A Painted Lady: The Poetics of *Ekphrasis*

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In *What Is Art?* Tolstoy discusses a play in which “the author wishes to transmit to the spectators pity for a persecuted girl. To evoke this feeling in the audience by means of art, the author should either make one of the characters express this pity in such a way as to infect everyone, or he should describe the girl’s feelings correctly.”¹ Instead, Tolstoy complains, most authors fail because they do not utilize these techniques but rely on verisimilitudinous or extreme effects. In *Anna Karenina* there is a spectator in the text who reflects the audience’s act of viewing and judging the heroine we are meant to pity. The scene where Lyovin and Anna meet is preceded by Lyovin’s viewing of Mikhailov’s portrait of Anna. Lyovin’s response to the artwork and to the actual woman infects the reader and simultaneously directs our gaze to Anna as a represented character, and to art—the portrait, the novel—as the means for infecting us with pity and compassion. Thus, the description of Lyovin’s act of gazing and the verbal description of the visual work of art constitute an *ekphrasis* (the term is used here in the sense developed by classicists, that is, the verbal description of a visual work of art).² This moment allows Tolstoy the opportunity for meta-aesthetic commentary.

Roland Barthes describes *ekphrasis* as “a brilliant detachable morsel [of description], sufficient unto itself,” and introduced solely for the “pleasure of verbal portraiture.”³ His surprisingly limited definition disregards the potential for *ekphrasis* to function not just as a de-
scription of art but as art criticism and meta-aesthetic discourse. For example, it is possible to read Homer’s description of the shield forged by Hephaestus for Achilles as a pretext for describing the customs of the day; however, no one could read Virgil’s description of Aeneas’s shield in this fashion. Because of its intertextual relationship to Homer’s description, the passage expresses a reflexivity and awareness of the value of art and description that Virgil employs to valorize Rome; as Lessing comments: “Homer makes Vulcan devise decorations because he is to make a shield worthy of a divine workman. Virgil seems to make him fashion the shield for the sake of the decorations.”

Similarly, since John Keats’s extended *ekphrasis* in his “Ode on a Grecian Urn” exalts the classical ethos in its visual inscription, it also necessarily comments on form and on the apparent superiority of visual over verbal or aural representation: “Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard /Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on; / Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear’d, / Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone.” On the one hand, the visual form is superior to other media because it preserves forever the ecstatic moment: “Forever panting, forever young.” On the other hand, the ode comments on the representational conventions and constraints of that “Cold Pastoral.” *Ekphrasis* thus establishes a tension between narrativity and stasis: in the ekphrastic moment, the stilling of the narrative flow required for ekphrastic exposition is renarrativized in the course of the temporally elaborated descriptions of the visual work of art. This paradox of modes returns us to the problem referred to in aesthetics by the term *ut pictura poesis* (“poetry is like painting”). This notion developed from a casual analogy in Horace’s *Ars poetica* into a precept of aesthetics and literary theory that poetry should be like painting. The classical emphasis on *mimēsis* or imitation as the ultimate goal of a work of art informed the critical debate on the limitations of representation within and between the two media. The accepted notion, as stated by Longinus in his treatise *On the Sublime* and later developed by Burke in his *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, exalted the capacity of painting to represent things themselves. Poetry, on the other hand, could only “affect by sympathy rather than imitation; to display rather the effect
of things on the mind of the speaker, or of others, rather than to present a clear idea of the things themselves (172).\textsuperscript{5}

*Ut pictura poesis* thus engages the phenomenological issue of traditional aesthetics as to whether or not poetry constitutes thinking in images. This latter view implies that the contemplation or creation of images facilitates the primary cognitive processes associated with the preverbal or extraveral states of childhood, mysticism, and ecstatic visions. The association of literary pictorialism with primal vision and epiphany privileges *ekphrasis* and, by extension, other descriptive moments in a text that organize visual perceptions in a pictorial manner. Such “framed” and “frozen” moments reflect the degree to which art is taken to inform and form our vision, and the extent to which vision is exalted as the conveyer of untranslatable and unnameable spiritual grace. The capacity of verbal texts to create vivid pictorial effects is seen as a fulfillment of *energeia*, expressed by the term *hypotyposis*, which Barthes claims may serve to place things right beneath the eyes of the listener, not in a neutral way but in a manner that releases into the representation all the force of desire (“mettre les choses sous les yeux de l’auditeur, non point d’une façon neutre, constative, mais en laissant à la representation tout l’éclat du désir”).\textsuperscript{6} When the *hypotyposis* is self-conscious, that is, aesthetically framed (ekphrastic), literary pictorialism becomes a commentary on all visual practice. Thus, as Mary Ann Caws suggests, this technique “makes a statement of coherence against the narrative flux and against the flux of our own time, so that our reading of frames and of the framed passages . . . is the model of not just reading, but of what, while reading, we live.”\textsuperscript{7}

The fact therefore that we organize our life experiences into narratives and our views of the world into pictures exposes us to the risk of being poor storytellers and mediocre artists. At worst, we are victims of the clichés and conventions that tell us how to make pictures; at best, our artistic structuring of experience lends coherence and epiphanic illumination to otherwise random and chaotic experience, and a sense of aesthetic closure weaves together the loose and unfinished, revealed threads of life. The danger is that we risk the enclosure that constricts, the form that deforms, or the representation that misrepresents.
A desire for coherence in the presentation of self or the quest for psychic unity and meaning in existence, the urge to contextualize life experiences, increases our desire for the end of the story or the frame of the picture. Thus, ominously, the desire for a finished self-portrait or a comprehensive icon is subtended by the death instinct, as critics like Mikhail Bakhtin and Peter Brooks have noted. As Jean-Paul Sartre commented about the process of writing his autobiography, “I became my own obituary.” Both the main protagonists of Anna Karenina, Anna and Lyovin, pursue meaning through visions, both rely on frames to secure understanding, and both find themselves drawn toward death. Their desire to frame and compose their views of self and their interpretations of life according to artistic models suggests that we may read them as artist figures. Anna willfully completes her self-portrait by committing suicide while, in the essential contrast of the novel, Lyovin leaves his narrative unfinished and open ended and “goes on living.” This contrast is overdetermined by the exigencies of plot and gender: many novelistic heroines, whose only two choices are oppression in marriage or liberation through death, “choose to die in order to shape their lives as whole.” Lyovin’s vision of Anna, occurring at a critical moment in the novel when the intersecting trajectories of the two protagonists’ lives emphasize their essential kinship and differences, is doubly marked as the viewing of a woman and the viewing of a representation of a woman. It is a great work of art, Mikhailov’s portrait of Anna, that occupies central view.

Lyovin’s Laocoön

The power of the ekphrastic moments in Anna Karenina motivated John Bayley to draw the conclusion that Tolstoy’s views on art “are expressed more powerfully in the narration of Anna than in his theoretical statements on art.” Certainly, the passages in Anna Karenina dealing with the artist Mikhailov and the other moments where art is discussed by the novel’s characters allow Tolstoy to delineate the creative process and to comment on aesthetic theory. Thus, Lyovin’s observations while attending a concert of modern music become a
disquisition on aesthetics in general. In this episode, Lyovin attends a concert of Balakirev’s *King Lear in the Steppe*, a piece “in the modern style” of the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*. During the entr’acte, Lyovin enters into a debate with his friend:

Lyovin maintained that the mistake of Wagner and all his followers lay in their trying to take music into the sphere of another art, just as poetry goes wrong when it tries to paint a face, which is what should be left to painting, and as an instance of this mistake he cited the sculptor who carved in marble certain shadows of poetical images flitting around the figure of the poet on the pedestal. “These shadows were so far from being shadows that they were positively clinging to the ladder,” said Lyovin. The comparison pleased him, but he could not remember whether or not he had used the same phrase before. (714)

Lyovin is right to question the originality of his statement. In fact, his habit of unconscious quotation overtakes him in this section of the novel, where the pressures of urban social life seduce him into a constant theft of bons mots in pursuit of the appearance of wit. For example, earlier in this chapter, Lyovin quips that punishing a revolutionary by exiling him to Europe is like casting a pike back into the water. Lyovin later realizes that he had “borrowed” the bon mot from an acquaintance who had read it in a newspaper article that in turn quoted from Krylov’s fables. Lyovin’s indictment of the sculptural (material) representation of poetic (intangible) ideas is similarly not original but derivative: it strongly echoes, at several points, Lessing’s *Laocoön* (1766), the classic polemic on the Horatian precept of *ut pictura poesis*.

Lyovin wants to argue against the doctrine of *ut pictura poesis*; yet his sculptural example as he describes it does not serve as an apt illustration to support the separation of painting (specifically, portraiture) from poetry. The sculptural example is only effective when read against the intertext of *Laocoön*. Lessing’s discussion focuses on the critical controversy over whether Virgil’s description of the agony of Laocoön antecedes or is derivative of the classical sculpture of Laocoön being devoured by serpents, and it concludes with his famous theses on the need to modify the subject to accommodate different modes of representation. Imitating Lessing, Lyovin employs a
sculptural work for his example, but he replaces the figure of the high priest Laocoön with the figure of a poet. Lyovin describes the sculptural work as hampered by clinging shadows that were meant to represent “poetic ideas.” We may see the shadows in terms of the Laocoön sculpture as a recasting of the serpents that encircle Laocoön and
whose different positions in the two works (poem and sculpture) form the basis for much of Lessing’s argumentation. In The Aeneid (2. 11. 305–307), the serpents mount Laocoön’s body and engulf him totally: “Twice round his waist their winding volumes rolled, / And twice about his gasping throat they fold. / The priest thus doubly choked,—their crests divide, / And towering o’er his head in triumph ride” [Dryden]. As Lessing points out, a literal rendering of this description would have obliterated any visual expression of Laocoön’s agony; therefore, the sculptor winds the serpents about Laocoön’s wrists and ankles, “parts which might be concealed and compressed without injury to the expression . . . [and which] also convey the idea of arrested flight.”

Lyovin’s clinging shadows illustrate the problem of the embodiment of the spiritual in the material: the indefinite, cerebral creative ideas of the poet are invisible mental constructs that manifest themselves only in the artist’s own work and appear ridiculous when represented as concrete objects attendant upon it. Lyovin’s image evokes Lessing’s indictment of the artistic conventions employed for representing the cloud of invisibility cast over the hero by the deus ex machina in classical canvases: the solution, a “cloud” painted to one side of the “invisible” figure, Lessing argues, is beyond “the limits of painting. His cloud is a hieroglyphic, a purely symbolic sign, which does not make the rescued hero invisible, but simply says to the observers, ‘You are to suppose this man to be invisible.’ It is no better than the rolls of paper with sentences upon them which issued from the mouths of personages in the old Gothic pictures.”

The echo of Laocoön in Lyovin’s brief treatise on aesthetics is enhanced by the subject of Lyovin’s statue: a poet, surrounded by his poetic ideas; the creator about to create and seeking an appropriate embodiment for his artistic vision. The choice of flitting shadows to represent creative inspiration suggests a demonic rather than a divine source and raises the question of good and evil in creation.

Thus through Lyovin’s illustration Tolstoy subtly debates the question of how or whether art may achieve its theurgic potential. This is an issue of central importance in the most sustained ekphrasis in Anna Karenina, the description of Mikhailov’s painting Pilate’s Admonition. Mikhailov’s problem, as Anna, Vronsky, and Golenish-
chev perceive it, is how to represent a human, real Christ, or whether such a representation is possible or even desirable; whether a spiritual entity can be materially embodied or represented; whether divine or demonic inspiration is required for such a manifestation; whether the material representation deforms or profanes the spiritual. Tolstoy’s indebtedness to Lessing is again discernible in the Platonic distinction he draws between Vronsky’s dilettantism and Mikhailov’s genius. In *Laocoön* Lessing differentiates between artworks that imitate nature directly and those that imitate other artworks (imitations of imitations); the latter category, Lessing argues, utterly degrades the artist; primacy of *mimēsis* is thus the criterion by which genius is distinguished from talent. Therefore, Vronsky is automatically indicted as an epigone who cannot discriminate between truth and illusion (recall the memorable analogy of a man caressing a doll as if it were a real woman) and who therefore paints after the style of other artistic schools: “He appreciated all kinds [of art], and could have felt inspired by any of them; but he had no conception of the possibility of knowing nothing at all of any school of painting, and of *being inspired directly by what is within the soul*, without caring whether what is painted will belong to any recognized school” (489) (emphasis added). In contrast, Mikhailov paints directly from the heart: “I cannot paint a Christ who is not in my heart” (499), drawing inspiration from “inner vision” (painting is “removing the coverings” from the true insight) while “[Vronsky] drew his inspiration, not directly from life, but indirectly from life embodied in art” (489). Thus it is that Vronsky’s portrait of Anna (“in Italian costume in the French style”) fails and remains unfinished while Mikhailov succeeds in creating a portrait that “impressed everyone, especially Vronsky, not only by its likeness, but by its characteristic beauty,” and by its revelation of “the very sweetest expression of [Anna’s] soul” (501).

**The Portrait**

In his study of *ekphrasis* in the European novel, Mack Smith determines that Mikhailov’s portrait is successful because it lives and
“stands out from its frame.”¹⁹ This organicist valuation of the creative process, which invests the created object with a life of its own, is exemplified in Mikhailov’s experience with his sketch of a “man in a violent rage” onto which a drop of wax falls. The new shape lent to the figure by the drop of wax inspires Mikhailov. As he works, “(t)he figure, from a lifeless imagined thing, had become alive and could not be changed. The figure lived, and was clearly and unmistakably defined” (463). Mikhailov’s view of the creative process, “removing the coverings from already existing figures,” is counterpoised to Vronsky’s belief in “technique.” Victor Terras has glossed this passage as “a classical statement of the Neoplatonic organic concept of the creative process.”²⁰ In his study of War and Peace, Gary Saul Morson terms this process “creation by potential,” a notion opposed equally to the classical, programmatic/algorithmic principle of composition and to the romantic conception of poetic madness or the frenzy of inspiration caused by divine or demonic possession. The autonomous, organic status of the artwork suggests that the artist is not in full control of his text and that the work of art evolves autonomously and organically, developed by the artist’s delicate manipulations, as Plotinus’s sculptor “liberated” his vision of Beauty from the prison of the unformed block of marble.

Mikhailov’s struggle to uncover the true forms within his art might be considered as exemplifying of the mode of sincerity Tolstoy would demand of the great artist in What Is Art? Tolstoy characterized art according to three main precepts:

1. An artist is successful if he or she succeeds in conveying through the force of his artwork his own genuine feelings (the work’s “sincerity” and its capacity for “infection”).
2. Art is successful only if it is universal; that is, if it is accessible to all people, regardless of their class, education, formation, culture, and any other characteristic.
3. A work of art succeeds as Christian art not necessarily because of its choice of Christian or biblical subject matter but because of its ability to inspire brotherly love and to unite humanity with divinity.
If we evaluate the three paintings by Mikhailov that we are shown in *Anna Karenina* according to Tolstoy’s own aesthetic principles, we find that the painting *Pilate’s Admonition* fails, despite its biblical subject matter and Mikhailov’s sincerity, because, by Mikhailov’s own admission, it requires education to understand it; even then Vronsky and Anna do not fully appreciate it. By contrast, the less ambitious secular painting of two boys fishing in a stream is a success, not merely because it infects the viewers with the bucolic mood of a lazy afternoon fishing expedition but because it appeals to a wide audience and, most important, stimulates the viewer’s desire to share the thoughts and experiences of another: “Two boys were angling in the shade of a willow tree. The elder had just dropped in the hook and . . . was entirely absorbed in what he was doing. The other . . . was lying in the grass leaning on his elbows, with his tangled, flaxen head in his hands, staring at the water with his dreamy blue eyes. What was he thinking of?” (500).

By Tolstoy’s own criteria, Mikhailov’s portrait of Anna is the most successful artistic creation in the novel, and as such it is contrasted to the various other portraits of Anna presented in and by the text. In addition to the three painted versions and the verbal portraits sketched by other characters, there are Anna’s own ekphrastically presented self-portraits; that is, Tolstoy’s framings of Anna’s presentations of herself as an art object. The most notable scenes in which Anna is overtly framed and aestheticized are her first and last public appearances at the ball in Moscow and at the opera in Petersburg. Anna’s presentation of herself as spectacle and art object (portrait or bust) meant to be admired and desired for its beauty alone is contrasted in the novel to Lyovin’s sublime visions of the world (landscapes) that become iconic emblems of his spiritual development. Thus, Tolstoy appears to perpetuate the romantic tradition of elevating the category of the sublime over that of the beautiful and preferring the landscape to the portrait.

Although described briefly in the section of the novel in which it is painted, Mikhailov’s portrait of Anna receives its most sustained ekphrastic treatment in the scene where the novel’s two leading protagonists meet, when Lyovin is coerced by his brother-in-law, Stiva, into visiting Anna. Tolstoy has been criticized for failing to exploit the
full dramatic potential of this scene; for example, Boris Eikhenbaum characterizes the connection established at Anna’s and Lyovin’s meeting as a “light dotted line” having no significance for the plot. In fact, their meeting inaugurates Lyovin’s education or Bildung, which is achieved through his contemplation of an image. So powerful and crucial is this scene that Joan Grossman has argued that the episode be regarded as the keystone in the arch of Anna Karenina, although, on purely architectural grounds, the placement of the keystone in this chapter would make it asymmetrical to the novel’s balanced structure, as elegantly diagrammed by Elisabeth Stenbock-Fermor. If the scene is not the keystone, it is nonetheless highly demarcated and circumscribed in the text. Lyovin’s viewing of the portrait is multiply framed and deeply imbedded in the narrative; the ornate setting of the portrait and its viewing similarly frame Anna’s entrance, which is in turn framed by Lyovin’s vision of her. The most exterior frames of this episode, the two occasions on which Lyovin and Stiva dine together, neatly bracket the novel structurally and thematically since both occasions serve as Platonic symposia where the various types of love are discussed, defined, and, on the second occasion, witnessed. Novelistically, and proleptically, the placement of the chapter in the plot serves as an additional frame. As has often been noted, Anna is contiguously and metaphorically located in a brothel, or women’s quarters (teremok). In terms of temporal sequence, Stiva and Lyovin fulfill the novelistic convention of having dinner, drinks, playing cards, and then going off to ______; a notion that is rendered explicit by Kitty in her subsequent argument with Lyovin: “You were drinking at the club, drinking and gambling, and then you went . . . to her of all people!” (732). The setting of the scene is itself seductive: dark lighting, soft carpets, even the treillage reminiscent of the trellis work in the traditional Islamic teremok, from behind which Anna emerges. It is this context, in addition to what Lyovin knows of Anna’s history, that informs his sense of guilt and embarrassment and predisposes him to a harsh judgment of Anna as a fallen woman.

In the dialogue with Stiva when they are en route to Anna, Lyovin reaffirms his attitudes toward fallen women and his negative expectations of Anna as he frames and stereotypes his projected image of her.
The reader is reminded of his disquisition on fallen women in the symmetrically opposed first dinner scene with Stiva: “I have a loathing for fallen women. You’re afraid of spiders, and I of these vermin . . . those who know only the nonplatonic love have no need to talk of tragedy. In such love there can be no tragedy” (46).

As in their first dinner discussion, on this occasion Stiva tries again to solicit Lyovin’s tolerance for human imperfection. As Stiva and Lyovin ride in the carriage to Anna’s, Stiva attempts, in three short narratives, to win Lyovin over with his descriptions of Anna. Stiva’s sketches are dialogized by Lyovin’s resistance and by Stiva’s own sense of verbal incompetence, as well as by their lack of fitness to frame the subject. Not only does Stiva fail to draw a portrait of Anna to his own satisfaction (he concludes each sketch by falling back on, “but you’ll see for yourself. . . .”); the pictures of Anna he presents are unrecognizable even to the reader since they introduce events and actions that are new in the narrative. The resulting sense of estrangement (ostranenie) has the effect of distancing and renewal, so that we, like Lyovin, seem to be hearing about a stranger and anticipate seeing Anna as if for the first time. Stiva begins by describing Anna as “calm and dignified,” when the reader last saw her in a state of psychic disintegration, rebelliously flouting social convention at the opera. Stiva then seeks to arouse Lyovin’s sympathies by describing Anna’s writing of children’s books, but then he immediately negates this portrayal: “But are you imagining she’s an authoress? Not at all.” Finally, he attempts to present Anna as a “woman with a heart” who has adopted a protégée and her family, a description he proceeds to deconstruct: “It’s not philanthropy. . . . She saw them, helped them, . . . But not by way of patronage. . . . But you’ll see for yourself” (724). But prior to seeing for himself, Lyovin is aided by another, more accurate interpretation of Anna’s character: Mikhailov’s portrait.

Upon entering Anna’s house, Lyovin’s first action is to examine his face in the mirror. His face is red, but he denies to himself that he is drunk. Lyovin’s second action is to contemplate Mikhailov’s portrait of Anna. The juxtaposition of the two portraits—one real in a mirror, the other so real it seems to step from its frame—reinforces our sense of Anna and Lyovin as alter egos, a view buttressed by the
novel’s structure, which continually juxtaposes parallel events from these two characters’ lives. In psychoanalytic terms, the act of viewing the “other” necessarily involves the projection of self; the conflation of portrait with reflection is emphasized linguistically by the description of a reflector lamp (lampa-refraktor) that overhangs Anna’s portrait and suggests the double function of illumination and reflection. Lyovin’s presence as the observer in the text mirrors the reader’s role as voyeur and introduces the implicit comparison of Mikhailov’s painted portrait with Tolstoy’s verbal one. The ultimate effect of the framing of the heroine is to focus our attention, and to estrange us from our familiar interiorized relationship to Anna in order to see her through others’ eyes. This makes Lyovin’s mental and spiritual transformation before the painting all the more effective.

Lyovin’s Bildung consists in his acceptance of human, specifically feminine imperfection, as expressed in his attitude toward “those vermin,” fallen women, whom he has traditionally and conventionally stereotyped as vulgar, lower-class, uneducated, and lacking in the capacity for suffering or consciousness. His Victorian (“Dickensian,” in Stiva’s term) prejudice is well described by Anna, who thus defines Stiva’s similar views on women to Dolly: “I know how men like Stiva look at it. . . . Their own home and wife are sacred to them. Somehow or other these [fallen] women are looked on with contempt by them. . . . They draw a sort of line that can’t be crossed between them and their families” (76). Lyovin’s encounter with Anna, an educated woman of high society with a complex, sensitive character, necessarily breaks the frame of his own expectations and provokes in him not the feeling of disgust he had anticipated but “a tenderness and pity which surprised him” (729). What brings about the birth of compassion and tolerance for human frailty and imperfection, a capacity for forgiveness that is the beginning of true faith on Lyovin’s part? It is not simply a case of physical attraction, although Lyovin is by no means immune to Anna’s attempt to “arouse in [him] a feeling of love” (733); yet even in this response we must ask if the resulting feeling is that of erôs or agapē. Lyovin’s first examination of the portrait of a fallen woman of high society, coming immediately on the heels of his glimpse of his own guilty face “caught in the act,” undermines his self-righteousness
and harsh judgment of others and produces the requisite sense of humility. And then the portrait itself immediately enchants Lyovin:

He could not tear himself away from it. He positively forgot where he was and not even hearing what was said, he could not take his eyes off the marvellous portrait. It was not a picture, but a living, charming woman, with black curling hair, with bare arms and shoulders, with a pensive smile on lips covered with soft down; triumphantly and softly she looked at him with eyes that baffled him. (725)

Lyovin is captivated not only by the exceptionally lifelike quality of the portrait, or by its beauty, but by the mysterious expression of Anna’s eyes, a mystery that perhaps implies the inner life of the subject, which can only be represented enigmatically. In its act of framing, the portrait paradoxically shows what cannot be framed. The viewer’s response to beauty framed is to sense the sublimity of spirit that escapes those borders. Thus, Lyovin’s vision of Anna is expanded rather than contained by the portrait, although when Anna first appears to Lyovin, she appears as “the very woman of the portrait... with the same perfection of beauty which the artist had caught” (725). But it is when Lyovin recognizes the disjunction between the Anna before him and the character of the ideal Anna in the portrait that he begins to appreciate and to commiserate her agony:

[H]er face, suddenly taking on a hard expression, looked as if it were turned to stone. With that expression on her face she was more beautiful than ever; but the expression was new; it was utterly unlike that expression, radiant with happiness and creating happiness, which had been caught by the painter in her portrait. Lyovin looked once more at the portrait and at her figure... and he felt for her a tenderness and pity which surprised him.” (729) (emphasis added)

By the end of the evening during which he “all the while was thinking of her inner life, trying to divine her feelings... though he had judged her so severely hitherto, now by some strange chain of reasoning he was justifying her and also sorry for her” (730) (emphasis added).

It is the portrait that leads Lyovin to wonder at the mysteries of
Anna's spiritual or inner life and thus to recognize the conflict and agony she endures. Lyovin achieves this understanding by "some strange chain of reasoning," because it is not by reason at all but by intuition and empathy, stimulated by contemplation of a true work of art that gives him insight. In a similar way, Vronsky had earlier marveled that Mikhailov, without knowing Anna, had managed to portray her soul: "‘One has to know and love her as I have loved her to discover the very sweetest expression of her soul,' Vronsky thought, though it was only from the portrait that he had himself learned the sweetest expression of her soul" (501) (emphasis added).

Lyovin's revelation before Anna's portrait initiates the spiritual conversion he will achieve by the close of the novel: his acceptance of an intuitive faith that is not based on reason; his recognition of and tolerance for the imperfection of human life and his resulting compassion. Lyovin thus plays the role of Christ asked to judge the fallen woman. In response to the Pharisee's demand for judgment, Christ bent down in silence and began to write in the dirt, as if revising Mosaic law. While seeming to perpetuate the tradition of scribal elitism, Christ tempered its dicta by maintaining oral silence, thus drawing a distinction between the abstract realm of the logos and the real plane of human response. Forgiveness transforms even Kitty, who, although she condemns Lyovin for his compassion for Anna, will herself instantly forgive her when she sees her. Thus, Mikhailov's portrait fulfills Tolstoy's requisite for true Christian art as stated in What Is Art?: that it unite people in compassionate love.

Lyovin's viewing of Mikhailov's portrait of Anna is contrasted to an earlier scene where a portrait of Anna is also contemplated by a man sitting in judgment of her. In the chapter that follows the one in which Anna reveals to Karenin her liaison with Vronsky, Karenin attempts to pursue his usual evening's diversions after having written his wife a letter requiring her to continue their married life as before. He attempts to read a French work on the Eugubine Tables but finds himself unable to concentrate and instead contemplates his wife's portrait:

Over the armchair there hung in a gold frame an oval portrait of Anna, a fine painting by a celebrated artist. Aleksey Aleksandrovich
glanced at it. The *unfathomable eyes* gazed ironically and insolently at him. Insufferably insolent and challenging was the effect, in Alek-
sey Aleksandrovich’s eyes, of the black lace about the head, ad-
mirably done by the painter, the black hair and handsome white hand with one finger lifted, covered with rings. After looking at the portrait for a minute, Aleksey Aleksandrovich shuddered, so that his lips quivered, and uttered the sound “brrrr.” (301) (emphasis added)

Karenin proceeds to solve not the mystery of his wife’s “unfathom-
able gaze,” which he now interprets as insolence, nor the (for him) unsolvable mystery of the Eugubine Tables, but “a complication that had arisen in his official life” (301). Anna, like the Eugubine Tables, remains a cipher. The effect of the black lace about the head and the “insolent” expression both recall Anna’s earlier appearance at the ball and predict her later fatal appearance at the opera. In both pub-
lic appearances, Anna is depicted as an aesthetic object, framed by her attire.

At the ball:

Anna was not in lilac, as Kitty had so urgently wished, but in a black, low-cut, velvet gown, showing her full shoulders and bosom that looked as though *carved of old ivory*, and her rounded arms, with tiny, slender wrists. The whole gown was trimmed with Venetian lace. In her black hair, all her own, was a little wreath of pansies, and there were more of the same in the black ribbon winding through the white lace encircling her waist. Her coiffure was not striking. All that was noticeable were the little wilful tendrils of her curly hair that would always break free about her neck and temples. Around her finely chiseled, strong neck was a thread of pearls. . . . Now [Kitty] understood that Anna could not have been in lilac, and that her charm was just that she *always stood out from her attire*, that her dress could never be conspicuous on her. And her black dress, with its sumptuous lace, was not conspicuous on her; *it was only the frame and all that was seen was she*. (85) (emphasis added)

In contrast to Anna, who is presented both as a chiseled ivory statue and as a work of art within a frame, Kitty appeals in such a way that her attire is part and parcel of her character, “as if she had been
born in that tulle and lace, with her hair done up high on her head and a rose and two leaves on the top of it” (83). Despite the apparent “natural” quality of Anna’s coiffure and toilette, the reader recognizes, with some irony at Kitty’s expense, what the more experienced Dolly will later understand as she examines Anna’s gown: “Anna had put on a very simple batiste dress. Dolly scrutinized that simple dress attentively. She knew what it meant, and the price at which such simplicity was obtained” (645). It is a supreme artistry that creates the impression of being natural whereas only genuine innocence could render the frills and furbelows of Kitty’s attire natural.

Anna’s conscious presentation of herself as an aesthetic object is even more pronounced in the later scene where she attends the opera. As in the ballroom scene and in the portrait contemplated by Karenin, lace is again the framing feature. In fact, this scene becomes an enactment of the features Karenin sees in the portrait, while Vronsky’s role and reactions throughout this chapter parallel those of Karenin in the earlier scenes between Anna and her husband. Vronsky now assumes Karenin’s role as Anna becomes a “closed book” (or cipher) to him:

He looked at her with searching eyes, but she responded with that defiant, half-mirthful, half-desperate look, the meaning of which he could not comprehend. . . . Anna was already dressed in a low-necked gown of light silk and velvet that she had had made in Paris, with costly white lace on her head that framed her face and was particularly becoming, setting off her dazzling beauty. (569) (emphasis added)

In the following exchange, Vronsky, “appealing to her exactly as her husband once had done” (570), feels an increasing hostility toward Anna as his respect for her diminishes, “although his sense of her beauty [is] intensified” (570). After pursuing her to the opera, Vronsky watches as Anna, framed by the proscenium of her opera box, upstages the diva:

Vronsky . . . caught sight of Anna’s head, proud, strikingly beautiful, and smiling in the frame of lace. The setting of her head . . . reminded
him of her just as he had seen her at the ball in Moscow. But he felt utterly different toward her beauty now. In his feeling for her now there was no element of mystery, and so her beauty, though it attracted him even more intensely than before, now offended him too. (573) (emphasis added)

Vronsky feels no sense of mystery, although he has never understood Anna less than at this moment, when he is ignorant of her tragic meeting with her son and cannot comprehend her behavior. What Vronsky sees in Anna’s self-portrait is the presentation of beauty without barriers to the sexual knowledge he has of her; as a result, his aesthetic experience of Anna is empty and superficial, virtually pornographic, and therefore offensive.

Such a reading is defensible when we recall Tolstoy’s later dictum in What Is Art? that true art requires no ornament or technique while false art relies on convention and decorations. In his famous analogy, Tolstoy argues:

However strange it may be to say this, the art of our time and circle has undergone that same thing that happens to a woman, whose feminine charms, destined for motherhood, are sold for the satisfaction of those who lust after such satiations.

The art of our time and circle has become a fallen woman. . . . It is just as made-up, just as commercialized, just as deceptive and ruinous. . . .

True art does not require any adornment, like a wife beloved of her husband. False art, like a prostitute, must always be adorned. 30

Anna as a fallen woman, is contrasted in the novel to Dolly, who is concerned about her appearance only as the mother of her children: “Now she did not dress for her own sake, not for the sake of her own beauty, but simply so that, as the mother of those exquisite creatures [her children], she might not spoil the general effect” (278). Despite her lack of feminine vanity, however, Dolly is no stranger to the impulse to be aestheticized in a picture, although in her case it is as the mother of “exquisite creatures” that she desires to be framed. Thus, meeting Lyovin as she is bathing with her children, “she was espe-
cially glad he should see her in all her glory. No one was able to appreciate her grandeur better than Lyovin. Seeing her, he found himself face to face with one of the pictures of family life his imagination painted” (282) (emphasis added). When Dolly exclaims, “How glad I am to see you!” the reader easily discerns that her pleasure is not in seeing but in being seen by Lyovin in a flattering picture.

In contrast to Dolly and Anna’s narcissistic self-portraits, Mikhailov’s portrait of Anna is transcendent. The revelatory effect of Anna’s portrait on Lyovin is reminiscent of his response to a vision of Kitty earlier in the novel: a vision that, like the portrait of Anna, constitutes an ekphrasis and radically revises his world view. Following a night spent with the peasants after the harvest, during which Lyovin experiences a false epiphany and considers marrying a peasant woman, he catches a glimpse of Kitty traveling to her estate, framed by the window of her carriage: “At the window, evidently only just awake, sat a young girl holding in both hands the ribbons of a white cap. With a face full of light and thought, full of a subtle, complex inner life that was remote from Lyovin, she was gazing beyond him at the glow of the sunrise” (293) (emphasis added). Lyovin, struck by this portrait of Kitty, realizes the full falsity of his previous night’s epiphany and acknowledges that the solution to the mystery of his life rests with her.

Whenever Lyovin attempts to find solutions to his philosophical dilemmas, he creates pictures by framing the vision of the real world before him and using it as an emblem or icon of his thoughts and experience. Thus, in his rodomontade in the passage preceding his vision of Kitty, Lyovin observes a “strange mother-of-pearl shell of fleecy white cloudlets” (293) in the sky that he “takes as a symbol of [his] ideas and feelings” (294) concerning the formation of his new views of life: “Just now I looked at the sky and there was nothing in it—only two white streaks. Yes, and so imperceptibly too my views of life changed!” Similarly, on the morning of his betrothal to Kitty, “what Lyovin saw then he never saw again” (424): a fortuitous, synchonic composition of birds, freshly baked loaves and children at play, drawn into a visual composition that crystallizes his spiritual state of ecstasy.

In the earlier passage, after Kitty’s carriage disappears over the
horizon, Lyovin glances at the sky to find that the shell has gone: “There in the remote heights above, a mysterious change had been accomplished. There was no trace of a shell, and there was stretched over fully half of the sky an even cover of tiny and ever tinier cloundlets” (294). Both images, the shell and the cover, suggest containment, physical exteriors that embody spiritual essences, and thus incorporate the theme of representation. Lyovin makes his vision stand as an emblem of the natural law of flux, of constant change and variation, of the impossibility of fixing the world and himself in an eternal state of perfection. This recognition makes possible his later acceptance of life as spiritual struggle in an ongoing process, and of himself as an imperfect creature with the intent of perfecting himself and the knowledge that this intent is as sufficient as the achievement of perfection. At the close of the novel, he accepts not only these facts but also his own flawed nature that resists process and seeks finalization by attempting to stop time and to preserve moments in a “frozen,” “framed” state.

Thus, at the novel’s conclusion, Lyovin acknowledges both the dangers of framing and, paradoxically, the salvific potential of such visions. Once he recognizes the limitations of earthbound vision, he can allow his tendency to organize the world into symbolic landscapes to enhance his nonrational, intuitive approach to faith without falling prey to the dangers of trusting his insight too much. Lyovin’s sense of limits and acceptance of the bounded field of bodily experience that cannot contain transcendence constitutes Tolstoy’s restatement of the Kantian definition of the sublime, as discussed in chapter 3. Lyovin’s final epiphanic picture of the sky is bordered and framed by his awareness of his narrow scope of sight and his appreciation of the value of the sensation of limits:

Lying on his back, he gazed up now into the high cloudless sky. “Do I not know that that is infinite space, and that it is not a rounded vault? But, however I screw up my eyes and strain my sight, I cannot see it but as round and finite, and in spite of my knowing about infinite space, I am incontestably right when I see a firm blue vault, far more right than when I strain my eyes to see beyond it.” (833)
Tolstoy closes Lyovin’s narrative on an exaltation of the experience of the sublime realized through the traditionally romantic vehicle of the awe-inspiring landscape. Yet this is an experience of the sublime that carries Lyovin away from human relations, which now irritate him as distractions from his spiritual growth. Indeed, he finds the mood of ecstasy difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile with the daily events and human interactions of prosaic existence, which “momentarily overshadow” his state of grace. By contrast, his viewing of Anna’s portrait brought him into harmony with humanity and made it possible for him to empathize even with someone completely different from himself. Anna’s portrait thus belongs in the category of the iconic and is superior to the mode of the sublime; it is a transcendent portrait that implies the continual process of perfectivization through living experience.

Lyovin’s final vision is contrasted to the series of streetscapes Anna views through the frame of her carriage window en route to her suicide: she interprets these pictures as profane projections of the vanity fair and cartoonish illustrations of unmitigated human greed and self-delusion. The hyperrealist, almost naturalist, depictions of dirty ice cream and grotesque visages are neither sublime nor iconic. Instead, Anna is seduced by an implacable realism and a photographic objectivity into making these scenes stand as accurate portrayals or “physiological sketches” of the human condition. Unaware of her own hermeneutic action of framing and reading, she accepts her frame of mind as the objective truth and the candlelight by which she reads her “book filled with troubles, falsehoods, sorrow, and evil” (799) as the ultimate and final illumination.