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Reframing Happiness: The Portrait of Anna Karenina¹

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ll happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." So famously begins Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. From the very first line, this novel, lauded as the 'greatest' of books, is directly concerned with happiness, also the theme of Fontbonne University's dedicated semester in the fall of 2010.

Tolstoy's vast tale of love, happiness, and misery could as easily have been titled Konstantin Levin rather than Anna Karenina, as he is the other character we follow more than anyone else's and who is closest to Tolstoy's voice, sharing even some of Tolstoy's biographical details. The emotional climax of the novel is undoubtedly Anna's famous suicide, but the spiritual climax is Levin's revelation--and happiness—nearer the actual end of the text. Yet, these two characters, Anna and Levin, only meet once, and that rather briefly, in the over 800 pages of the novel. While this is interesting enough in itself, what is at least as interesting as well is how the meeting is mediated by a large painted portrait of Anna, a device through which Tolstoy brings the questions of art and artifice, representation and reality into this moment of the novel like no other. This article, then, will focus on the literary and artistic framing of the portrait of Anna Karenina in Tolstoy's eponymous novel and in particular will explore the representation of happiness, a key theme both of the novel and the theme of the dedicated semester at Fontbonne.

Since its sensational success at first publication in 1877, the conventional reading of the novel is as a tragic romance, casting

¹ My thanks to the Department of English and Communications for the opportunity to teach the Dedicated Semester course "Happiness in Russian Literature," out of which in part this paper grew. I also would like to extend my sincere thanks to the students who took the course for their intellectual curiosity, literary insights, and enthusiastic engagement. This paper is dedicated to the happy memory of Jacqueline Sontag.

² Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Penguin, 2000), 1. Unless otherwise noted, all references to Tolstoy refer to this volume.

³ J. Peder Zane, *The Top Ten: Writers Pick Their Favorite Books* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007).

Anna as the central character and the victim of true love in a society that could not accept her pursuit of her own emotional and sexual happiness: "He portrays love with a realism that no one in our country has yet approached." Critics as diverse and insightful as Boris Eikhenbaum and Harold Bloom adhere to this sympathetic reading of Anna's misadventures. This paper takes another tack, starting with what Gary Saul Morson identifies as a "minority view" of the novel, which sees Anna as the creator of her own unhappiness, who pursues a transitory self-satisfaction she conflates with happiness to the detriment of all those around her and ultimately, herself. Her death is the culmination of her failures, some moral and most otherwise. *Anna Karenina* might remain a tragedy, but not a romantic one.

The portrait of Anna that hangs at the meeting of Anna and Levin allows various characters to "look" at Anna in a very specific, "framed" way, and it also allows readers to look at these characters looking, creating a number of framed views, some of which replace, overlap, contain, and contest each other. As Morson has pointed out, taking his cue from art historical criticism as much as literature, this is not a passive act: "As is so often the case with Tolstoy, *looking is an action.* Indeed, it is often the most important one we perform." In other words, how Anna looks and how others look at Anna (including Levin at the only point in which these two main characters come in contact) is crucially important. Three characters—Mikhailov, Vronsky, and Levin—and their ways of looking at Anna will be examined in turn to develop a new way of looking at the portrait of Anna and its relevance to the novel as a whole.

Framing Anna as Artist: Mikhailov

The portrait of Anna has its origins in Anna and Vronsky's trip to Italy in Part Five of the novel. The Russian expatriate artist Mikhailov is commissioned by Vronsky to paint Anna subsequent to their visit to his studio. In the circumstances of the portrait's commissioning and creation are found the first clues to the portrait's meaning in the later parts of the novel—so it is first through the eyes of Mikhailov the artist who paints it we must look—and thus also to understand his ability to look at Anna as an artist and then observe how he represents her—a critical act in Tolstoy's novelistic world.

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⁴ Suvorin, 1877, qtd. in Henri Troyat, *Tolstoy*, trans. Nancy Amphoux (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1967), 370.

⁵ See Boris Eikhenbaum, *Lev Tolstoi: semidesaitye gody* (Leningrad: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1974) and Harold Bloom, *Leo Tolstoy's* Anna Karenina (New York: Chelsea House, 1987).

⁶ Gary Saul Morson, Anna Karenina *in Our Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 60.

⁷ Morson, 45 (emphasis original).

The device of a portrait within a portrait or story within a story is well-worn; in this case, the novel itself can be read as a kind of portrait of Anna, so the relationship between the picture and the novel puts Mikhailov and Tolstoy in analogous positions relative to Anna. Both convey her powerfully, compellingly, with an obvious affection for her beauty and her passionate personality. If Tolstoy's own text creates sympathy among readers, luring them into the "majority" reading, convincingly representing the passionate, vibrant, ideal Anna as if it were the real Anna, Mikhailov's portrait does the same thing within the novel.

Other critics have noted that Mikhailov's actions and the pictures features correspond in many ways to the definition of art Tolstoy offers in his famous treatise on aesthetics, What is Art?, published in 1890. Tolstoy argues, "The receiver of a true artistic impression is so united to the artist that he feels as if the work were his own and not someone else's—as if what it expresses were just what he had long been wishing to express."8

Mikhailov's success with Anna's portrait leads critics to take it as what Tolstoy later would call an "authentic" work of art. Grossman summarizes the virtually universal critical consensus:

> Tolstoy ... makes it clear that Mikhailov is a genuine artist whose understanding of art is at once simpler and more profound than [the other characters'] will ever be. ... Mikhailov has most importantly the spiritual penetration of the genuine artist.9

Be this as it may, Mikhailov's work doesn't always seem to achieve the communication of spiritual penetration that is accorded to it. The religious scene that is Mikhailov's primary current work doesn't really compel Vronsky, Anna, and Golenishchev when they visit his studio. Mikhailov's visitors find little to say that they really mean about his grand religious canvas of Christ before Pilate. Mikhailov's inclusion of John—a figure that his visitors don't even notice but that he makes a point of touching up after they leave—makes it certain the scene, which appears in all four gospels, is taken from the Gospel of John--the only account with the culminating moment of the interview being Pilate's asking Christ: "What is truth?" 10 ancient question and the quest it embodies for communicating spiritual authenticity is the goal of true art, both within Anna Karenina and What is Art?

⁸ Tolstoy, What is Art?, trans. Aylmer Maude, in The Novels and Others Works of Lyof N. Tolstoi, vol. 19 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902), 477. ⁹ Joan Delaney Grossman, "Tolstoy's Portrait of Anna: Keystone in the Arch," (Criticism: A Quarterly for Literature and the Arts, 18, 1976), 8-9. This general view is shared by Morson, Mack, Christian, Bayley, Mandelker, Smith, and others.

¹⁰ John 18:38

Though not directly mentioned, the question becomes the text that frames the painting, and in a way all the art in the novel, like the novel's epigraph from St. Paul's letter to the Romans frames the text. 11 The question of "truth" is not only the goal of art, but the main characters' own spiritual struggles revolve around this same question, and indeed, their resolution becomes the prerequisite for his happiness. It is all the more noteworthy, then, that Mikhailov's painting quite fails to convey it to his viewers: Vronsky admires the technique, Anna finds Christ pities Pilate, Golenishchev observes that Mikhailov has destroyed the unity of impression by rendering Christ as a man, rather than God. 12 Ironically, they prefer instead a picture of two boys fishing and later the portrait of Anna – a genre scene and portrait over what was at the time the much more highlyregarded genre of religious and historical painting. At the same time, this quality of spiritual authenticity is precisely what is supposedly so compelling about Mikhailov's representation of Anna. problem merely from one painting to the next, or is the issue with the artist in general? The doubts raised by the misreading of the picture of Christ before Pilate also means a closer look at the artist's painting of Anna is in order.

Anna is at this point in the novel as happy a woman as we ever see her. "[D]uring this first period of her liberation and quick recovery, [Anna] felt herself unpardonably happy and filled with the joy of life." This is the state in which she is painted, and yet, Mikhailov, though a vain and impetuous man in terms of his attitude towards others' thoughts about his work, paints Anna without liking her. Vronsky's practice as an artist-amateur, to which we will come shortly, is dictated by conventions and technique. Mikhailov's talent is in observation of character: he seems to see Anna's true self without getting to know her. One might fairly ask how he manages this; the best indication is by looking at what he actually does:

Anna was nicer to him than to others, and was grateful to him for her portrait. ... But Mikhailov remained ... cold to them all. Anna felt from his eyes that he liked looking at her; but he avoided talking with her.¹⁴

Virtually every critic concedes that he has special vision, is a special artist, and has a special perception and talent evidenced in his representation of Anna. How he actually achieves this and the subsequent creation of such a masterpiece is ambiguous. Mikhailov has met Anna at most a half-dozen times, and he doesn't even speak with her, but somehow sees to the depths of her soul?

¹¹ Romans 12:19 "Vengeance is mine; I will repay."

¹² See also John 14:6 "Jesus said, 'I am the way and the truth and the life."

¹³ Tolstoy, 463.

¹⁴ Tolstoy, 478.

The discrepancy between Mikhailov's methods and his results reveals that there is something wrong with Mikhailov's art, but not because it is bad art. In fact, it's quite good art, but like Pilate asking Christ for the truth (when the Truth is standing before him), there is a level at which it fails to understand the underlying complexity of the situation. In fact, Mikhailov has captured Anna's character, her charm, her appeal, her beauty—but it is a beauty that looks deep but in reality is not. Morson's observations in his unsympathetic reading of Anna's character, central to the minority reading of the novel, help to make sense of what has really happened. What Mikhailov has captured is what Morson calls Anna's "contrived naturalness." ¹⁵ A large part of Anna's personality and her attractiveness is described throughout the novel over and over as her spontaneity, her simplicity, and her sincerity, but Morson offers a rather frank critique: "Studied spontaneity, fake simplicity, and assumed sincerity: these skills characterize ... Anna." In fact, what Mikhailov has succeeded in capturing is the impression Anna actually creates, but he has failed to perceive that this impression is a false one—and this is no surprise, given the clues that Tolstoy has provided in the description of his interaction with Anna. Mikhailov has been fooled along with almost everyone else: she looks profound, spiritual, natural, and simple—and that's how she is painted—but she isn't really that way. So the painting gives the correct impression, or the truth of how she appears and seems at one level, but neither Mikhailov, nor Levin, nor most of the critics see that Mikhailov's portrait is fundamentally wrong at a The greatest guilt for this misprision is perhaps the man who knows her best, Vronsky. In fact, it is Vronsky, to whom Anna is closer than any other character, whose viewing of Anna we must briefly observe next.

Framing Anna as Lover: Vronsky

Vronsky's role is foremost as Anna's lover. After Vronsky leaves military service and the couple leaves Russia, we find he has an interest in painting, which in part motivates their visit to Mikhailov. Before the meeting with Mikhailov, Vronsky undertakes to paint her before they commission Mikhailov, and his efforts are often contrasted with Mikhailov's painting. When Vronsky tries to paint Anna, his art, and art that relies on the inspiration of "life already embodied in art" and technique rather than observation, is still able to be "very successful." He later abandons the project, not because he sees any great difference between his work and Mikhailov's; in fact, to Golenishchev, Anna, and himself it is "very good" and only

¹⁵ Morson, 80.

¹⁶ Morson, 80.

¹⁷ Tolstoy, 466

incomplete because it becomes "superfluous." Critics have noted the similarities between Vronsky's artistic practice and Tolstoy's later descriptions of "false" or "counterfeit" art in *What is Art?*

It is not as a painter, however, but as a viewer, that through Vronsky's eyes that we first get to see Mikhailov's finished portrait. Vronsky's knowledge of Anna as her lover and virtually her sole *raison d'être* for most of the text informs Vronsky's vision in what he sees when he looks at Mikhailov's portrait of Anna.

From the fifth sitting the portrait struck everyone, especially Vronsky, not only by its likeness but by its special beauty. It was strange how Mikhailov was able to find this special beauty in her. 'One would have to know her and love her as I do to find that sweetest inner expression of hers,' thought Vronsky, though he had learned of that sweetest inner expression of hers only from this portrait. But the expression was so true that he and others thought they had always known it.¹⁹

Mikhailov's success—or Vronsky's failure?—is that Vronsky is fooled like everyone else. Even though he is perhaps more culpable than others as Anna's most intimate companion, at the same time his response is revealing. He is completely taken with Mikhailov's portrait, just as he was utterly taken with Anna as a woman. On the other hand, Mikhailov's disapproval of Vronsky's art sharply contrasts with Vronsky's approval of Mikhailov's art-which is directly connected by the text to his perceptiveness as a lover. Tolstoy deploys the revealing metaphor of a life-size wax doll: Mikhailov finds Vronsky's painting "ridiculous, vexing, pathetic, and offensive," like a man in love watching another man caress a wax doll.²⁰ While the metaphor might be taken to refer only to "art," since the subject the two painters share is Anna, and she is in fact Vronsky's lover, the invitation to associate this wax doll with Anna is strong. As Bayley comments, "The striking and sinister metaphor cannot but infect our idea of Vronsky as a lover as well as an artist."²¹

While we might take it as a reasonable indictment of Vronsky's misunderstanding of either (or both) art and Anna, the thought comes from Mikhailov. If Vronsky is the counterfeit lover of an artificial woman, Mikhailov mentally places himself as the true lover, the one who understands the truth of the "real" woman. This implicit eroticism in art is itself a "striking (effect) ... evoking sexual desire" is a mark of a counterfeit of art in What is Art?²² As we have

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¹⁸ Tolstoy, 478.

¹⁹ Tolstoy, 477.

²⁰ Tolstoy, 479.

²¹ John Bayley, *Tolstoy and the Novel* (New York: Viking, 1966), 236.

²² Tolstoy, *What is Art?*, 438-9.

seen though, how he knows the real woman is unclear and his own success is itself dubious. Though a stranger, he positions himself as an intimate of Anna's. It is to Levin, whose meeting with Anna is framed by his awareness of the role of the stranger, that the portrait becomes most revealing.

Framing Anna as a Stranger: Levin

At last we come to Levin's single encounter with Anna. It takes place in Part Seven, not long before Anna ends her own life, after Levin has spent the evening at the club with Anna's brother Stiva. Grossman has pointed out that Stiva and Levin's visit to Anna parallels a visit to a brothel, the stereotypical destination of Russian noblemen after a night of drinking.²³ Anna's status in Russian society would reinforce this, but at the same time, this incident also contains elements which force an evaluation of the portrait not simply as a "painting of an alluring woman."24 Levin's experience of Anna in person and in Mikhailov's picture combines both the profane and the Mandelker, whose fine work on Tolstoy offers a sacred. sophisticated reading of this scene, acknowledges that Levin's act of looking is "multiply framed and deeply embedded in the narrative," but misses a key frame that is revealed by the portrait's position and reception as a religious icon.

Mikhailov's work, accepted by most critics as beyond criticism, has been shown to have flaws which evade the detection of the characters, including Levin in his first meeting with Anna-as-portrait. Tolstoy puts the picture in a space that evokes not only a brothel, but also a church--the natural place for an icon. Anna's picture hangs, in a quiet, darkened room, illuminated by a reflector lamp, like the lamps and candles which the faithful light before an icon in a darkened Orthodox church. The line between reality and art is blurred by the power of a 'spiritual' likeness. Levin's encounter with this image-cum-reality has all the marks of an ecstatic religious vision.

Levin gazed at the portrait, stepping out of its frame in the brilliant light, and could not tear himself away from it. He even forgot where he was and, not listening to what was said around him, gazed without taking his eyes from the astonishing portrait. It was not a painting but a lovely living woman with dark, curly hair, bare shoulders and arms, and pensive half-smile on her lips, covered with tender down, looking at him triumphantly and tenderly with troubling eyes. Only, because she was not alive, she was more beautiful than a living woman can be.²⁵

²³ Grossman, 3.

²⁴ Grossman, 3.

²⁵ Tolstoy, 696.

In the same way that an icon really is the saint depicted, so this picture by Mikhailov, to Levin, really is Anna.

The icon is connected with the original [model or subject], not on the strength of an identity between its own nature and his nature, but because it depicts his person and bears his name ... there exists a certain participation of the one in the other. ... 'The image of Christ is Christ, and the image of a saint is the saint.'²⁶

While there is no way objectively to label Anna's image as saintly--not with her pulchritudinous dark gown and bare shoulders and arms that are far more reminiscent of John Singer Sargent's potent *Madame X* than any picture of the Virgin Mary, many readers see Anna as a martyr for love, even if she is not a saint.²⁷ She is the victim of true love in a society that cannot abide her authentic passion and commitment to live it out.

Mandelker argues that Levin's encounter with the portrait of Anna is analogous to a series of other framings in the novel, including Vronsky's visual consumption of her at the ball and especially Levin's vision of Kitty after the he spends night in the haystack, when he sees Kitty framed in her passing carriage window.

Levin'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. Levin thus plays the role of Christ asked to judge the fallen woman. ... 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.²⁸

Like Levin and so many readers, Mandelker, too, is seduced by Anna's image and claims that Levin's gazing on portrait of Anna, and

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²⁶ Leonid Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons*, trans. G. E. H. Palmer and E. Kadloubovsky (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1999), 32 (quoting John of Damascus).

Other critics have seen scenes from the novel as echoing and evoking iconic motifs and themes. See for example Barbara Lonnqvist, "Anna Karenina" in Donna Tussig Orwin, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Tolstoy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 93. An important distinction also should be made between icon painting (*ikonopis*' in Russian) and Western-style religiousthemed painting (*religioznaia zhivopis*' in Russian). These are distinct concepts, and are received as fundamentally different kinds of images.

²⁸ Amy Mandelker, *Framing Anna Karenina: Tolstoy, the Woman Question, and the Victorian Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1993), 115.

then the comparison to the living woman herself, is a watershed moment similar to the vision of Kitty for Levin, that this moment enables his final reconciliation at the novel's end.

A closer look at the framings of the encounters with Kitty and Anna force a reframing of Levin's encounter with the painted—and real—Annas. First Levin's vision of Kitty is preceded by a sleepless night of meditation in a haystack, where he has a false epiphany of sorts and resolves to marry a peasant woman, if necessary, though he recognizes his lack of sleep may be blearing his thoughts. Levin's false image of a simple peasant wife is echoed by Anna's portrait, a representation of false simplicity and spiritual depth, which we have seen is what the portrait actually is. Moreover, the contrast of light and darkness also frames the two experiences in different ways. Levin sees the Annas only in the half-darkness of this dimly lit room. This consistent darkness contrasts with the appearance of Kitty. With dawn, the natural world moves from darkness into light, and only then does Levin see Kitty, abandon his dark thoughts, and understand that she is "the only possibility of resolving the riddle of his life that has been weighing on him so painfully of late. ... 'However good that life of simplicity and labour may be, I cannot go back to it. I love her." This second epiphany does in fact direct his actions and his ultimately successful (pur)suit of Kitty.

Like Levin's night in the haystack, his evening before meeting Anna prepares him in a way for the event—enjoying with perfect ease living the life of aristocratic leisure, just as he had spent the night before his encounter with Kitty on the road enjoying with extraordinary comfort the simplicity of peasant life and physical labor. Both experiences also ultimately yield resolutions of doubt or uncertainty for Levin and reveal the truth. If seeing Kitty in the carriage window drives him away from the peasant life, seeing Anna draws him toward the seductive but counterfeit life she leads. It is only afterwards, as soon as he tells his wife where he was, "his doubts about whether he had done a good or bad thing by going to see Anna were finally resolved. He now knew that he should not have done it."³⁰ However, unlike Levin's response to Kitty's framing in the carriage which does initiate a change, this encounter does not. It does not recur; it is not mentioned again; and in fact, the resolution to which Levin comes after going home and discussing it with Kitty (who has lost a love to Anna before) is that Anna is a temptress—as she herself recognizes. Anna herself acknowledges her artifice:

Though for the whole evening (lately she had acted the same way towards all young men) she had unconsciously done everything she could to arouse a feeling of love for her in Levin, and though she knew she had succeeded in it, as far as

³⁰ Tolstoy, 703.

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²⁹ Tolstoy, 277, 278, emphasis original.

one could with regard to an honest, married man in one evening ... as soon as he left the room, she stopped thinking about him.³¹

Anna's affection seems natural and authentic but is terribly mercenary and illusory. Levin understands in the end the erroneous impression he received through the painting, and the danger of Anna's veneer of charm. He will avoid her, make sure never meet her again—hardly the role of Christ and the fallen woman Mandelker sees. Far from the moment in which he becomes disposed to feel pity for others, this is another moment that reveals Anna to be charming and enticing, even to the point of ecstasy Levin experiences before the painting, like the joy he feels in the haystack, like the moment Vronsky experiences in the train when he, too, meets Anna, but all of which are ultimately artificial. Levin might pity her, but he soon realizes that neither his own love, nor pity, nor Anna's beautiful artifice can make him happy.

In short, this isn't a moment of transformation for Levin. It is a moment that is interesting for the architecture of the novel and a significant symbolic moment.³² It is a moment that is interesting for the contrast it shows between the two main figures, but it is not important for the plot or development of the characters.

Conclusion/Framing Anna as Readers: Us

In the early drafts of the novel, Anna was unattractive, explicitly an agent of vice for upstanding men—both Karenin and Vronsky.³³ By the time the novel was published, Anna had transformed, as had the men around her. Perhaps the single most concentrated instance of the power of her beauty and passion is the portrait. Her image is almost like magic—like a 'wonder-working' icon. Like the novel itself, it creates a compelling and sympathetic representation of a woman who might otherwise be condemned as a selfish, maniacal, and dissolute woman, who spreads the most extreme suffering in the lives of everyone around her—including herself.

Tolstoy's critics have virtually universally accepted the judgment that Mikhailov's portrait is not only superior to Vronsky's work, as indeed the text tells us, but also that it is "good" art and offers an authentic portrait of Anna. In taking the portrait as authentic, they have read it as a metonymical representation of the novel as a whole. The picture becomes a framed emblem of Anna's perfection, a testimony to the injustice of the violent fate that Anna calls "a bad

³¹ Tolstoy, 704.

³² Grossman, 14.

³³ Troyat, 359.

omen" when it befalls the switchman at the beginning and finally claims her own life near the end.³⁴

Those who find Anna ultimately less sympathetic than the common viewpoint nonetheless tend to retain the general assessment of the portrait itself. Mack argues the two Annas, the one in the portrait and the other in real life, contrast: "The earlier, natural Anna, as captured in Mikhailov's portrait, and the later one, debased by the outward show of convention, represent both the true and false arts Tolstoy described in his essay ["What is Art?"]."35 Mikhailov on the way to judging Anna, Morson avers that "artworks that do not proceed from experience are bound to be fake."³⁶ He is correct but not only in the way that he intended. The story of the portrait and its lookers and makers reveals for the careful reader a deeply framed, carefully concealed flaw in the representation of Anna. Mikhailov, despite his experience at looking, has virtually no experience of Anna. All of Mikhailov's efforts to portray Anna produce a spiritual-seeming portrait of an attractiveness that is not wholly true. Her happiness, as the plot bears out, is untenable despite its spectacular appeal, just as her astonishing beauty, artificially preserved in the portrait, will become untenable in real life as well without authentic happiness to renew it. Mikhailov, the finest artist in the novel, does not see it. Vronsky, amateur artist and lover, does not see it. Levin, too, at first does not see it. In the end it is the task of the careful reader to see what the characters cannot: Mikhailov's compelling portrait amounts to a false metonymy of the allure of false happiness.

³⁴ Tolstoy, 65.

³⁶ Morson, 190.

³⁵ Mack Smith, "Tolstoy and the Conventions of Representation," (*Renascence: Essays on Values in Literature*, 37:4, 1985), 228.