

Reading the Suprasensual in Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*:  
A Thesis in Eight Parts

by

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*I rode back through the forest of Turgenev's Spasskoe at sunset: the fresh green in the woods and underfoot, the stars in the sky, the smells of the flowering willow and the drooping birch leaf, the sounds of the nightingale, the drone of the maybeetles, the cuckoo and the solitude, and the cheerful pleasant motion of the horse under you, and physical, spiritual health. And I thought, as I do constantly, of death.*

- Leo Tolstoy, in a letter to his wife, 6 May 1898

*Dostoevsky was particularly spiritual, and Tolstoy completely earthbound.*

- Ernest J. Simmons, from *Introduction to Russian Realism*

*It is commonly said that reality is that which exists, or that only what exists is real. Just the contrary is the case: true reality, that which we really know, is what has never existed.*

- Leo Tolstoy, in a response to Emile Zola

I.

In Part Four of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, Vronsky wakes from a nap, "trembling with fear":

'What was that? What? What was that terrible thing I saw in my dream? Yes, yes. The muzhik tracker, I think, small, dirty, with a disheveled beard, was bending down and doing something, and he suddenly said some strange words in French. Yes, that's all there was to the dream,' he said to himself. 'But why was it so horrible?' He vividly recalled the peasant again and the incomprehensible French words the peasant had uttered, and horror sent a chill down his spine.

‘What is this nonsense!’ thought Vronsky, and he glanced at his watch<sup>1</sup>. (355-56)

The images Vronsky recalls have no frightful context, that is, no clear association with feelings of terror within his own subconscious. He is confused to find that the ostensibly neutral image of a *muzhik*, a peasant, which seems to have been recalled from a recent experience (Vronsky identifies the peasant in the dream as the tracker on a hunting trip), nevertheless creates in him the emotional experience of a nightmare. The feeling of the dream is unmistakable to Vronsky: “horrible,” “terrible,” but there is no identifiable reason, in the reserves of meaning in Vronsky’s inner world, why this should be so.

A few pages later, we learn that the true originator of the dream is actually Anna, not Vronsky; that somehow, the images of the dream have been “involuntarily communicated” (to use a term that is employed by Tolstoy throughout *Anna Karenina*) between the two lovers— the peasant image, along with the nightmarish feelings that image inspired, transferred to Vronsky without the two ever discussing it. Anna’s dream is much more detailed; for her, the muzhik is not muttering incomprehensibly, but says clearly, “*Il faut le battre le fer, le broyer, le pétrir,*” meaning “you must beat the iron, pound it, knead it” (361). For her, the muzhik is not vaguely “doing something” but bends over, rummages in a sack. This dream is old for Anna, solidified in memory; she tells Vronsky she had it “long ago”:

I dreamed that I ran into my bedroom, that I had to get something there, to find something out—you know how it happens in dreams,” she said, her eyes wide with horror, “and there was something standing in the bedroom, in the corner. . .And this something turned, and I saw it was a muzhik with a dishevelled beard, small and frightening. I wanted to run away, but he bent over a sack and rummaged in it with his hands. . .” And she showed

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<sup>1</sup> Tolstoy, Leo. *Anna Karenina: A Novel in Eight Parts*. Translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. Penguin Classics. 2000. All references to *Anna Karenina*, unless otherwise stated, will be from this translation. All pagination for quotations will be in the form of in-text citation for ease and clarity.

how he rummaged in the sack. . . “He rummages and mutters in French, very quickly, and rolling the *rs* in his throat”. . . And I was so frightened that I wanted to wake up, and I woke up. . .but I woke up in a dream. And I wondered what it meant. And Kornei says to me: ‘You’ll die in childbirth, my dear, in childbirth. . .’ And I woke up.” (361-62)

Anna is terrified even in her retelling of this dream. Possessed by the vividness of her memory, she acts out the part of the peasant with her body, mimicking the motions of the muzhik, making the figure all the more viscerally recognizable to Vronsky. But it is Vronsky who is truly horrified, indeed, Vronsky alone who knows this most distressing detail: that somehow, over the span of years and between two distinct minds, a nightmarish image has managed to *communicate itself*, to implant itself in another without warning or explanation. Partially stunned, partially not wishing to further upset the already-unraveling Anna, Vronsky remains silent about the shared quality of the dream. For Anna, the details of this dream act as an omen, frightening for the fate they cast over her future, but for Vronsky, it is the detail of their unexplained communication that is most unsettling. Similarly, it was this detail, upon my first reading of Tolstoy’s novel years ago, that deeply troubled me. Vronsky must think— as I did at the moment of its discovery—well, so what kind of reality is this?

## II.

This first time I read Leo Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*, I was a newly returned undergrad taking a course in the Russian Novel, and I was intimidated to find that Tolstoy’s text was the first I would read after a year and a half long hiatus from school. I had a preconceived idea of Russian literature (as, I’m sure, most novices do) as a literature with a reputation of general impenetrability, of sheer length, of naming novels after entire topics, like *War and Peace*, or *Crime and Punishment*. I had an old boyfriend whose intense love of Dostoevsky’s *Notes from the Underground* gave me a certain idea of the stuff of Russian literature, I thought: nihilistic,

solipsistic, embittered, detached, cold. I had little idea of Russian history or culture beyond learning about the Russian revolution in high school, but basic knowledge told me it seemed a severe and somewhat idiosyncratic country, intellectually rigorous perhaps because of cold climate and/or political strife. What I imagined before actually reading *Anna Karenina* was pages and pages of inaccessible musings, a novel of ideas that floated in air. I saw myself struggling to keep eyes open, head aching, pleading and grasping for something concrete to hold onto. I was back to finish my degree after unceremoniously dropping out, and now I thought frantically of possible failure: *Why had I chosen a course in Russian literature as my first one back?*

The professor of the course, Michelle Woods, selected the Pevear and Volokhonsky translation of Tolstoy's novel as the text the class would read together. The cover, soft gray, had tiny hands holding lilacs on a lap. This comforted me. Nothing gilded, nothing severe here. I opened it, and it began:

All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.

All was confusion in the Oblonskys' house. The wife had found out that the husband was having an affair with their former French governess, and had announced to the husband that she could not live in the same house with him. The situation had continued for three days now, and was painfully felt by the couple themselves, as well as by all the members of the family and household. They felt that there was no sense in their living together and that people who meet accidentally at any inn have more connection with each other than they, the members of the family and household of the Oblonskys. The wife would not leave her rooms, the husband was away for the third day. The children were running all over the house as if lost; the English governess quarreled with the housekeeper and wrote a note to a friend, asking her to find her a new place; the cook had already left the premises the day before, at dinner-time; the kitchen-maid and the coachman had given notice. (1)

I was surprised. This *Russian Novel*, this Tolstoyan tome, *Anna Karenina*, was extremely readable right from the first line. Where I expected to find rolling lectures, I found instead a home in disarray, seemingly simple sentences describing an ordinary domestic scene. During her lecture on this first section of the novel, Woods directed us towards the repetition of the word *home* in this first paragraph, a repetition that in Russian (pronounced “dom”) recollected the clangings of a church bell, a detail that Nabokov also notes in his *Lectures* on the text<sup>2</sup>.

*Anna Karenina* was, to my surprise and delight, a novel of ordinary life. Tolstoy himself described it as “truly a novel,” as he wrote in a letter to his friend, Nikolai Strakhov, “the first in my life.”<sup>3</sup> This he wrote even though *Anna Karenina* came after the publication of his successful novels *Childhood* (1852), *Boyhood* (1854), *Youth* (1856), *The Cossacks* (1863), and most notably, *War and Peace* (1867). Like his previous novels, *Anna Karenina* was serialized; the novel in eight parts appeared in *The Russian Messenger* between 1873 and 1877. Perhaps even in its medium of publication, *Anna Karenina* suggested itself as more than art, as somehow a slice of reality. Serial publication was commonplace in Russia at the time, and it allowed for substantial novels like *Anna Karenina* to respond directly to social and political issues as they arose, the stories and characters often reorienting themselves according to the intellectual zeitgeist. In this way, the characters were certainly *relatable* to contemporary Russian readers of the time; Levin, Stiva, Vronsky, Karenin: the ideas, laws, debates, fads that provided the backdrop of their lives were the same as the ideas circling in their real readership. Further, Chloë Kitzinger argues that serialization as a medium in itself had a hand in the immersive, life-like effect 19th century Russian novels had on their audience:

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<sup>2</sup> Nabokov, Vladimir Vladimirovich, and Fredson Bowers. *Lectures on Russian Literature / Vladimir Nabokov*; Edited, with an Introduction, by Fredson Bowers. 1st ed., Harcourt Brace Jovanovich/Bruccoli Clark, 1981

<sup>3</sup> Pevear, Richard. “Introduction” in *Anna Karenina: A Novel in Eight Parts*. Written by Leo Tolstoy. Penguin Classics. 2000. pp. vii

The 19th Century Russian novel, its claim to authority about reality and the inner truth of things, can be traced to specific historical circumstances. . . literature and literary criticism offered singularly open forums for the discussion of social, cultural and philosophical questions. . . most fiction [of the time period] was published in ‘thick journals,’ monthly magazines available by subscription. . . the novel’s intersection between literature and other types of writing. . . was a feature of serial publication. . . which took on particular weight in Russian in the absence of other avenues for expression<sup>4</sup>.

In these ways, the Russian view of literature at the time was “less as a production of a commodity, more as the intense dialogue of a literate class<sup>5</sup>.” *Anna Karenina*, at the time of its publication, was shaped by *and* responsible for shaping the literary society that made up its readership, both representing and contributing to Russian reality.

But Tolstoy deeply disliked the pretension of the literary society for which he wrote. Richard Pevear suggests that *Anna Karenina* was written in open rebellion to the literary intelligentsia in the 1870’s, an aristocracy that, steeped in nihilism, deemed “family novels” as “hopelessly out of fashion<sup>6</sup>”. Thus, *Anna Karenina*, in its focus on ordinary life, was reacting against the more avant-garde aspects of the cultural milieu, and reasserting the radical complexity to be found within the ordinary. In drawing attention to the repetition of *home* on the novel’s first page, Woods introduced the class to this rebellious strain of Tolstoy, to the paradox of the extraordinary power of the ordinary, complicating his image as an Old Master of Realism with his tendencies as impish provocateur.

Woods also took issue with the usual interpretation of Tolstoy’s first line, a line so oft repeated and so epigrammatic, it can be difficult to truly digest. *What do you think of the first*

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<sup>4</sup> Kitzinger, Chloë. *Mimetic Lives: Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Character in the Novel*. Northwestern University Press. 2021. pp. 11

<sup>5</sup> Milner-Gulland, Robin. “Old Russian Literature and its Heritage.” from *The Routledge Companion to Russian Literature* / Edited by Neil Cornwell. Routledge, 2001. pp. 18

<sup>6</sup> Pevear, Richard. “Introduction” pp. ix

*line?* She read aloud: *All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.* We were a room of undergraduates in which I, at twenty-three, was the eldest by a few years, a group of students at a state institution, unfamiliar with Tolstoy, that had surely rushed past the line in an effort to keep up with the strict reading schedule she had constructed for us— a breakneck pace that allowed for the reading of five Russian novels in one semester. In directing us to that first line, Woods forced us to slow down, implored us: *Do we really think that all happy families are the same? Is there such a thing as this distinction he puts to us: unhappy, happy? How could we judge which is which?* Where I had certainly read wizened aphorism, she found sarcasm; Tolstoy's tongue in Tolstoy's cheek. The author, she argued, couches a sharp criticism, a *proklyatie*, accursed, question, in this seemingly simple opener. Here he announces that this will not be a novel concerned only about representing domestic drama— no, this would be a novel about the instability of our conceptions of what ordinary life *is*, about what it might mean to cast or withhold judgment on that life— a novel about the very validity of the definitions that hold together our world, a novel that interrogates as much as it represents. All of this in the first line. All of this I had missed.

After this first lecture, I set out to read critically in the next assigned section. As I continued to read, however, maintaining an analytical eye proved to be exceedingly difficult, if not impossible. The novel, as they say, pulled me in. I fell in love with Anna. I saw her through the eyes of Vronsky's infatuated obedience turned painfully to coolness, through Kitty's misty admiration turned unendurably to betrayal, through Levin's judgment turned unexpectedly to enchantment. I went to the fields with Levin, felt in myself the rhythm of his mowing, shook my head in endearment at the throes of his psychological vacillations. I smiled always at the charming and simple Oblonsky, seeing how Dolly could love him even as he proved himself

adulterous and useless in both household and economic affairs. I felt in myself the powerful aplomb of Kitty as she ordered and arranged the dying Nikolai Levin's dirty hotel room, changing sheets, cleaning skin, straightening out her brother-in-law's environment without any embarrassment. In short, I knew and loved these people, Tolstoy's characters, I inhabited them, and their intertwining stories, their world that expanded and contracted around their shifting connections to each other. Tolstoy's ability to recreate the sensory experience of these characters is well documented and perhaps unmatched, and it was easy for me to read hungrily and without critique. I loved this novel unreservedly, and did not quite know how to approach it analytically.

Yet, I was taking a class, and I needed to produce a paper. Tolstoy had written life, and it sprawled out before me while I eagerly devoured it, this was true. But at the time, as now, the intuitive realization of this distinctive realism led me to fixate on the parts of the novel that, it seemed to me, did not fit in with what I saw then as Tolstoy's overwhelming devotion to representing reality: parts of the text that cling not to the abilities of the sensing body but seem to suggest a sensing spirit, a power beyond what physics could explain. There was this trouble of the peasant dream. If Tolstoy wrote reality, if he was, as Turgenev wrote of him, "the great writer of the Russian soil<sup>7</sup>," what aspect of reality, what earthly space was Tolstoy writing when he allowed the peasant dream to be transferred, incommunicado, from Anna to Vronsky? As I read further, I also noted the proposal à la mind-reading between Levin and Kitty, and began noticing at least a dozen smaller moments in the text in which characters use some kind of extra-sensual "sense" to *know* their world (Anna *knowing* her husband is near before seeing or hearing him; Levin *knowing* where Kitty is without having to look), or in which emotions "involuntarily communicate" themselves between characters. These smaller moments are offshoots of the more

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<sup>7</sup> Cited in Ehrhard, Marcelle., and Philip Minto. *Russian Literature / Marcelle Ehrhard, Translated from the French by Philip Minto*. Translated by Philip Minto, Walker, 1964. pp. 94

major episodes of supernatural significance: the moments in which emotions “communicate” themselves between characters is simply empathy (the accuracy of which varies to certain degrees), a more common and earth-bound example of the Anna-Vronsky dream; the moments in which characters can sense beyond the material senses is a step removed from plain sensitivity, in which we can interpret the body language, tone, looks of our familiars, a common kind of “mindreading.”

Throughout the text of *Anna Karenina*, there is a means of experience that is suprasensual, repeated moments in the text that seemed to me to deviate from Tolstoy’s apparently slavish devotion to writing objective, observable reality, departing from what can be represented concretely via the five senses. I wrote a small paper arguing that Tolstoy’s novel represented a reality that was shaped and created by human emotion, in a modernist way, and as such, the strength of Anna’s and Levin’s emotion could explain the supernatural bits of reality created around them. This thesis was sound and generally well argued, but in the years that followed the completion of that paper, I couldn’t shake my curiosity about the peasant dream; there was much more to be said, much more to incorporate and to grapple with in terms of that peasant dream, of Kitty and Levin’s wordless communication, of Anna and Levin’s ability to sense *sans* senses.

### III.

At the start of this project, I attempted to reread Leo Tolstoy’s novel at my teller station in Chase Bank. Ideas still embryonic, I read the novel between deposits and withdrawals, sneaking pages and scribbling quotes and notes for a yet unformed thesis in a spiral bound book. Like Anna trying to read her novel on the train from Moscow to Petersburg, I am distracted.

At first, [Anna] was unable to read. To begin with she was bothered by the bustle and movement; then, when the train started moving, she could not help listening

to the noises; then the snow that beat against the left-hand window and stuck to the glass, and the sight of a conductor passing by, all bundled up and covered with snow on one side, and the talk about the terrible blizzard outside, distracted her attention. (100)

Like Anna, I am constantly interrupted; I make payments, take withdrawals, print out statements. I bundle cash, stamp endorsements, scan endless slips of paper. I hear the stale ring of the phone, the voices of bankers rising out of their cubicles twenty feet up to vaulted ceilings, the shrill *ding-dong* of the drive-up censor<sup>8</sup>, the heavy whirring of the heat. No sooner have I sunk into the train car with Anna have I been interrupted by someone who asks, without greeting me, *can you cash my check without ID?* There is enough time between customers to feel guilty about not making an attempt to do my *real* work, my meaningful (and moneyless) work—but not enough time to acclimate to the mental mode that allows for the real work to actually get done. As I try to peer into the mimetic lives<sup>9</sup> of Karenin and Vronsky, of Kitty and Dolly, *real* sensations, *real* lives ceaselessly intrude.

Thus, the project takes shape slowly. No, that's not true. *Takes shape* is too generous. The shape of it remains broadly undefined. Its borders, over time, are generally moving in towards each other— that's true. I started out thinking I'd approach three other novels in conversation with Tolstoy's. An expansive and sprawling survey of four Great Russian novels, characteristically overblown and ambitious, almost certainly impossible. Thankfully, the contracting borders did not abide; that was cut. It would only be Tolstoy's novel.

I set out wanting to connect theories of space and place, ambient rhetoric, object studies, the Lacanian Real, Nineteenth Century Realism, phenomenology, sensory perception, the body and embodied cognition, spirituality, authenticity. In a way, I haven't given this up. I cannot talk

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<sup>8</sup> To which, after my years here, I respond with a promptness and energy that can only be described as Pavlovian.

<sup>9</sup> As Kitzinger calls them.

about any of these ideas without approaching the others, but the borders that enclose them within the project keep shifting; sometimes this will be a project mostly about Realism as a genre, sometimes this will be mostly about the body and its senses, sometimes this is a project only about my personal search for truth. A border occasionally juts out to allow for yet another adjacent feeling of resonance between ideas. Territories are created, loyalties formed and then broken. Sometimes the borders rush in close enough to squeeze my arms on either side, and I'm almost claustrophobic in a fleeting and illusory moment of anecdotal clarity: there it is! My thesis! All entirely caged, for example, in one of the quotations that tops this paper. I long for that to be enough, for the rush of feeling-ideas and intuitions and notions that I experience, held with unattainable aplomb within that quotation, to be involuntarily transferable to you, some written reader.

It's all there in the reminiscing thoughts of his letter to Sofya: the fresh green in the woods, the smells of the flowering willow, the sounds of the nightingale, the feeling of his horse under him, physicality, spirituality, death. The *feeling* of the web I will try to create is all there, all at once. But writing, my chosen vehicle for this project, unfolds in time, slowly; it cannot, as a painting can, be observed in the singularity of a moment, taken as a whole, in one gulp. I think of Lionel Trilling's comments on the possibilities of criticism after he reads *Anna Karenina*: "there are moments in literature which do not yield the secret of their power to any study of language. . . times when the literary critic can do nothing more than point<sup>10</sup>." The artifice of this pointing is also my concern. This is as much a story about the pointing, about what it means to point, as it is about the one doing the pointing, as it is about what is being pointed at— about the force exerted in the pointing, and the force exerted by the thing being pointed at. I do not hope to

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<sup>10</sup> Found in George R. Clay "Tolstoy in the Twentieth Century." in *The Cambridge Companion to Tolstoy: Edited by Donna Tussing Orwin. 1st ed., Cambridge University Press, 2002.*

force Tolstoy's text to yield to me, to my writing, to my argument about what his words mean. Tolstoy's text seems to me to require a different kind of criticism, a criticism that unfolds in time, slowly, that leans into that slowness, and that makes bare the usual hidden scaffolding of the scholarly article, that necessarily includes and is driven by the life of the one who reads and the one who writes.

The parameters of the project continue to shift, behaving like Russia's own borders over its history, volatile, expansive in the country's quests for imperial additions, shrinking in times of military defeat. Russian national identity is particularly idiosyncratic, muddled and rich between Slavic and Asiatic and European, between a French-speaking society and a bear-hearted farming culture; massive borders enclose a massive culture that resists definition, but is still distinct. This is the general idea that I come across in my reading done to get abreast of Russian identity. However, I find out much more, I think, by reading Tolstoy's novel, than by reading *An Historical Geography of Russia* (although I do not regret learning about the soil types in all of Russia's climate zones).

I devote lots of time to research, spending days off in the library. I circle the project like a vulture, looking for nourishment in the dead bodies of texts. It is what I call my absorption phase. I am collecting brambles of ideas and lines of text to create a nest for myself, collecting so as to arrange what right now looks more like a pile than a web, but aspires towards a Tolstoyan labyrinth of linkages between his novel, the work of scholars and theorists (some living, some dead, all still speaking), my lived and real life (with all its senses and feelings), Anna Karenina the character, Tolstoy the once-living author, Tolstoy the eternally living, eternally interred character (for Levin, hero of *Anna Karenina*, is Tolstoy), me the character (the person writing this, the "I" as Elena Ferrante suggests, who is no real person, who is writing), and me the person

sitting with bad posture and without energy at her teller station at Chase bank. It's starting to feel like a hoarder's house; I'm keeping ideas around like my mom kept every plastic bag the grocery store ever gave her: I certainly don't need all of these, but because of some vague sense of their eventual usefulness, I can't seem to throw them away. I love the research, and the moments in which I am least clear about where the threads will fit are for me the moments of most satisfying joy.

#### IV.

Gary Browning explores Tolstoy's phrase "labyrinth of linkages"<sup>11</sup> as the defining structure of *Anna Karenina*, a phrase that denotes the dense interrelatedness of ideas, characters, motifs, plot points, images, colors, themes in the novel as a highly organized text (in direct disavowal of early critical responses that Tolstoy's novels lacked structure, and were, in the words of Henry James, "loose baggy monsters"<sup>12</sup>). Thus, as anyone who writes on Tolstoy, I will jut up against this inescapable fact of his novel, writing, life: attempting to separate out a single critical strand necessarily pulls on five or six other threads, and, if you keep pulling, reveals what may look, at first glance, like a loose baggy monster. I decide I will focus on what has interested me from the start: the Anna-Vronsky peasant dream, the moments of sensing without senses.

Here there are a few distinctions that must be made. First of all, these supernaturalish moments are beyond explanation by simply considering the modernist tendencies of Tolstoy that have been noted by many scholars including Nabokov in his *Lectures* and George R. Clay in his illuminating comparison of Tolstoy and the modernists; there are of course scenes in the novel which show quite clearly the mutability of "reality" via the emotional state of the character who experiences that reality (we see this most acutely and most often in the experiences of Anna and

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<sup>11</sup> Browning, Gary L. *A "Labyrinth of Linkages" in Tolstoy's "Anna Karenina."* Academic Studies Press, 2010, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1zxsj3n>.

<sup>12</sup> Cited in Simmons, Ernest J. *Introduction to Russian Realism.* Indiana University Press, 1965. pp. 140

Levin, the most irrepressibly emotional characters in the text). Anna's carriage ride to the train station is one of literature's first examples of stream-of-consciousness; indeed, Clay makes convincing comparisons between Tolstoy's style in Anna's pre-suicide narrative and the style of James Joyce in *Ulysses*. But the suprasensual moments which I consider here are not instances of shifts of the experience of reality via emotional interpretation. The shared peasant dream is a moment of *complete transfer* of the subconscious experience of one character (Anna) into another (Vronsky); the proposal is an example of *complete transfer* of thoughts between two characters (Levin and Kitty); and there is no accounting for the sensing of another person's presence by way of being in any particular emotional state. In these scenes, reality is not simply molded by emotional sensitivity, but extra channels of communication and observation appear to open to the characters, channels that cannot be explained within the confines of the use of the five senses.

Another qualm that must be attended to: quasi-paranormal moments of coincidence, mind-reading, and suprasensual knowledge are not entirely unheard of in the lived experience of real people. Often, we have the ability to read body language, for example, and ascertain a person's general thought based on the information given to us in a certain posture, the tapping of a finger, a glance. There are many examples of this phenomenon in real life, and within the text of *Anna Karenina*. I draw the distinction between these moments and the ones that I deem *supernatural*, because these moments are easily explained by our human ability to interpret the actions of another.

Less often do we find ourselves able to spell out with exactitude, in complete sentences, the thoughts of another, as Levin and Kitty do, and perhaps never do we find that another's dream has burrowed itself into our subconscious. Can these happenings be explained by pure

coincidence? In real life, perhaps they could. But these details take on a special significance when fitted into the controlled schema of a fictional world, where coincidence is not coincidental but intentional, and where readers take the whole of the fictional world as a complete system with an identifiable logic that dictates what we can reasonably expect from this world. In novels that include markers of magical realism, for example, these details would not arouse the same kind of discomfort that they do in readers of Tolstoy's text. We may readily accept that the devil has come to Moscow in Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita*, for example, because the author has set up a world in which supernatural elements are a part of the world's internal logic. Professor Woland—that is, Satan—performs a magic show for a crowd of Soviets, and we don't bat an eye. But *Anna Karenina*'s world is certainly not a “magical” one; indeed, the author directly disavows “spiritualism” early on in the novel:

The conversation turned to table-turning and spirits, and Countess Nordston, who believed in spiritualism, began telling about the wonders she had seen.

. . .

‘But you, Konstantin Dmitrich, do you believe in it?’ she asked Levin.

‘Why do you ask me? You know what I'm going to say.’

‘But I wanted to hear your opinion.’

‘My opinion,’ answered Levin, ‘is simply that these turning tables prove that our so-called educated society is no higher than the muzhiks. They believe in the evil eye, and wicked spells, and love potions, while we. . .’

‘So, then, you don't believe in it?’

‘I cannot believe, Countess.’ (52)

Levin is, of course, the famously autobiographical depiction of the author himself, and here he speaks quite clearly of his view on the occult. Levin thinks of the spiritualists as absolute quacks

who “began by saying that tables write to them and spirits come to them, and only afterwards started saying it was an unknown force” (53). But we, as readers, must view the phenomenon of the peasant dream, of the Kitty-Levin mind-reading game in the same way, working backwards. What conception of an unknown force allows for the integration of these scenes in Tolstoy’s text? How do we reconcile Tolstoy’s “realism” with the seemingly supernatural? What is the schema in which we can understand a non-magical reality that allows for suprasensual communication and observation? It is clear that while Tolstoy disavows spiritualism, he cannot avoid the spiritual, and he makes it a tangible part of his schema of reality, one that is not precisely magical, but is also not entirely ruled by physics and reason.

In Part One of *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy gives an access point to this schema. Levin arrives at his brother Sergei’s apartment, walking into a heated discussion between his brother and a professor. The two intellectuals question if there is “a borderline between psychological and physiological phenomena in human activity” and if so, “where does it lie?” (24). Sergei holds that there is some quality of being that is not tied to the physical, that sensing the external environment does not make up the sum total of a person’s experience. The professor answers that “consciousness of being comes from the totality of your sense impressions, that this consciousness of being is the result of sensations” and thus “where there are no sensations, there is no concept of being” (24). The two go back and forth in this way, citing others on their side, each continuing to discuss “fine distinction, reservations” while getting no closer to a compromise. Levin, tiring of this intellectual phooey, attempts to pierce through to the core of the issue as he sees it, and asks: “Therefore, if my senses are destroyed, if my body dies, there can be no further existence?” In other words, what is left of me without my senses, without my body? Is there here a spirit, a soul that will outlive the body, that lives now through the body?

Here Tolstoy sets out one of the prime conflicts of *Anna Karenina* and, as his diaries and biographies readily attest, of his intellectual and actual life: the conflict between the physical body and the spirit within and beyond that body, an existential crisis of illness and art, of life and death. Over the course of *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy is concerned with many facets of the body-spirit relationship: the ability to use the body to seek and experience spirit, the extra-sensory perception of the spirit, the fallible nature of the body that contrasts the eternal nature of the spirit, the force and feeling of death that informs this noumenal/phenomenal struggle, and finally, the possibilities of truth and falsity in the artistic representation of acts of sensory perception in art.

*Anna Karenina*, then, is Tolstoy's exploration of the fuzzy distinction between the material and the immaterial realms— and the sensitive powers of observation and experience this liminality allows for in the human, suprasensual powers afforded to the material body by way of a spiritual sense. The combination of the author's (in)famously idiosyncratic conceptions of the relationship between the body and the spirit, and of emotional infection in the creation and experience of life and art make for a liminal kind of realism that reads as especially lifelike. In Tolstoy's conception of reality, we have the ability to sense beyond sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch. This is what makes Tolstoyan realism distinct: readers of *Anna Karenina* recognize a schema of reality that deeply acknowledges the integration of a spiritual sense. In other words, Tolstoy writes the observations and communications of the spirit *as though they were one of the material senses*.

This project is an exploration of questions that for me is long overdue. It is an assertion that a parsing of Tolstoy's conception of and relationship to the material senses, to spiritualism and spirituality, to emotional infection, to the genre of nineteenth century Realism, all inform the

text-world of *Anna Karenina*, the novel that appears to critics and novice readers alike as one of literature's most acute examples of "reality." Although Tolstoy has long been lauded as the master of 19th Century Realism, his texts do not operate as other 19th century realist texts do, and that is because Tolstoy did not conceive of "reality" the way other writers of his time did. To cast Tolstoy as the master of rote observation, or to only go as far as placing him as a creator of the psychological novel, is to miss the spiritual/material element of his work that "[enables] readers to grasp the felt experience of everyday life<sup>13</sup>," to feel that what they are reading is "not really a work of art at all, but a piece of life."<sup>14</sup> Paradoxically, I begin to realize that the question of the peasant dream is not disavowal of the realism of Tolstoy, but the opposite: it is a portal through which to view the inner-workings that make the text so unnaturally "real."

I include the disclaimer that the structure of this project operates much inspired by the idea of a "labyrinth of linkages," in that certain lines of inquiry will disappear and reappear as needed. Throughout, however, I argue that Tolstoy's unique conception of the body and the spirit is bound up in his theory that answers the question *What is Art?*, and to his conception of infection (emotional and otherwise) -- and finally, to his preoccupation with the irrepressible force of death. The interrelation of these threads works to create the distinctively "real" novel that readers find in *Anna Karenina*. In following these threads, I also explore the questions: what makes a novel appear to us as "real"? What is Tolstoy's schema of reality? How does Tolstoy write the spirit onto the body? What formal elements are indicative of Tolstoy's attempts to represent the spiritual via the material? And finally, what are the implications of this spiritual element on our reading of the characters who inhabit this world?

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<sup>13</sup> Auyoung, Elaine. *When Fiction Feels Real: Representations and the Reading Mind*. Oxford University Press. 2018. pp. 16

<sup>14</sup> Matthew Arnold, cited in Simmons, *Introduction to Russian Realism*. pp. 139

## V.

The days pass and I continue to reread *Anna Karenina* at work. Here, among the payment slips and lollipops, the sight of the novel shocks. *Anna Karenina* does not belong at Chase Bank. It is over eight hundred pages. It seems to threaten. Without exception, any banking patron over the age of forty will feel a need to engage with the threat, to size it up, to size themselves up, to size me up. *Bit of light reading, huh? Tolstoy? Heavy stuff. Better you than me.* Most amusing perhaps are my attempts to convince these accountholders that *Anna Karenina* is not deserving of this reputation, that Tolstoy writes for any reader, that he writes life, that his novel reads smooth and refreshing like water (that his chapters are very short!). After my little spiel, the customers usually respond with a look that is skeptical, part squeamish, part pitying. Should I tell them about Oprah? I wonder about context. What was the source of my initial fear of Tolstoy? I think about the novel's serialization. If these customers found a passage of Tolstoy amidst the reddit reposts and memes of their Facebook feed, I think, they would become immersed just as all other readers of Tolstoy seem to be.

It is because, when it comes down to it, Tolstoy's great talent as a writer is well identified as his ability to observe and recreate sensory perceptions. Since its publication, *Anna Karenina* has garnered attention for the exactness of verisimilitude that is produced by Tolstoy's keen observation and delicate representation of sensory experience. In 1887, Emile Melchior assigns Tolstoy an "unparalleled lucidity and penetration for the scientific study of life," declaring that the author has "a clear analytical comprehension of everything upon earth's surface<sup>15</sup>"; Richard Freeborn writes of Tolstoy's fiction as able to create the feeling in a reader that "they are perceiving reality unmediatedly, experiencing his characters' emotions without any barriers<sup>16</sup>";

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<sup>15</sup> from "Early English-Language Responses to Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*," Evans, Robert C, editor. *Anna Karenina*. Salem Press, a Division of EBSCO Information Services, Inc, 2021.pp. 77

<sup>16</sup> from *The Cambridge history of Russian Literature*. Ed. Charles A. Moser. pp. 249

Matthew Arnold chides Tolstoy for his lack of organization, for a seemingly indulgent inclusion of events that are not streamlined towards a totalizing, artistic effect— before admitting that what *Anna Karenina* “loses in art it gains in reality,” and finally praising Tolstoy’s “extraordinary fineness of perception,” along with “his sincere fidelity to it.<sup>17</sup>” Victor Shklovsky’s concept of art as “estrangement,” is driven by his references to Tolstoy’s ability to, what Shklovsky calls, “defamiliarize” our ordinary experiences; Tolstoy “deautomatizes” our experience of a thing “by describing it as if seen for the first time, as if happening for the first time<sup>18</sup>” -- with what a Buddhist might call a ‘beginner’s mind’. To sum up the dozens of reactions to Tolstoy’s work that I’ve read in preparation for this project: I find I am not alone in this almost compulsive need to assert the lifelikeness of Tolstoy’s writing. Readers and critics repeatedly find and ascribe a “life” within the author’s pages— a “fidelity<sup>19</sup>” to life espoused by nineteenth century American realists such as W.D. Howells:

I make truth the prime test of a novel. If I do not find that it is like life, then it does not exist for me as art; it is ugly, it is ludicrous, it is impossible. I do not expect a novel to be wholly true. I have never read one that seemed to me so except Tolstoy’s novels. . . (915)

Nabokov says in his *Lectures* that it seems like in the case of *Anna Karenina*, “the novel writes its own self<sup>20</sup>”. As basic as it may seem to say it, there is undoubtedly something “natural,” “true,” “real” about the text. In short, Tolstoy’s realism struck me, as it has struck many others, as somehow fresh and more intensely real than other fiction.

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<sup>17</sup> from “Early English-Language Responses to Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*,” *Anna Karenina: Critical Insights*, ed. Robert C. Evans. pp. 79

<sup>18</sup> Shklovsky, Viktor. “Art, as Device.” Berlina, Alexandra as translator. *Poetics Today*. 36:3. September 2015. pp. 163

<sup>19</sup> Howells, W.D. “The Editor’s Study.” *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*. Seventh Edition. Volume C. ed. Lauter, Paul, Yarborough, Richard, et al. Wadsworth Cengage Learning. 2014. pp. 147-48.

<sup>20</sup> pp. 143

One of Tolstoy's most dedicated American proponents, the aforementioned W.D. Howells, devoted much space in his regular columns to praising Tolstoy's abilities of 'realism,'; indeed, much of Tolstoy's reputation as a figure of realism comes from Howells' representation of him as such:

Of this band of faithful followers [a modest group of American realists and critics], Howells was undisputed leader. And it is to his criticism that we must look for a clear understanding of how nineteenth-century America reacted to Tolstoy . . . Long before Tolstoy had the stature he has today, Howells recognized his genius . . . [and] tried to sell Tolstoy to the American public. He also used him to define literary realism and give that new literature a standard of greatness<sup>21</sup>.

If we see Leo Tolstoy as the epitome of Nineteenth Century realism, it is perhaps because the genre itself, in its American iteration, due to the efforts of Howells, was actively inspired and shaped around Tolstoy's writing. Ever since, explanations for Tolstoy's apparent approximation of reality are varied and profuse, but there is general agreement that Tolstoy's fiction is a masterpiece and masterclass in traditional nineteenth century Realism. But even as I write the words *real*, *natural*, *true*, I bristle against their vagueness. In general, there is trouble in the term *realism* itself. It doesn't seem clear that Tolstoy's "realism" fits in with the Realism of his contemporaries. In fact, it doesn't seem clear what "realism" actually is.

In his *Glossary of Literary Terms*, M. H. Abrams defines realism as literature that "represent[s] life as it really is," as opposed to romanticism, which "is said to present life as we would have it<sup>22</sup>". Where to even begin with these definitions? What exactly is "life as it really

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<sup>21</sup> Goldfarb, Clare R. "William Dean Howells: An American Reaction to Tolstoy." *Comparative Literature Studies*, vol. 8, 1971, pp. 317–37.

EBSCOhost, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=1971214173&site=ehost-live>.

<sup>22</sup> Abrams, M. H. (Meyer Howard). *A Glossary of Literary Terms* / M.H. Abrams. 6th ed., Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, 1993. pp. 174

is”? When we remove reality from The Lacanian Real and translate it into words on a page, aren’t we necessarily “present[ing] life as we would have it”? Taking issue with the term “realism” is not directly in the purview of this project,<sup>23</sup> but suffice it to say that there is a trail of muddled definitions inherent to the genre all the way back to its very inception, where early Realists such as James, Stendhal, Twain all gave their versions of this definition: realism is representing life *as it really is*.

What can this muddy definition possibly mean in light of Tolstoy? So many have attributed ‘life’ to its pages, and yet there is something almost enchanted about the text, despite the fineness of its realistic effects. In language, Tolstoy represents the life and bodies of his characters through the realist focus on recreating sensory perception. But in his word-made bodies he also gestures towards the spirit, the transcendent, supernatural quality of life that even in the trenches of our reality, we can often feel the edges of. *Anna Karenina* is not a great fit for the strict Newtonian “realism” with which Tolstoy’s work is often made metonymic. Many critics, including Mary Holland, have explored the loose baggy monster of “realism,” as it were, and tried to hack through the ambiguity of the term in order to make it useful again. As the list of ‘realisms’ (magical, poststructural, traumatic, figural, hysterical, meta, etc.<sup>24</sup>) continue to accrue, Holland assesses that we must understand that “realism” isn’t truly representing an objective “reality,” but rather is true in its faithfulness to the conception of reality of its author (which is often related to the broader scientific and cultural understanding of the nature of reality recognized by the society in which the author lives). The significance of identifying Tolstoy’s unique conception of reality, then, is that it helps to identify his distinct kind of realism, clarifying our idea of the novel as containing “life”. Tolstoy is masterful in his dedication to his

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<sup>23</sup> For a fascinating and up-to-date parsing of this term, read Holland’s *The Moral Worlds of Contemporary Realism*.

<sup>24</sup> Holland, Mary. *The Moral Worlds of Contemporary Realism* / Mary K. Holland. Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. pp. 53

particular schema of the world; it cannot be received as only representing an “earthbound” reality. But it does start with the five senses.

Natalia Chernysheva has done extensive work— I owe her much<sup>25</sup>— on Tolstoy’s relationship to the body and the senses. In *The Haptic in Lev Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina*, she focuses on touch in the novel, and describes in detail the various moral and philosophical underpinnings of Tolstoy’s particular sensory sensitivity, his related obsession with the relationship between body and spirit, and more specifically, his growing anxiety about the body and the effects this has on his oeuvre. Tolstoy showed an exceptional depth and affinity for sensory perception from a very young age; in his autobiographical notes, Tolstoy (almost unbelievably) recalls the physical sensation of being bathed in his early infancy (along with the “not unpleasant” smell of bran)<sup>26</sup>. This deep capacity for connectedness to his own senses is inarguably linked to his ability to describe with stunning precision the sensory experiences of his characters. Indeed, Chernysheva cites Nabokov’s “obser[vation] that Tolstoy’s attention to physical detail is unusual for Russian literature of the nineteenth century, even as late as the 1880s,” and asserts that not only does this distinctive “attention to physical detail” explain the unusual verisimilitude found in Tolstoy’s texts, but that this “attention” also warrants further investigation into what the surplus of acute “physical detail” in Tolstoy’s texts points to: a moral and philosophical preoccupation with the body that defines the ethics of his oeuvre<sup>27</sup>. Tolstoy’s spiritual crisis in 1879 is a turning point for many of Tolstoy’s increasingly radical ideas<sup>28</sup>, and

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<sup>25</sup> She kindly emailed me a manuscript of her PhD dissertation, which I could not find through the usual library channels. Chernysheva, Natalia. *The Haptic in Lev Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina*. 2017. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, PhD dissertation.

<sup>26</sup> Chernysheva, Natalia. pp. 2

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. pp. 3

<sup>28</sup> And also marked a turning point in his writing. D.S. Mirsky, for example, in his *History of Russian Literature*, breaks up his survey of Tolstoy into two distinct eras: pre- and post-1880s. Most critics see *Anna Karenina* as Tolstoy’s greatest novel, and the last in a trajectory of increasing artistic quality; his literature after 1880 denotes, according to Mirsky, “a profound change in his artistic views and aims” that let go of the “wisdom” of his earlier

Chernysheva finds that his anxiety about the body greatly increases in his texts written after 1880. In terms of *Anna Karenina*, written directly before this major crisis, Chernysheva tracks the lead up to his eventually overwhelming anxiety about the morally corruptive powers of the body, and especially of touch<sup>29</sup>. Pre-crisis, Chernysheva finds, Tolstoy's conception of the body and the spirit was much more forgiving:

In his diary of 1851, young Tolstoi ponders the mysterious link between the body and the soul, which incites man's contradictory impulses: "В таинственной связи души и тела заключается разгадка противоречащих стремлений" ("In the mysterious connection of soul and body lies the key to conflicting aspirations")<sup>30</sup>.

Chernysheva writes of Tolstoy as a student of Plato and Rousseau, and of the influence both thinkers had on Tolstoy's conception of the relationship between the "soul and the body," the senses and the spirit. Plato is skeptical of the senses as reliable arbiters of "reality," and creates a clear distinction between the body and the spirit: for Plato, ultimate reality is not material, but immaterial, is represented in the noumenal world of forms, and not the phenomenal world that we experience through the senses. For Plato, the body is temporary, suggestible, vulnerable to disease; the soul is eternal. Plato advocates for the rejection of the body in those interested in attaining ultimate truth; only in death, the final shirking of our material form, do we approach complete truth. Rousseau, on the other hand, believes the presence of sensory perception is the only true way to know our existence. Western thought on sensory perception, as deftly summarized by Chernysheva, seems to vacillate between these two ends: on the one hand, our senses are not to be trusted, on the other, they are the only way in which we can verify our

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work, "the surrender of rationalism to the irrationalism of life," and moved absolutely towards "the identification of the principle of life with reason" (294-296).

<sup>29</sup> For example, in his 1889 novella, *The Kreutzer Sonata*, Tolstoy ends with a detailed description of the ideals he sought to express in the novella, namely: absolute abstinence, even within marriage.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 42

existence at all; our senses provide us with all the knowledge we have, and yet sometimes the data we receive is inaccurate. Understanding Tolstoy's realism hinges on an understanding of the tension held in this idea.

It is commonly understood that there is more to Tolstoy's sensory descriptions than rote reportage. Referencing John Weeks, Chernysheva notes that "Tolstoi imbues his sensory (corporeal) perceptions with epistemological and metaphysical (immaterial) meanings<sup>31</sup>," in other words, as John Bayley argues, the emotion of a Tolstoy character is "always expressed physically<sup>32</sup>". Taking this notion a step further, I argue that Tolstoy writes the spiritual (immaterial, metaphysical) *into* the physical, sensory, corporeal. Take for example, Vronsky and Anna's first meeting:

Vronsky had time to notice the restrained animation that played over her face and fluttered between her shining eyes. . . It was as if a surplus of something so overflowed her being that it expressed itself beyond her will, now in the brightness of her glance, now in her smile. She deliberately extinguished the light in her eyes, but it shone against her will in a barely noticeable smile. (61)

The metaphysical "something" of Anna's being is recognized by Vronsky in her physical attributes, her "glance," her "smile." Later in the text, Vronsky "look[s at Anna], struck by the new, spiritual beauty of her face" (139). It's not just that her emotions are expressed through her physical actions, but also that through her physicality, aspects of her soul become visible. This is a fine distinction, but a significant one. For Tolstoy, the description of physical and sensory attributes is not merely a mechanism through which to "show and not tell" his character's inner feeling, instead, it is an integral part of his view of reality, of his conception of the physical body as a conduit through which the immaterial spirit works.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid. pp. 9

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. pp. 7

Critics have also long identified the presence of the spiritual in Tolstoy's work. Nabokov notes this "metaphysical component to the physical experience<sup>33</sup>" in his analysis of the storm scene in which Levin's child has a wet diaper. Edward Garnett writes that "Tolstoy's realism in art is symbolical of our absorption in the world of fact, in the modern study of natural law, a study ultimately without loss of spirituality, nay, resulting in immense gain to the spiritual life,<sup>34</sup>" and W.D. Howells notes the spiritual sense is what makes Tolstoy's writing operate ethically, which is what Howells holds most dear about Tolstoy's work.

This presence of the spiritual is tangible in the moments of suprasensual perception, and supernatural forces repeatedly mentioned by Tolstoy throughout the text. There is mention of some "unknown force" multiple times throughout the novel: when Levin is mowing, he says "he felt some external force moved him" (256); when Anna lies to Alexie Alexandrovich about her affair with Vronsky, she says "she felt some invisible force was helping her and supporting her" (145); when Kitty runs towards Levin after their engagement is set, "she did not walk, but by some invisible force rushed towards him" (404). When Kitty looks at Anna at the ball, Tolstoy writes:

Some *supernatural force* drew Kitty's eyes to Anna's face. She was enchanting in her simple black dress, enchanting her firm neck with its string of pearls, enchanting her curly hair in disarray, enchanting the graceful, light movements of her small feet and hands, enchanting that beautiful face in its animation; but there was something terrible and cruel in her enchantment. (83)

Anna is able to sense her husband's presence at the races "without the aid of external senses" (207). At the dinner which serves as backdrop to Levin and Kitty's proposal, Levin

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<sup>33</sup> Nabokov, Vladimir. pp. 202

<sup>34</sup> In "Early English-Language Responses to Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*," Evans, Robert C, editor. *Anna Karenina*. pp. 83

without looking at Kitty, sens[es] her movements, her glances, and the place where she was in the drawing room. . . Without turning around, he [feels] a gaze and a smile directed at him and [can] not help turning. [Kitty] was standing in the doorway with Scherbatsky and looking at him. (395)

Levin and Kitty's relationship is one of the most beautiful and charming in all of literature, and similarly, the scene of their proposal is one of the most romantic and memorable in all of literature. Nabokov speaks of it fondly but skeptically, saying that although it is "far-fetched," he can concede that "love may work wonders and bridge the abyss between minds and present cases of tender telepathy," although he finally settles on the point that "such detailed thought reading. . . is not quite convincing." In a schema in which Tolstoy's novel exists in a totally earth-bound reality, Nabokov is correct. But in the schema of reality that includes spiritual forces, we can read the chalk table proposal as something more than simple coincidence brought about by love. Even before the two sit at the chalk table, Kitty demonstrates her ability to "fully "[divine] and [express Levin's] poorly expressed thought," to "transition from an intricate, verbose argument with his brother and Pestsov to this laconic and clear, almost wordless, communication of the most complex thoughts" (396). When they sit down at the chalk table, writing a code in chalk, Levin tests Kitty's abilities further, and miraculously, she understands. Kitty then tests Levin, and he also understands. The two go back and forth, writing the first letter of each word in their heart, and in turn, the other understands those words with complete precision:

She and Levin were carrying on their own conversation, or not a conversation but some mysterious communication that bound them more closely together with every minute and produced in both of them a feeling of joyful fear before the unknown into which they were entering. (390)

In this wordless exchange, there is no significantly no searching of the other's physicality for an answer, no need for body language nor facial expressions. Removed from the use of their physical senses, Levin and Kitty use their spiritual senses to ascertain each other's location at the dinner party, and then, at the chalk table, to understand each other's thoughts.

## VI.

The two poles of the novel, Anna and Levin, are also the two epicenters of the suprasensual moments in *Anna Karenina*. Not precisely foils of each other as characters, but certainly involved in the two contrasting romantic relationships that structure the text, Anna and Levin, out of all the characters of the novel, are the most sensitive, both internally and to their environments. Both characters are noticeably gifted in observing their world, and both characters are deeply affected. They are both intelligent, both moody, both jealous, both, to varying degrees, dissatisfied with the status quo. More than any of the other characters, Anna and Levin change the narration of the text with the strength of their emotionality. Levin, after Kitty accepts his proposal, molds the narration around his joyfulness, "laugh[ing] and weep[ing] with joy" at ordinary things like schoolboys, pigeons, and baking bread (403). The entire world of the text becomes "obviously infected by Levin's rapture, just as people get infected by yawning" (401). The speed of the narration seems to increase with the frenetic energy of Levin's joy, and everyone in Levin's immediate vicinity appears to be kind, good, and inspirational. In a similar but darker way, Anna takes control of the narration in the moments before her suicide. Before stream-of-consciousness was commonplace in literature, Tolstoy writes the flow of Anna's thoughts without interruption in the carriage ride to her death. She spies two boys buying ice cream, and thinks:

‘We all want something sweet, tasty. If not candy, then dirty ice cream. And Kitty’s the same: if not Vronsky, then Levin. And she envies me. And hates me. We all hate each other. I Kitty, Kitty me. That’s the truth. Twitkin, Coiffeur. . . *Je me fais coiffer par Twitkin*. . . I’ll tell him when he comes,’ she thought and smiled. But at the same moment she remembered that she now had no one to tell anything funny to. ‘And there isn’t anything gay or funny. Everything is vile. The bells ring for vespers and this merchant crosses himself so neatly! As if he’s afraid of dropping something. Why these churches, this ringing and this lie? Only to hide the fact that we all hate each other, like these cabbies who quarrel so spitefully. . .’ (761)

Her thoughts fling wildly from one idea to the next, scattered here and there by the things she perceives from the window of her carriage. Everything in the world outside is tinged by the desperation of her anguish; everyone she sees is sinister, is disgusting and offensive to her. As with Levin, the subjectivity of her reality is so powerful that it shapes Tolstoy’s mechanism of the telling of that reality. In both examples, the emotion of the character affects the accuracy of their sensory perception. Any sense of “objective reality” disappears, and is replaced by the one that each character sees through the lens of their emotion.

The scene in which Anna reads on the train, famously outlined by Nabokov, is especially rich in how it reveals both Tolstoy’s mimetic technique that relies on the reader’s embodied senses, *and* the author’s complicated conception of the senses not as a means of unmediated observation of reality, but as mutable and suspect interpolators of the world around.

Anna leaves Moscow early after her worrisome encounter with Vronsky at the ball, taking her seat next to Annushka “in the semi-darkness of the sleeping car” of the train that will take her back to Petersburg. Every minute action Anna makes to “settle herself” in her seat does not escape Tolstoy: he details “with her small deft hands she unclasped her little red bag, took

out a small pillow, put it on her knees, reclasped the bag, and, after neatly covering her legs, calmly leaned back” (100). In usual Tolstoyan fashion the scene is peppered with (but not overwhelmed by) these fine details, even down to descriptions of Annushka, “with her broad hands in their gloves, one of which was torn” (100). Annushka’s torn glove is a detail that seems especially superfluous— but that nevertheless convinces us of the ultimate “reality” of the train car, of Anna and Annushka. By providing a seemingly unnecessary detail, Tolstoy mimics the visual experience of life in which one often notices random bits of information that don’t necessarily end up meaning anything significant after the detail has been perceived.

In her fascinating exploration of “the phenomenological significance of Tolstoy’s representational technique,” Elaine Auyoung argues that seemingly random details like that of Annushka’s torn glove, or of Anna’s detailed movements as she settles on the train, are not completely arbitrary, but particularly efficient in their ability to activate sensory motor recognition in the reader:

Tolstoy consistently calls attention to ordinary physical actions. . .and the ease with which these details can activate a reader’s embodied knowledge enables the text to evoke perceptual immediacy in a surprisingly efficient way.<sup>35</sup>

Indeed, in this vein, Nicole Wilson and Raymond Gibbs find in their research that when reading about an action, the same parts of the brain become activated in reading about the action as when completing the action physically<sup>36</sup>. This in part explains the feeling of fluidity in the reading of *Anna Karenina*; Auyoung explains that when our brains encounter already-known information in a text, we don’t have to work as hard to comprehend that text: by presenting small details that rely on embodied knowledge, Tolstoy actually makes his text *easier* to read, and so easier to

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<sup>35</sup> Auyoung, Elaine. pp. 20-21

<sup>36</sup> Wilson, Nicole and Gibbs, Raymond. “Real and Imagined Body Movement Primes Metaphor Comprehension.” *Cognitive Science*. 2007:3:4. pp. 721-731

become immersed in. The more ordinary and recognizable the detail, the more *fluency* (a cognitive psychology term referring to the amount of mental effort we as readers need to put in to “grasp” something we read) experienced by the reader, the easier it is for that reader to feel cognitively immersed:

Mundane physical experiences that readers regularly undergo without a second thought become a means by which they can come to know, in deep and durable ways, a vibrant, expansive world that has no real existence ... To understand a novel’s reality effects as a function of how well the text takes advantage of a reader’s cognitive capacities is to approach literary representation in a surprisingly Aristotealian way.<sup>37</sup>

Further, Auyoung makes the point that although “twentieth century theorists have tried to pull the rug out from under the word *rug*” (referring to poststructuralists/postmodernists that argue that language has no actual *referent*, for example Derrida argues, words refer only to an irreducible *supplement*, which stands in for reality), “our multisensory knowledge of what kind of thing a rug is comes too readily to mind<sup>38</sup>”. We’ve lain down on a rug, shaken one out on our porch during spring cleaning, felt the relief of one after walking on a cold winter floor—and the embodied nature of this knowledge creates a cognitive reality of the word/concept “rug,” and suggests that “nineteenth century novelists can no longer be said to be as naive about how language works as they have sometimes been made out to be<sup>39</sup>”. The part of me that felt silly and immature for wanting to write a thesis about the “reality” of a novel here is vindicated— the Tolstoy that wrote *Anna Karenina* knows that his text can never stand in for The Real, but he also believes that art has a great capacity for creating and expressing truth. Although Tolstoy wasn’t thinking in the exact terms of cognitive science, he intuited the significant effect the

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<sup>37</sup> Auyoung, Elaine. pp. 34

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. pp. 12

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. pp. 12

inclusion of specific physical details would have on the reader. The more times Tolstoy can activate these regions of his reader's brain, then, the closer he gets to achieving the kind of full on "simulation"<sup>40</sup> that he idealizes in *What is Art?*, a theory of artistic "infection" in which what Chloë Kitzinger calls "aesthetic absorption"<sup>41</sup> can take place.

On the train, Anna tries to read on the journey, but at first is "unable" – there are too many distractions occupying her senses which must be blocked in order to focus on her novel (100). The "noises" of the train, "the snow that beat against the left-hand window and stuck up to the glass, the sight of a conductor passing. . .and the talk about the terrible blizzard outside" are obstacles to the possibility of Anna's immersion in the fictional world of her novel, where, ostensibly, she replaces her own five senses with the simulatory sensory perceptions the author creates (100). As she gets used to the stimuli around her on the train car, she is more able to read– but "it was unpleasant for her to read, that is, to follow the reflection of other people's lives" (100). The realist literature is uncomfortable for Anna, who confuses the 'living' fictional world she reads with the possible realities of her own life:

When she read about the heroine of the novel taking care of a sick man, she wanted to walk with inaudible steps round the sick man's room; when she read about a Member of Parliament making a speech, she wanted to make that speech; when she read about how Lady Mary rode to hounds, teasing her sister in law and surprising everyone with her courage, she wanted to do it herself. (100)

Tolstoy nearly approaches metafiction in his depiction of Anna reading her novel; the reader of Tolstoy's novel here finds a description that mirrors the very act that they are engaged in, perhaps wishing that *they* could ride along in the train car with Anna, could live Anna's life

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<sup>40</sup> Tatyana Gershkovich's term. Gershkovich, Tatyana. "Infecting, Simulating, Judging: Tolstoy's Search for an Aesthetic Standard." *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 74, no. 1, Jan. 2013, pp. 115–37. EBSCOhost, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=2017308437&site=ehost-live>.

<sup>41</sup> Kitzinger, Chloë. pp. 7

instead of merely reading it. The guilty conscience of the protagonist of Anna's novel starts to meld with her own guilt and shame, leading to a series of concerning thoughts about Vronsky that ultimately removes her entirely from the world of the English book.

Giving up on the novel, she takes herself away from these thoughts by grounding herself in her senses— first touching the paper knife, “and then put[ting] its smooth and cold surface to her cheek” (101). She is shocked by the “joy” that this physical sensation brings her, “nearly laugh[ing] aloud” in the darkened sleeping car. Platonic thought asserts that to fully enter the mind, one must disregard the sensing body; this logic is mimicked in Vronsky after Anna's suicide; Vronsky has a toothache, but when his thoughts turn to the tragedy of Anna, he experiences a “general, tormenting inner discomfort” that “make[s] him forget his toothache for a moment.” In thinking about “her triumphant, accomplished threat of totally unnecessary but ineffaceable regret,” he “cease[s] to feel the toothache” (780-81). The metaphor of a pulled tooth first appears with Karenin, who, after Anna's confession of the affair with Vronsky, feels “like a man who has had a long-aching tooth pulled out,” “feels that what has poisoned his life and absorbed all his attention for so long exists no more, and that he can again love, think and be interested in something other than his tooth” (279). There is only so much conscious attention one can muster, and this attention is in a state of constant tension between the thinking mind and the feeling body.

On the train, Anna evades her thoughts by bringing consciousness to her body and senses; “she felt her eyes open wider and wider, her fingers and toes move nervously,” before fully submerging into the experience of her senses, where “all images and sounds in that wavering semi-darkness impressed themselves on her with extraordinary vividness” (101). In this fully-sensing state, absorbing all sensory data around her, Anna begins to notice just how

inaccurate her senses can be in telling her the “reality” of her surroundings. Anna realizes that she cannot feel if “the [train] carriage was moving forwards, or backwards, or standing still” – a direct reference to Newton’s second law of motion, acceleration (101). The only time a body in motion can *sense* that motion is when there is a change, either an increase or decrease in speed. This is why, even though the earth is constantly turning, we cannot *feel* that it is so. Because the train is traveling at a constant speed, Anna cannot sense its motion. This is a perfectly chosen example for Tolstoy to complicate the world as experienced through sensory perception; sometimes, if left only to our senses, we are dumb to the nature of our reality.

Levin acknowledges this in a more direct way towards the end of the novel, when he questions the answers that science has given to replace those of Christianity. On the penultimate page of the novel, Levin asks himself:

‘Don’t I know that the stars don’t move?’ he asked himself, looking at a bright planet that had already changed its position over the topmost branch of a birch. ‘Yet, looking at the movement of the stars, I cannot picture to myself the turning of the earth, and I’m right in saying that the stars move.’ (816)

And a few pages earlier, again looking up at the sky, Levin questions the validity of his own perception versus the proofs of scientific inquiry:

Lying on his back, he was now looking at the high, cloudless sky. ‘Don’t I know that it is infinite space and not a round vault? But no matter how I squint and strain my sight, I cannot help seeing it as round and limited, and despite my knowledge of infinite space, I am undoubtedly right when I see a firm blue vault, more right than when I strain to see beyond it.’ (800)

For Levin, the question of the accuracy of his senses gives way to a mysticism that trusts the truth of his spiritual perception, rather than needing to sense “objective” Reasoned reality. He

stops thinking, and “listen[s] to the mysterious voices that spoke joyfully and anxiously about something among themselves” (800). This, he realizes, is “faith” (800).

Anna, although quite similar to Levin in many ways, does not have his vigor of spiritual inquisition. After her realization of the inaccuracy of her perception of the motion of the train, then, without the concept that her senses might be able to reveal to her some spiritual truth, Anna begins with anxiety to question her ability to sense any truth in her environment:

Was that Annushka beside her, or some stranger? What is that on the armrest— a fur coat or some animal? And what am I? Myself or someone else? (101)

The world of the darkened sleeping car becomes a carnival of sensory illusions, in which Anna feels “something [is] drawing her in” to this “oblivion”:

Everything became confused again . . . This muzhik with the long waist began to gnaw at something on the wall; the old woman began to stretch her legs out the whole length of the carriage and filled it with a black cloud; then something screeched and banged terribly, as if someone was being torn to pieces; then a red fire blinded her eyes, and then everything was hidden by a wall. Anna felt as if she was falling through the floor. (101)

Immersed only in a stupor of confused material senses, without logic, she comes close to the abyss, a state of disorienting “oblivion.” The strength of Anna’s sensitivity rivals that of Levin; she is subject to the same spiritual force that he is. But without his foundation of spirituality, her sensitivity draws her closer to the carnal, rather than to the immaterial.

Levin approaches an “oblivion” as well, but his is grounded in a working body, not a stew of senses. He forgets his body even as he uses it, entering a “magical” state of spiritually charged motion:

The longer Levin mowed, the more often he felt those moments of oblivion during which it was no longer his arms that swung the scythe, but the scythe itself that lent motion to

his whole body, full of life and conscious of itself, and as if by magic, without a thought of it, the work got rightly and neatly done on its own. These were the most blissful moments. (252)

Marriage, childbirth: for Tolstoy, these milestones of life (that for the intelligentsia of his country have lost their mystical quality) are as mysterious and significant as death, and represent oblivion in similar ways. During the birth of his child, Levin enters a “mysterious and terrible, unearthly” world of Kitty’s labor. Although childbirth is perhaps the most obvious and universal hallmark of ordinary life, Levin sees birth, like death, as “outside all ordinary circumstances of life. . . like holes in this ordinary life, through which something higher showed”:

And just as painful, as tormenting in its coming, what was not being accomplished; and just as inconceivably, in contemplating this higher thing, the soul rose to such heights as it had never known before, where reason was no longer able to overtake it. (713)

In *Anna Karenina*, death represents the ultimate realization of our connection to our bodies, and the ultimate mystery concerning our connection to our spirit. When Levin realizes his brother is dying, he begins inspecting himself physically in the mirror; the reality of his brother’s impending death makes him remember that he, too, will die, that he too has a body that will eventually disintegrate and give way to ultimate oblivion. Oddly, despite his spiritual bent, his happy family life, his health, his moments of faith, Levin, like Anna, is suicidal. Anna and Levin both consider death as the only way out of their existential peril; but only Anna gives in.

The irony of the novel’s first line is felt deeply; are all fathers of happy families “so close to suicide” that they “hid[e] a rope lest [they] hang [themselves] with it” (789)? What distinguishes the story of the fallen, adulterous woman, outcasted from society, from the story of the man in a happy, fully-sanctioned marriage, surrounded by supportive family and friends when both are nevertheless driven to seek suicide? The main difference, Tolstoy asserts, is this: “Levin did not

shoot himself or hang himself and went on living” (789). Anna is tormented by her life because the only meaning she allows for is the carnal love of Vronsky, which cannot be maintained to the level of ecstasy and illusion in which it began. Levin, on the other hand, seeks to find meaning outside of his love for Kitty, for his child, outside of his corporeal connections in the world. Levin uses his body to commune with spirituality through physical labor, through spiritually sanctioned sex (within marriage, towards procreation). Anna uses her body only to push the bounds of her capacity for carnal pleasure and for the carnal pleasure of Vronsky. These key differences express themselves clearly in the moments of suprasensual perception and supernatural occurrence: Levin’s spiritual sense lifts him, while Anna’s leads to her eventual and complete descent.

## VII.

First and foremost, Tolstoy as artist is concerned with communication, with infection. Throughout the text of *Anna Karenina*, emotions, thoughts, images are “involuntarily communicated” between characters. Pevear and Volokhonksy choose “involuntarily communicated”; Constance Garnett, in her translation, uses “infected” each and every time P&V use “involuntarily communicated.” Garnett’s choice is probably tied to Tolstoy’s artistic treatise, *What is Art?* in which the author describes art through the concept of “infection”:

The test of art is infection. If an author has moved you so that you feel as he felt, if you are so united to him in feeling that it seems to you that he has expressed just what you have long wished to express, the work that has so infected you is a work of art<sup>42</sup>.

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<sup>42</sup> From Tolstoy, Leo- *What is Art?* Translated by Aylmer Maude. Funk & Wagnalls Company. New York 1904. Project Gutenberg. 2021. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/64908/64908-h/64908-h.htm>. No pagination.

Tolstoy's full definition expresses the function of art as a means of true communion between people via empathy:

*a human activity, consisting in this, that one man consciously, by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that other people are infected by these feelings, and also experience them.* Art is not, as the metaphysicians say, the manifestation of some mysterious Idea of beauty, or God; it is not, as the æsthetical physiologists say, a game in which man lets off his excess of stored-up energy; it is not the expression of man's emotions by external signs; it is not the production of pleasing objects; and, above all, it is not pleasure; but it is a means of union among men, joining them together in the same feelings, and indispensable for the life and progress towards well-being of individuals and of humanity<sup>43</sup>.

Tolstoy asserts that through art, we can grasp the contents of another's soul "in its entirety"<sup>44</sup>.

Gershkovich understands Tolstoy's theory as suggesting the complete "simulation" of an author's "mental state"—and further, that his theory encourages a means by which author and audience seem to lose "the separation between" themselves. This is the magic and the danger of empathy, of emotional infection: the boundaries between selves can dissolve; pity for an other can bring the self into that pitious state. The relationship between Vronsky and Anna reveals this dissolution of self-hood, of emotional separation; Vronsky is constantly subject to Anna's moods, "involuntarily submitting" to her consciousness (356); he is consistently described as "obedient" to Anna.

Unlike Levin and Kitty, characters that are truly able to read each other's minds, Anna and Vronsky repeatedly misinterpret each other. Although precise meaning is missed, Vronsky is defenseless against the emotional infection of Anna's consciousness. When Anna first shares that she is pregnant, she believes that Vronsky "understands all the significance of this event. . .but

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid. Chapter V. No pagination.

<sup>44</sup> Gershkovich, Tatyana. pp. 134

she was mistaken in thinking that he understood” (188). Still, “her excitement communicate[s] itself physically to him” and “he [gives] her a tender, obedient look” (188). Later, when Anna reveals that she has confessed their affair to her husband, Vronsky is again emotionally infected by Anna: “in her presence, he had no will of his own: not knowing the reason for her anxiety, he already felt that this same anxiety had involuntarily communicated itself to him” (314).

Unknown to Anna, Vronsky thinks of a duel, while Anna expects him to ask her to run away with him. Although Anna attempts to “[read] his thoughts in the expression of his face,” and Vronsky also “[tries] to read her thoughts in her face,” the two do not understand each other (314). Unlike Kitty and Levin, Anna and Vronsky cannot read the truth of each other’s souls; Anna and Vronsky are confined to attempting to read each other’s bodies, a purely corporeal and usually inaccurate method of communicating without words. For Tolstoy it is not enough to communicate only as bodies, only with the senses; a spiritual element must be present to avoid misunderstanding, grief, ruin. Levin and Kitty communicate with their spirits, which allows them to read each other’s thoughts; Anna and Vronsky with their bodies and nothing more, which only allows for the passive transmission of emotion between the two. As the disconnect between Anna and Vronsky reaches its highest pitch, Anna wonders: “is it really possible to tell someone else what one feels?” (760)

Supernaturally, taken literally, meaning above the material earth, Levin and Kitty read each other’s minds. Supernaturally, Anna and Vronsky infect and poison each other while missing the true meaning held within each other’s souls. The peasant dream is a botched, disfigured version of the spiritual transmission between Levin and Kitty. It is the closest Anna and Vronsky come to true communion, true communication. When Vronsky asks “What is this

nonsense?” as he awakes from his nightmare, he expresses his absolute inability to tap into his spiritual senses in a way that might give eventually life-saving empathy to Anna.

#### VIII.

Throughout the duration of this project, I continue to work and think about *Anna Karenina* while I wait on customers at the bank. The job is a wretchedly necessary way of paying my rent while going to graduate school. I show up at eight thirty and I leave at five thirty, thirty hours a week. I’ve been taking two classes and teaching one freshman composition course each semester for the past five semesters as a part of a TAship. I’m only supposed to work 10 hours a week outside of this “TA”ship (let me be clear: I am not assisting anyone; these composition classes, in what an energetic professor of mine has called “baptism by fire,” are all mine), but in lieu of parental patronage or the prospect of digging myself further into my pit of debt, I’m working thirty hours a week at Chase Bank.

It is the start of the spring semester, still February, as I begin to reread *Anna Karenina* at work. It is now nearly mid-August as I finish the project. In the months between, books in piles collect on the catch-all chair, folders expand with printed and marked up articles and my little spiral notebook fills with penciled notations. I buy note tabs in pleasing color palettes. In the stupor of writing and revision, I lose myself many times, recover, forget, disdain, forgive. There is a fact I have to accept: the project will not, could never, communicate everything I want it to express to my reader. This is due to my human imperfection, procrastination, and lack of skill. It will have to be *good enough*.

At the very end of the novel, which I’ve now read countless times, Levin believes that Kitty again knows what he is thinking, and is about to ask her about his epiphany when she interrupts:

‘Listen, Kostya, do me a favor,’ she [says]. ‘Go to the corner room and see how they’ve arranged everything for Sergei Ivanovich. I’m embarrassed to. Did they put in the new washstand?’ (816)

The health of their intimacy no longer requires that Kitty have that perfect ability to discern Levin’s thoughts. The moments of spiritual, supernatural significance are few and far between, even for a couple like Levin and Kitty, and that doesn’t denote a lack. Levin ends the novel with his own admittance of imperfection, with the firm understanding that perfection is not compatible with “life”:

‘I’ll get angry in the same way with the coachman Ivan, argue in the same way, speak my mind inappropriately, there will be the same wall between my soul’s holy of holies and other people, even my wife, I’ll accuse her in the same way of my own fear and then regret it, I’ll fail in the same way to understand with my reason why I pray, and yet I will pray— but my life now, my whole life, regardless of all that may happen to me, every minute of it, is not only not meaningless, as it was before, but has the unquestionable meaning of the good which it is in my power to put into it!’ (817)

Perhaps what makes Tolstoy’s text the most lifelike is this ultimate meditation on imperfection, felt and repeated throughout the text, even in its moments of the most otherworldly possibility. Perhaps Simmons is correct: although Tolstoy is undeniably spiritual, he is, at least before 1880, tied indelibly to the Russian soil, to the bodies of his characters. Only through these earthly bodies can Tolstoy make spirit appear.

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