and thus permit the evolutionary and developmental shifts in character and chronotope that Bakhtin valued so highly.\textsuperscript{18} Yet such a viewpoint ignores the ultimately cyclical nature and framing force of the prose work itself, whose beginnings and ends and episodic selectivity ultimately close off character as firmly as any frame. Furthermore, Bakhtin minimizes the tendency of prose toward the pictorial, as for example the "spatial configurations" and lyricism realized in the topos of \textit{ekphrasis}: the use of actual or virtual portraits that become framed moments within the verbal text given over to description. These arrest readers and alert them to the problem of embodied and represented character.

The issue of the verbal representation of visual art and visual illustrations of verbal texts received its classic treatment in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's \textit{Laocoön}. It should be recalled that Lessing's discussion of the differences between visual and verbal representations is a response to tendencies in aesthetic philosophy that assume the superiority of one or the other mode. What seems to be true in the case of both painting or verbal art is that the action of framing, enclosing, and outlining seems in itself to impose an absolute perspective; the frame serves not so much as a break between the real and the repre-
sented worlds as an indexical arrow directed inward. Drawing a frame thus draws a conclusion, as if what has been chosen to be framed is intended to serve as the absolute symbol of itself.

Bakhtin’s concern in the passage cited above seems to reflect a certain anxious conviction that the process of framing is so finalizing a movement that it will ultimately denude the painting or portrait of its potential meanings. But how does the death of multiple meanings become translated into the death of the person represented? Surely the viewer’s sense of object permanence (understanding that the subject’s life continues beyond the moment represented) constitutes a secondary frame around the original utterance, a porous and continually changing frame that allows for numerous re-visions of the original? Bakhtin seems to be concerned not with a general truth about painting but with the kind of painting that considers that it has told the truth; in other words, an “official” mode of portraiture in which the moment framed is believed to be a distillation of the ultimate truth about the subject. And since this ultimate truth about any living subject can only be constituted after death, the frame of the painting assumes the status of the black border of the obituary. The assumption that everything that needs to be told about an individual has been told in a portrait accomplishes the reduction of the self to the physical and thus ends the “inner” spiritual life.

As thus sketched, the portrait or bust becomes a death mask most clearly in the description of novelistic heroines, for whom beauty more often than not foretells doom. Anna Karenina may be read according to this overdetermined plot of beauty and fatality, yet the very fact of Anna’s suicide forces us to confront the questions raised in chapter 2: does Anna’s end reflect Tolstoy’s enactment of divine punishment and participation in a judgmental gaze or does it represent his chastisement of a world and plot that allows no other conclusion? In comparison to the deaths of other literary heroines, Anna’s suicide is distinctive both in terms of its placement in her narrative—she is not, in fact, abandoned by her lover—and in terms of her chosen means. Indeed, the literary antecedents for her leap beneath the train are male protagonists driven by shame and ruin: Dickens’ Carker in Dombey and Son and Trollope’s Lopez in The Prime Minister.
Viewed against this tradition, Anna’s suicide acquires a masculine, even a heroic character and no longer seems to belong to that register of pathetic, fallen women who die for love or its lack.

As Nicole Loraux has observed, in classical literature, heroines met their death (whether it was murder, sacrifice, or suicide) in the throat: either by hanging, decapitation, or cutting of the throat.\(^{19}\) Thus, in a textual movement of figural and literal decapitation, the portrait of Anna Karenina serves to prefigure her final enclosure in finitude. The action of severing the body from the head, the ornamental proclivities of a knotted rope or beading of blood, and, most important, the preservation of Anna’s severed head from damage all suggest a form of framing—the heroine is transformed into a mute bust of immobile marble; she is ultimately seen as an inanimate objet d’art. Such an event occurs literally in *War and Peace*, where the statue executed to adorn the grave of the “little Princess” uncannily resembles her and seems to have the expression Prince Andrei had seen in her dying face.

In Victorian literature, heroines commonly lose their heads before dying. When Anna Karenina in the delirium of postpartum complications comments, “How badly painted those violets are, not like real flowers at all,” she recalls those dying heroines who, like Ophelia, spend their last delirious hours counting and naming flora and fauna. In a similar way, Catherine Earnshaw Linton, dying during complications of labor, pulls feathers from her pillow and names the birds of the moor above Wuthering Heights. It is often the deathbed scene that offers the best subject for a dramatic pictorialization of the dying or condemned heroine, as Hardy well knew when his last view of Tess had her laid out like a sacrifice on the stones of Stonehenge, or as Flaubert capitalized on by having Emma Bovary’s last act be that of contemplating her face framed in a mirror. Mirrors offer a natural opportunity to frame the heroine; Emily Brontë thus frames Catherine by having her look in a mirror that she takes to be the black press of her childhood room at Wuthering Heights. Like Anna Karenina who, before her last ride to suicide, looks in the mirror and does not recognize herself, Catherine does not understand that the “face in the press” is her reflection in the looking glass.
The death of criminals and adulteresses condemned to decapitation or hanging is usually deferred or concealed in Victorian fiction. The death of Tess of the D’Urbervilles is an example of an execution that is not witnessed but is instead signaled by the mounting of a black flag. Her dead body is not seen; it is only prefigured in the Stonehenge scene. Hetty Sorrel, the infanticide, is sentenced to be hung but is reprieved and her sentence is commuted. The bigamist and would-be murdereress, Lady Audley, is spared capital punishment and confined in an asylum for the insane. Even for those adulteresses who engineer their own execution through suicide, public mutilation is usually avoided and death is courted through planned self-destruction à la Camille: exposure to the elements (Lady Dedlock), fasting prior to childbirth (Catherine Earnshaw Linton), murder invited (Nastasya Filipovna), or illness not fended off (Lady Lynne). The latter heroines’ demise could almost be construed as actual suicide, the chosen end of Emma Bovary or Anna Karenina.

Literary suicides can be divided into those that are driven by the plot and those that are ideological. Plots that require suicide involve ruin, failure, loss, or self-denial; ideas that require suicide involve existential crises, commitment to an ideology requiring suicide, or noble self-sacrifice. The former have come to be feminized, either according to the protagonist’s gender or by reason of the failure of manhood. The latter are masculinized, even valorized, as a kind of warfare, as the courageous and willful resistance to destiny, plots, and social conventions. In the first instance the character succumbs to plot, but in the second the character rises above it.

A variety of types recur among plotted suicides in the nineteenth-century novel: (1) the sensational suicide, the almost supernatural variety of self-destruction that overtakes Dickens’ characters for example, propelling them under trains or into spontaneous combustion; (2) anorectic suicide, the self-willed death through inanition or exposure that is so common to the Victorian heroine; (3) the escapist suicide, committed in the face of social ruin, shame, or loss; (4) the romantic suicide, like the suicide of Werther, for example. By contrast, we might designate a nonplotted, or ideological suicide, a suicide committed in service to a higher ideal, a heroic act of self-sacrifice
offered in war or revolution, such as Sydney Carton’s “far, far better thing” or Kirillov’s suicide to prove a point. Akin to an ideological suicide would be a fictitious suicide, such as that staged by Sand’s Jacques or Chernyshevsky’s Lopukhov, who pretend to commit suicide in order to allow their wives to remarry the men they love. Within this last tradition is the hero of Tolstoy’s *The Living Corpse*, who stages a pseudosuicide to allow his wife to marry her lover, Karenin.

Cultural attitudes toward suicide, whether real or fictional, tended to shift in the course of the nineteenth century as a result of the increasing treatment of suicide attempts as a medical problem. In popular representations on stage and in penny romances, suicides are prevailingly of the Ophelia variety, where the dying woman is seen as deranged or mentally ill or psychologically broken. An important example for *Anna Karenina* is Ostrovsky’s play *The Storm*, where the adulterous heroine, although sympathetically portrayed, becomes hysterical prior to her suicide. Barbara Gates considers this tendency in the popular conception of suicide to be a “medicalization” or “feminization” of suicide, or, as Higonnet puts it, cultural attitudes began to “shift from a moralistic but potentially heroic vision of [suicide ideological suicide] to a more scientific yet demeaning acceptance of the act as illness.”

Within this framework, it is has been easy for critics to read Anna’s suicide as a weak, impulsive, and vindictive act. The shift from a view of suicide as a masculine heroic act to a view of it as an irrational, hysterical act resulting from feminine weakness or medical pathology emerges in a dichotomous literary representation of romantic versus ideological suicides.

The ideological suicide was not always masculine, as classical examples from Antigone to Joan of Arc suggest. Despite the fact that men’s suicides outnumbered women’s suicides in the nineteenth century, the popular perception of the typical suicide as reflected in literature was of a woman crossed in love or fallen. In addition, according to Gates, “Many Victorians wanted to believe that ‘redundant women’ had really no place to go but toward death.” In part, this reflected a general perception in Victorian society of women as being afflicted by vapors, hysterics, female ailments, or a weaker nature.

While there has been no study corroborating a similar phenom-
enon in Russia, popular literature in Russia perpetuated the same European stereotypes, beginning with Nikolai Karamzin’s Poor Liza. Even Kitty in Anna Karenina succumbs to a wasting illness, an undiagnosable “female malady” ascribed to her broken heart. Although her illness is deconstructed by Tolstoy as a physical symptom of shame and distaste for the marriage market, Kitty comes close to accomplishing the kind of anorectic suicide that afflicted and carried away many a less resilient Victorian heroine.

Because the heroine’s suicide is seen as plotted, inevitable, and in some sense natural to her sex, this very action of woman’s suicide acquires a somatic, involuntary character. The heroine is drawn to her suicide as Dickens’ suicidal heroine is drawn to the murky waters of the Thames. As Higonnet comments, “The voluntary act often appears involuntary; the quest for autonomy is replaced by breakdown of identity.”27 Thus, a heroine’s suicide loses any ideological quality it may have had even as a form of social rebellion, which it was implicitly recognized to be. As Florence Nightingale wrote of women “starving for work” but trapped in the idle idyll of Victorian domesticity, “Some are only deterred from suicide because it is the most distinct way to say to an indifferent God: ‘I will not, I will not do as Thou wouldst have me.’”28 Alternately, suicide is the only possible closure for a life of disobedience or deviance, for it expresses the heroine’s remorse for her sins. In this sense, the heroine’s suicide reflects primitive cultural taboos, apparently still practiced, that require a woman to commit suicide following rape or dishonor. Thus, Higonnet concludes: “[E]ven those 19th century male writers most sympathetic to women’s plight in bourgeois life subvert the heroism of women’s voluntary deaths in their focus on social and masculine victimization; the reliance on social explanation which climaxes in the realistic novel . . . underplays the heroine’s choice.”29

The Execution of Anna Karenina

“The marvel,” one critic has commented a propos of Tolstoy’s “execution” of Anna, “is that Tolstoy had the patience and compassion to stay
his hand as long as he did.” Anna’s is generally considered a romantic and a plotted suicide that is essentially impulsive. As Konstantin Leontiev writes, “Anna leaves the house without any plan or decision; her decision is made almost instinctively, under the influence of chance impressions.” In fact, Anna contemplates suicide continuously and obsessively from the time of her final visit with her son and her appearance at the opera, which can be read as a scene of public execution and social death. Long before she even plans to leave the house, suicide is in the back of her thoughts:

“I want love and there is none. So, then, all is over.” She repeated the words she had said, “and it must be ended.”

“But how?” she asked herself, and she sat down in a low chair before the mirror.

Thoughts of where she would go now . . . and many other ideas . . . came into her head; but she did not give herself up to them with all her heart. At the bottom of her heart was some obscure idea that alone interested her, but she could not get clear sight of it. Thinking once more of Aleksey Aleksandrovich, she recalled the time of her illness after her confinement, and the feeling which never left her at that time. “Why didn’t I die?” and the words and the feeling of that time came back to her. And all at once she knew what was in her soul.

Yes, it was that idea alone which solved all. “Yes, to die!” (774)

Anna’s suicide is also ascribed to baser motives since she thinks, “And he will feel remorse; will be sorry; will love me; he will suffer on my account” (774). Yet this particular passage may also be understood, as Higonnet reads it, as Anna’s attempt to create her own meaning for her life. In fact, her first thoughts are to eliminate the “shame and disgrace” experienced by her husband, son, and herself: “it will all be saved by my death.”

Tolstoy himself did not characterize Anna’s suicide as romantic in his caustic parody of the novel that was meant to reproach Katkov for suppressing the final part and publishing only a paragraph summarizing its events. Tolstoy suggested that Katkov might have spared himself the cost of printing the entire novel by publishing only an abstract: “Upset with things in Moscow, Anna Karenina commits sui-
icide.” Tolstoy’s synopsis tellingly does not mention Vronsky, love, or Anna’s status as a fallen woman. Furthermore, Anna’s romantic plot does not demand that she commit suicide since Vronsky has not abandoned her—her fantasies about Vronsky’s potential infidelities and abusive treatment of her create a motive for suicide from literary models, almost as though the suicide were her goal and the loss of her lover its necessary pretext.

Because of the philosophical reflections and observations that precede it, Anna’s suicide has an ideological quality and it is not unreasonable to conclude that she commits suicide for the same reasons that Lyovin hides guns and ropes from himself at the novel’s end. Both characters are aware of the existence of a senseless evil, as exemplified by Lyovin’s thoughts:

“In infinite time, in infinite matter, in infinite space, is formed a bubble-organism, and that bubble lasts a while and bursts, and that bubble is I.”

It was an agonizing fallacy. . . . But it was not merely a fallacy, it was the cruel jest of some wicked power, some evil, hateful power, to whom one should not submit.

He must escape from this power. And the means of escape every man had in his own hands. He had but to cut short this dependence on evil. And there was one means—death. (822)

In this sense, Anna’s pursuit of death begins as the culmination of her plot of rebellion and fall, but it continues as a presaging of modern existential despair, fear and trembling.

Anna fails at her attempt to die the death of the Victorian heroine—her puerperal fever is not fatal—nor does she succeed at the French route of poison through an accidental overdose of morphine, despite her addiction. Although Tolstoy’s original intention was for Anna to commit suicide by drowning (a choice that would have been more in keeping with the traditional manner of women’s suicide), her death beneath the train is a more potent emblem of the theme of beauty and fatality. The viewing of the body by Vronsky gives us some indication of what Lyovin would have seen: “On the table shamelessly
sprawled out among strangers, the blood-stained body so recently full of life; the head unhurt, thrown back with its weight of hair, and the curling tresses about the temple, and the exquisite face, with red, half-opened mouth, the strange, frozen expression, piteous on the lips and awful in the fixed open eyes” (813). Thus, Anna’s suicide constitutes in some sense her final self-portrait. When we recall that in earlier drafts Lyovin’s philosophical conversion was to proceed after he had viewed Anna’s body at the station, the scene where he views her portrait can be read as a clear substitute. In the final version, it is an artist’s portrait of Anna that Lyovin views but one no less transformative.

The moment of this viewing, which we are about to consider in the following chapter, is the site that unites the many themes of the novel: the issue of forgiveness and judgment, the framing that prefigures death and the enclosure of meaning, the iconicity of aesthetics that discloses meaning. The figure of the framed woman regarded by a viewer in the text sets up the mise-en-abîme for our viewing of Tolstoy’s novel, itself a portrait, and makes our choice in the paradigm of judgment and execution a critical and inescapable one. In his discussion of painting, Roland Barthes comments that “the included observer is metonymic for our own observation . . . [and our] . . . follies of pattern hunting and obsessive frame mongering.” The interpretive failures of Joyce’s Gabriel and Proust’s narrator are indicative of the modernist response to a recognized symbolism and mirror our response to a doubly framed image, a text within a text. In the next chapter, we view Lyovin viewing Anna—woman and portrait—and thus are made aware of the direction of our own gaze and the degree to which the novel presents Anna as spectacle and implicates us in its specularity.