

THE DRAWING AND THE GREASE SPOT: CREATIVITY AND INTERPRETATION IN *ANNA KARENINA*

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No critic interested in Tolstoy's theory of art could overlook Tolstoy's description of the artist Mikhailov. Indeed, Russian scholars from Alexander Voronskii to Elizaveta Kupreianova and Valentina Vetlovskaiia, as well as scholars writing in English—John Bayley, Rimvydas Silbajoris, Gary Saul Morson, and Amy Mandelker—all refer to this scene as an illustration of Tolstoy's "*What is Art?*"¹ Many perceptive and relevant observations have been made about certain aspects of this scene. Critics have pointed out that the juxtaposition of the true art of Mikhailov to the counterfeit art of Vronsky exposes Vronsky's ultimate inadequacy not only as an artist, but as a lover as well.² They have drawn parallels between Mikhailov's approach to his art and the vision of art that Tolstoy expresses in his treatise. These include particularly Tolstoy's notions of originality and accessibility, his scorn for technique, and his concept of a Christian art as an inspiration for brotherly love.³ Yet what seems to elude most readers is Tolstoy's subtle cunning in placing all art critics alongside Golenishchev, Anna, and Vronsky as they interpret Mikhailov's painting. For it is the very act of interpretation that Tolstoy questions in this scene. Not only does Tolstoy show that a true and exhaustive interpretation is unattainable; he discloses some hidden causes for why this should be so. The Mikhailov scene, therefore, provides clues both to Tolstoy's view of art and to how to read the novel; it is these clues that endow the episode with intense metapoetic and hermeneutic qualities.⁴

The artist Mikhailov's excitement and frustration with his elegant visitors and dilettante critics echoes Tolstoy's attitude toward both professional and amateurish interpreters of his own texts. The visit of Golenishchev, Vronsky and Anna to Mikhailov's studio results in the mutual embarrassment of the artist and his guests. The visitors feel uneasy in the role of interpreters, and not only because they are not initiated into the mystery of art and are inexperienced in critical analysis. As it becomes clear, no interpretation can fully satisfy the artist, just as none of the spectators' comments are entirely false. The embarrassment of the artist, on the other hand, is caused by the extreme ambiguity of the situation: he registers both the truthfulness of his guests' statements about his painting, and the overall inadequacy of their perceptive abilities.

Before analyzing various interpretations of Mikhailov's painting of Pilate and Christ one should first consider: should we evaluate Mikhailov's picture as an example of "good art?" Or, to put it differently, does this scene raise the problem of inadequate interpretation or of what Tolstoy calls "counterfeit art?" If we analyze Mikhailov's painting of "Pilate's Admonition" according to the criteria for "true good art" established by Tolstoy in his treatise *What is Art?*, then the reader might seriously doubt the painting's status as "true art," for it fails to infect its spectators. By contrast, the artist's other paintings—that of the two boys fishing and the portrait of Anna—fully satisfy Tolstoy's aesthetic principles of accessibility and

infection. Indeed, Amy Mandelker in her enlightening article on *ekphrasis* in *Anna Karenina* suggests precisely that Mikhailov's painting of "Pilate's Admonition" fails if we evaluate it according to Tolstoy's own aesthetic criteria (Mandelker 8).

However valid this conclusion might be, there is no reason to judge Mikhailov's art according to Tolstoy's own theoretical formulations. One might instead conclude that Tolstoy's representation of Mikhailov's art demonstrates precisely how Tolstoy's rigid aesthetic schemes crumble when these schemata are applied to any work of art. It is true that the painting of "Pilate's Admonition" fails to infect Mikhailov's visitors, yet there are no grounds for believing that Tolstoy wanted to or did indeed present this painting as an example of "counterfeit" or "bad art." The text offers numerous indications that this picture is an acme of perfection not only in Mikhailov's own opinion, but also in the eyes of a much larger audience. As Vronsky discovers in a newspaper, Mikhailov "had just finished a picture long talked of and bought in advance" (424).⁵ Tolstoy dwelt in detail on Mikhailov's profound satisfaction with his painting, as his description of Mikhailov's opinion of his art reveals:

About his picture—the one at present on the easel—he had at the bottom of his heart a firm opinion: that no one had ever painted anything like it. He did not consider his picture better than all Raphael's, but he knew that what he wanted to express in that picture had never been expressed by anyone (427).

The painting pleases the artist for its intrinsic originality and sincerity—the two qualities that are just as important to Tolstoy as infection. It is clear that Mikhailov derives his inspiration directly from his heart: "I could not paint a Christ whom I had not in my soul," Mikhailov rejoined gloomily" (431). Furthermore, it is unlikely that in a scene that sharply contrasts Vronsky's artistic impotence with Mikhailov's success, Tolstoy would focus so vividly on the painting and the creative process it involves only to suggest that the painting is an artistic failure.

Although the fact that the apparently "good art" fails to infect Mikhailov's visitors appears to be a contradiction, this is only true within the narrow limits of Tolstoy's *What is Art?*, a text extraneous to *Anna Karenina*. Gustafson and Silbajoris have persuasively demonstrated that affinities and even consistency do exist between Tolstoy's art and his aesthetics. However, different genres, both fictional and non-fictional, pursue different goals. One should be wary, therefore, of depending upon the ideas that Tolstoy expressed in his treatise *What is Art?* to validate Mikhailov's paintings. One can only properly assess the paintings' shortcomings and merits within the limits given by the text of *Anna Karenina* itself.

Moreover, Tolstoy fails in his treatise to address an important issue with which he grapples in *Anna Karenina*: the dynamics of reading and interpretation. If one distinguishes between "good" and "bad" art, then one should also differentiate between "good" and "bad" readers. While in *What is Art?*, Tolstoy focuses more on the idea that qualities of the work of art can

generate certain feelings in the audience, in the Mikhailov section of *Anna Karenina* he clearly changes direction; it is rather the readers' perceptive abilities that concern Tolstoy in this scene. Tolstoy's omniscient narrator discloses Mikhailov's critics as vacuous dilettantes: "The word *talent* . . . occurred very often in their conversation, since they required it as a name for something which they did not at all understand, but about which they wanted to talk" (433). In his representation of the visitors' responses to "Pilate's Admonition," Tolstoy exposes, therefore, not the inadequacies of the painting, but the shortcomings of art criticism.

The visitors' respective responses to Mikhailov's painting of "Pilate's Admonition" reflect Tolstoy's own hermeneutic and aesthetic concerns. Each of the three spectators pays attention to different aspects of the painting. Golenishchev focuses on Pilate. Anna admires the expression on Christ's face. Vronsky praises the "figure in the background." The three spectators' differences are also stressed by their interpretive methods. Golenishchev crudely interprets visual art in terms of its message and the author's intention: "It is, that you have made him a man-God, and not a God-man. However, I know that you wished to do so" (431). Anna's response is emotional and impressionist: "How wonderful Christ's expression is! . . . One sees he is sorry for Pilate" (430). Vronsky approaches art as a "formalist," from the point of view of rules and skills: "How those figures in the background stand out! This is technique" (431). In other words, they behave much like the blind people asked to touch and describe an elephant in the famous joke or, for that matter, like any critic.

It is, therefore, not surprising that although each of these responses flatters the artist's pride somewhat, they nevertheless dissatisfy him:

His opinion of that figure was the same. The fact that this opinion was but one of a million of other opinions which—as Mikhailov well knew—would all have been just, did not for him detract from the importance of Golenishchev's remark (430).

Anna, who is undoubtedly a better "reader" than Golenishchev and has better aesthetic perception and intuition, correctly identifies the center of the painting—the image of Christ—and focuses on the figure who is, as we know, most dear to the artist himself. All the same, her comments are as "correct" and incomplete as those of Golenishchev. Mikhailov's reaction reflects his ambivalent feeling: "This too was one of a million just remarks which might have been made with reference to his picture and the figure of Christ" (430).

Tolstoy expresses a similar sentiment in his famous description of the Council of War in *War and Peace*, as well as in his letter to Strakhov of April 23 and 26, 1876:⁶

You write: do you understand my novel correctly, and what do I think about your opinions? Of course you understand it correctly. Of course your understanding heartens me beyond words; but not everyone is bound to understand it as you do. . . . I say this because your opinion about my novel is true, but it isn't everything—i.e.

everything is true, but what you said doesn't express everything I wanted to say. For example, you speak about two sorts of people. I always feel this—I know—but I didn't intend it so, but when you say it, I know that it's one of the truths which can be said (*Letters* 296).

The interpretations of Mikhailov's guests as well as Tolstoy's readers' criticism represent a multitude of truths which in their multiplicity never add up to one complete and unifying truth. This is why Tolstoy claims that "if I were to try to say in words everything that I intended to express in my novel, I would have to write the same novel I wrote from the beginning" (*Letters* 296). Tolstoy's suggestion that the critic look for "that endless labyrinth of linkages" is equally utopian. For if the critic were to establish all the "linkages" and all the "laws that are the foundation of these linkages" he will find himself reproducing the creative process that led the author to create the work the way he created it. In another letter to Strakhov, Tolstoy once again expresses his frustration at the impossibility of developing the "correct" reading: "In clever art criticism everything is the truth, but not the whole truth (*ne vsia pravda*), and art is only art because it is whole (*potomu chto ono vse*)" (*Letters* 295).

Tolstoy not only emphasizes the inevitable fragmentariness and incompleteness of any interpretation, but he also discloses its destructive aspect by using a device later identified by the Formalists as "making it strange." In the Mikhailov episode, Tolstoy employs this device self-consciously and self-referentially. Tolstoy suggests that any view from the outside makes the work strange and thus destroys its unity:

During the few moments that the visitors were silently gazing at the painting, Mikhailov also regarded it, and he looked at it with an indifferent and detached eye (*smotrel ravnodushnym, postoronnim vzgliadom*). . . . He saw the painting through their indifferent, detached, new vision (*ikh ravnodushnym, postoronnim, novym vzgliadom*), and he saw nothing good in it. . . . all of those faces so often placed and replaced for the sake of wholeness (*dlia sobliudeniia obshchego*), all the shades of color and tone achieved with such effort—all these as a whole (*vsio eto vmeste*), when regarded through their eyes (*gliadia ikh glazami*), now seemed to him a triviality a thousand times repeated (429).

The effect of looking at art through someone else's eyes, as a stranger, is always incomplete and in this sense reductionist. Tolstoy himself both utilizes this device for his own purposes (as for example, in the famous opera scene in *War and Peace*) and lays bare its reductionist quality.

Since interpretation always depends on the perspective and bias of an observer, no fully satisfactory interpretation is possible for the author—including the interpretation by the artist himself. For no reader or viewer can exhaust the work's semantic potential by simultaneously assuming all points of view. Unity and completeness of perception cannot be achieved in the act of interpretation, which is always reductionist, but only in the act of creation. It is telling that as soon as his guests leave the studio,

Mikhailov sees his painting in its unity once again, and this ability to perceive the wholeness of his work results in the renewal of the creative process. From the role of a detached observer he assumes the role of a creator:

Strange to say, what had had weight with him while they were there and he looked at things from their point of view suddenly lost all significance now. He began to look at his picture with the wholeness of his artistic vision (*vsem svoim polnym khudozhestvennym vzgliadom*), and reached that state of assurance of the perfection, and consequent importance, of his picture which he needed to attain the intensity of effort—excluding all other interests—without which he could not work. . . . He took his palette and commenced working (433).

Significantly, it is precisely the "inner connections," or "inner continuity," that constitutes the core of his efforts. The hidden connections that totally escape the viewers of his painting are revealed to his artistic vision so that suddenly the leg of Christ becomes linked to the figure of St. John:

While correcting the foot he kept glancing at the figure of John in the background, which the visitors had not even remarked, but which he knew to be the height of perfection. When he had completed the foot he was about to do something to that figure. . . (433).

As he works on his painting, Mikhailov continues to interpret it. It is this process of simultaneous interpreting and introducing changes that restores the unity of the work. It is no coincidence that the scene describing various interpretations of Mikhailov's painting is framed by a description of the artistic process itself: Mikhailov works on an unfinished drawing before the arrival of his guests and returns to work as soon as they depart. This frame highlights the important link between interpretation and the creative process.⁷

Vronsky perceives art mechanically—as technique, or a sum total of rules; this is why for him, genre always precedes all else. Golenishchev believes in the talent and the "idea" of the work of art, in the author's predetermined message. Mikhailov's work, by contrast, is anything but mechanical or fully preconceived. A creative act for Mikhailov represents a combination of chance and design, of vision and revision. While working on a figure of a man seized by anger, Mikhailov feels dissatisfied with his sketch and decides to look for an earlier drawing that he had thrown away. He finds the original sketch, but it is "dirty now and spotted with candle grease" (426). This sheet of paper represents a combination of the artist's design—his drawing—with elements of chance that altered his design (the drop of wax). Rather than dismissing the accidental, Mikhailov responds to it and builds upon it:

Nevertheless, he took it, put it on his table, and, stepping backward and screwing up his eyes, began examining it....That's it! That's it' he said, and taking up his pencil he began drawing rapidly. A grease spot had given the figure a new pose (426).

The accidental shape, therefore, becomes part of his design.⁸ Necessity becomes an act of freedom :

It was possible to correct the drawing to accord with the requirements of the pose; it was possible and even necessary to place the feet further apart, to alter the position of the left arm and to throw back the hair. But while making these corrections he did not alter the pose but only removed what interfered with its character (427).

When describing the creative history of his own works, Tolstoy often expressed similar ideas on the role of the incidental in art. In his letter to Strakhov of March 25, 1873, Tolstoy comments on the artistic process: "Involuntarily, unwittingly, not knowing why and what would come of it, I thought up characters and events, began to go on with it, then of course changed it, and suddenly all the threads became so well and truly tied up that the result was the novel which I finished in draft form today. . . ." (*Letters* 258). In another letter to Strakhov (May 11, 1873) Tolstoy repeats his sentiment again: "In a letter which I did not send to you I wrote about this novel and about how it came to me unwittingly, thanks to the divine Pushkin whom by chance I picked up and whom I read all the way through with new enthusiasm" (*Letters* 261).

For Mikhailov, the inner logic of the work of art dictates its design and he perceives this as necessity. Likewise, Tolstoy confesses that he lets the novel and its characters develop according to inner laws and invisible linkages:

The chapter about how Vronsky accepted his role after meeting the husband had been written for a long time. I started correcting it and completely unexpectedly for me, but quite certainly, Vronsky started to shoot himself. Now it turns out that for what follows, it was organically necessary (*Anna Karenina* 751).

The type of creative process that Tolstoy suggests has made some critics believe that the artistic product becomes independent of its creator and develops according to its own laws, regardless of the artist's will. Gary Saul Morson aptly calls a type of creative process that Tolstoy wanted his reader to believe he used in writing *War and Peace* "creation by potential" (1987:182). Morson writes:

...beginning with only a loose set of principles and resources, the author allows the work to 'shape itself' as it is being written. With no conclusion in mind, he deliberately cultivates the unexpected; structure is what it turns out to be, connections emerge without

premeditation, and unity becomes only a unity of process. Integrity is *ex post facto* (1987:182).

Morson further suggests that "not characters, but actions and events retain their radical autonomy in *War and Peace*" (1987:188). Amy Mandelker goes even further when she contends that "the autonomous, organic status of the art work suggests that the artist is not in full control of his text" (7). The analysis of the Mikhailov episode leads me to qualify the idea of the work's autonomy. Whether creative process, suggested by Tolstoy, could be called organicist (Terras 282; Mandelker 7) or "creation by potential" (Morson), it is the *relationship* between the author's creative will, or design, and the incident that affects this design that is ultimately most important.⁹ Upon close consideration of the interaction between chance and design in Mikhailov's creative process, the extent to which the work of art or even "actions and events" preserve their "radical autonomy" becomes questionable.

To be sure, Mikhailov responds to the accidental shapes—such as a grease spot on his unfinished drawing—but the way he responds to it is not accidental; it is grounded in the "inner connection" or inner design of the work. At every step of his work he is not only an author but a reader, reading into his drawing that which complies with his inner design. Functioning simultaneously as both the reader and the author, or to put it differently, being both "in" and "out" of the game, the artist always knows how to observe and exploit his own creation. The grease spot highlights only what the artist is ready to see.

In fact, this method was widely used in pictorial and verbal arts and goes back at least to Leonardo da Vinci's *Treatise on Painting*. Tolstoy's description of Mikhailov's work on his sketch of a "man in a violent rage" curiously resembles Leonardo's advice to the young painters:

By looking attentively at old and smeared walls, or stones and veined marble of various colours, you may fancy that you see in them several compositions, landscapes, battles, figures in quick motion, strange countenances, and dresses, with an infinity of other objects. By these confused lines the inventive genius is excited to new exertions (da Vinci 89).

Leonardo proposes that the artist use a rapid and untidy sketch, and that this device might suggest new possibilities to the artist (da Vinci 64, 68-69). Moreover, Leonardo stresses the connection between accidental forms and the shaping force of the mind:

...by throwing a sponge impregnated with various colours against a wall, it leaves some spots upon it, which may appear like a landscape. It is true also, that a variety of compositions may be seen in such spots, according to the disposition of minds with which they are considered; such as heads of men, various animals, battles, rocky scenes, seas, clouds, woods, and the like. It may be compared to the sound of bells, which may seem to say whatever we choose to

imagine. In the same manner also, those spots may furnish hints for compositions, though they do not teach us how to finish any particular part. . . (da Vinci 216).

Mikhailov is clearly a good disciple of the old master.

In his fundamental study *Art and Illusion*, Ernst Hans Gombrich provides an excellent discussion of the role of accidental forms in art and the creative method that came to be known as "blotting" in the eighteenth century. Gombrich persuasively argues: "What we read into these accidental shapes depends on our capacity to recognize in them things or images we find stored in our minds" (182-3). Commenting on the practitioners of the technique of blotting, Gombrich insists that "a language of forms was ready to be projected into the inkblots, and it was new combinations and variations of these ideas which they desired rather than an entirely fresh vocabulary" (186). How much is left then of the work's "autonomy?" That Mikhailov sees one thing rather than another is, therefore, not completely arbitrary, but suggests rather that he is influenced by his expectations and his "preconceptions." His mind is already attuned to a specific type of perception when he examines "the effects of the grease spot." The work is hardly autonomous with respect to its author; rather it represents a continuous process of interaction between the external reality, which might well be accidental, and the artist's mind. The artist, then, merely needs a few adjustments to make this spotted drawing into the desired picture. Chaotic details might exist, but the artist projects his ideas onto them and thus creates order. It is this relationship between the indeterminacy of the incident and the determinacy of the author's projecting mind, between the artist's role as author and as reader, that Tolstoy explores in the unfinished drawing scene. Once the artist has completed the act of projecting, he needs only to remove "the coverings," the alluvial, the unnecessary.

Tolstoy, like Mikhailov, works under the assumption that the true artist possesses a unique knowledge, or truth, and that the issue is then how to transmit this knowledge, or to "remove the coverings," in Mikhailov's terminology. Mikhailov is convinced that

if the things he saw had been revealed to a little child, or to his cook, they would have been able to remove the outer shell from their idea. And the most experienced and technical painter could never paint anything by means of mechanical skill alone, if the outline of the subject-matter did not first reveal itself to his mind (431).

On several occasions Tolstoy himself expresses a similar belief. In his letter to P. D. Golokhvastov of March 17-20, 1876, he emphasizes the supremacy of knowledge over the actualization of this knowledge in any specific form: "I don't even want to know what you ought to be working at. That does not matter. I only know that there are things which you know and others don't...and that only you ought to express these things..." (*Letters* 292-3). Or in a letter to L'vov, February 29, 1976 : "...and this knowledge did not fall out of the sky because I have talent (a most foolish, nonsensical

word), but because I acquired this knowledge by love and hard work" (*Letters* 291-2).

This knowledge, however, has nothing to do with a fully predetermined plan; and this is why Tolstoy often claims that he has no control over his creation. In this respect Tolstoy does not differ from any other artist, for it is virtually impossible to plan even the tiniest scene or episode in absolute detail. Rather, this knowledge is what the artist projects over the indeterminate and often accidental forms that life brings to his mind. Lack of control, therefore, is merely an illusion. To be sure, the creative process includes the incidental, but the way in which random elements are observed, interpreted and realized is determined by the author. It is the projection of the creative mind that endows the work with inner continuity and consistency.

If the account of the creative process implicitly suggests an appropriate method of interpreting the work of art, what kind of interpretive approach does Tolstoy intimate here? Tolstoy provides a glimpse into the artistic process of the artist Mikhailov in order to demonstrate that no "correct" interpretation is possible, for every interpretation implies transformation—an idea that is, to be sure, commonplace in our contemporary criticism.¹⁰ Yet Tolstoy definitely shows that although all interpretations are not fully adequate, some are more adequate than others. Regardless of the kind of text they read—be it a work of art, history, or life itself—some of Tolstoy's characters find, if not a proper interpretation, then at least a proper way to read: they take part in a dynamic interchange between text and reader that constitutes the essence of any creative process. Creation and interpretation display close affinity: both represent a continual process of projection and adjustment. Precisely this emphasis on minute shifts of consciousness (*chut' chutochnye izmenenia* in Tolstoy's own terms), which result from the interaction between the unexpected material of life or art and the human mind, informs Tolstoy's concept of both reading and creating. The success of interpretation, therefore, depends upon the degree of the interpreter's prior receptivity, on his or her openness and readiness to transcend assumptions about life or the work of art. Significantly, all three of Mikhailov's visitors come to and leave his studio with the same unmodified vision of his art. Tolstoy specifically points out that Mikhailov's guests have preconceptions before they see the artist's work: "The visitors, already disenchanted by Golenishchev's account of the artist, were still further disillusioned by his appearance" (428). They do not reach any new awareness of life or art after they see the painting, either, but merely reiterate Golenishchev's dictum that Mikhailov has talent but no education: "They said that it was impossible to deny his talent, but that his talent could not develop because of his lack of education—the common misfortune of our Russian artists" (433).¹¹ Anna's and Vronsky's interpretive flaws turn them into poor readers of life as well.

By contrast, as Mandelker effectively argues, Lyovin, who "may be classed with Mikhailov as an artist and art critic," manages to modify his preconceptions. Anna's and Lyovin's meeting, Mandelker suggests, "inaugurates Lyovin's *Bildung* (*obrazovanie*), achieved through his contemplation of an image or *Bild* (*obraz*)" (9). I believe that Tolstoy invites us

to compare the two visits to the two "exhibitions" of Mikhailov's paintings: Mikhailov's studio and Vronsky's house. In both cases the visitors have negative expectations; only Lyovin, however, achieves a new stage of awareness. What makes Lyovin a truly good reader is his ability to join in the creative process initiated by the artist. Lyovin begins by gazing at the picture fixedly, and then allows his "horizons" to expand. It is the painting that sets his new expectations about Anna. Lyovin, however, does not stop here; he not only sees the portrait as the artist supposedly intended it but continues the process of revision, considering the new reality and new circumstances. He enlarges his limited "horizons" by coming to recognize his own prejudices. Vronsky also learns something new about Anna from Mikhailov's painting; however, this knowledge does not change his overall attitude toward her.

Curiously, Lyovin's interpretive method echoes Mikhailov's technique of "blotting." Just as Mikhailov looks at the grease spot, Lyovin contemplates the sky and sees in it various accidental shapes which he interprets according to his disposition:

He looked up at the sky, hoping to find there the shell he had been admiring, which had typified for him the reflections and feelings of the night. There in the unfathomable height a mystic change was going on and he could see no sign of anything like a shell; but a large cover of gradually diminishing fleecy cloudlets was spreading over half the sky, which had turned blue and grown brighter. It answered his questioning look with the same tenderness and the same remoteness [as Kitty's look—SE] (253).

Best of all, however, both Lyovin and Kitty's skill at reading is exemplified in the scene of their "mystic intercourse" at Stiva's dinner party:

"There," he said, and wrote the following letters,—W, y, a: i, c, n, b; d, y, m, t, o, n? These letters stood for: When you answered: it can not be; did you mean then, or never? It was quite unlikely that she would be able to make out this complicated sentence . . . She glanced seriously at him and then, leaning her puckered forehead on her hand, began reading. Occasionally she looked up at him, her look asking him: 'Is it what I think?' (362).

Their communication represents an unusual interaction between reader, text, and author: the text is oriented toward the "implied reader," and the reader projects a meaning upon the apparently unsolvable text, filling in the gaps, verifying and reevaluating his or her reactions at each step, constantly moving back and forth from text to interpretation. The outcome of Kitty's and Lyovin's reading experience depends equally on the text and on the reader's receptivity. Both the text and the reading emerge as processes.

To be certain, Tolstoy's own art does not rely on the reader's ability to fill in all the "blanks" on the basis of the initial letters; he does not anticipate a response from his reader similar to that of Kitty's and Lyovin's reactions to their frantic scribbings. Yet this scene could be viewed as a

model of a good reading, for it defines the act of reading as a process that involves projection, transformation and reevaluation—the elements also central to Mikhailov's creativity.

The task that Mikhailov performs—that of seeing through a spotted drawing and acting upon it—is, of course, the ultimate task of any human being. It is precisely this task of discovering meaning through one's life's spotted design, polluted and contaminated by the intrusion of the accidental and the alluvial, and then to respond to it that Konstantin Lyovin ultimately considers his life's goal. It is no coincidence that Lyovin's words conclude the novel:

. . . my life, my whole life, independently of anything that may *happen* to me, every moment of it is no longer meaningless as it was before, but has an unquestionable meaning of goodness with which *I have the power to invest it* (740, emphasis added).

In this dynamic interchange between the indeterminate text of life (or art) and the author-reader's creative mind, the latter always remains the stronger partner. Similar to Mikhailov's incessant work on his unfinished painting, Lyovin leaves the novel in the process of making adjustments. Both the true master and the adept reader are engaged in an unending strife for greater vision through continual revision.

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NOTES

¹ Kupreianova interprets the painting in terms of the moral categories of the "spiritual" and the "corporeal" and comments on the significance of the picture's subject matter—the representation of Christ and Pilate—for the thematic and symbolic structure of the novel (126). While pointing out that "the nature of the artist's work is a key to the major principles of the novel's poetics, which the author discloses in the text itself" Vetlovskaiia further develops Kupreianova's insights concerning the relevance of the painting's subject matter for the novel as a whole (17).

Both Bayley and Silbajoris relate the Mikhailov episode more closely to Tolstoy's concept of art as expressed in his treatise *What is Art?* Silbajoris maintains that what the narrator "explains to us in his running commentary amounts to a prototype essay on art. In many ways it closely resembles the ideas Tolstoy put down in his own name in *What is Art?*" (Silbajoris 152; Bayley, chapter VI).

² Silbajoris, for example, points out that "the juxtaposition between true and counterfeit art that we see in the essay is built into the novel as well" and contends that "in the case of Mikhailov, art was an instrument of exploring the question of how much Vronsky really loved Anna after all" (153-154).

³ Morson and Mandelker specify some of the connections between Mikhailov's concept of art and Tolstoy's own theory of art. Using Mikhailov as an example, Morson explains how such seemingly contradictory artistic demands as originality, sincerity, and accessibility might coexist in Tolstoy's vision of true art (Morson:1991, 136-138). See also Mandelker 8.

⁴ Critics often observed that Tolstoy's views on art are expressed better in his fiction than in his theoretical essays. See, for example, Bayley 235. Gustafson and Silbajoris also emphasize the essential unity between Tolstoy's later theoretical statements on art and his earlier fiction.

⁵ All citations from *Anna Karenina* and *War and Peace* are from the translations by Louise and Aylmer Maude. Some necessary changes for accuracy have been made.

⁶ Cf. Tolstoy's description of the informal Council of War and the generals: "It was one of the millions of proposals, one as good as another, that could be made as long as it was quite unknown what character the war would take" (*War and Peace* 685). Kutuzov's reaction to different reports reflects similar skepticism: "All that Denisov had said was clever and to the point, but it was evident that Kutuzov despised knowledge and cleverness, and knew of something else that would decide the matter—something independent of cleverness and knowledge" (*War and Peace* 795).

⁷ Reading this episode in terms of the relationship between interpretation and the concept of creativity supports Morson's argument that "the story of a work's creation, when available or imaginable, penetrates the work itself and constitutes a powerful hermeneutic weapon" (Morson: 1987, 176).

⁸ Robert Louis Jackson's excellent article "Chance and Design in *Anna Karenina*" addresses the problem of the accidental as it relates to the individual fates of Tolstoy's characters and particularly to the fate of Anna. Jackson emphasizes that Tolstoy's art of characterization discloses those "elements of character in Anna which are her fate." It is "under the impact of character" that "the elements of chance group themselves into coherent design" (Jackson: 68, 316). In this article, Jackson does not explore the role of chance in Tolstoy's notion of art and creativity, but his penetrating analysis of the scene of Anna's first appearance in the novel allows him to articulate the dialectical relationship between chance and design in Tolstoy's representation of Anna which I consider central to Tolstoy's vision of the creative process as well.

Jackson further develops his ideas on the role of the accidental in his most recent article "Pierre and Dolokhov at the Barrier. The Lesson of the Duel." Analyzing the elements of chance and design in Pierre's victory and Dolokhov's defeat, Jackson comes to a broader conclusion about the "seemingly insignificant or 'unnecessary' incidents and characters" in *War and Peace* and in the artistic creation in general: "The accidental very much enters into artistic creation and life; without it there would be no freedom. What the artist selects, however—the acceptance or rejection of the incidental or accidental—is governed in the long run by his developing design (such is the case in life, though the pattern, in process, is more fragmentary, less visible than it is in art, and, of course, incomplete)" (Jackson: 1993, 58).

⁹ Victor Terras refers to the Mikhailov scene as "a classical statement of the Neoplatonic organic conception of the creative process" (282). This view of the creative process is based only on Tolstoy's image of "removing the coverings" and does not consider other important elements of Mikhailov's creativity which precede the removing of the "outer shell." Mikhailov's work,

however, is more than just a mechanical liberation of the preconceived image from the alluvial. It is indeed a process that involves continual redesigning and a complex interaction between the artist's mind and the external reality. One of the earliest and most perceptive analyses of the Mikhailov scene belongs to Alexander Voronskii. Voronskii is one of the few critics who attempt to discuss Mikhailov's work precisely as a *process*. Voronskii, however, is interested primarily in the role of intuition in the creative process and seems to overemphasize the artist's passivity. See his 1925 essay "About Art" (Voronskii 350-367).

My own interpretation of the Mikhailov episode leads me to support Silbajoris's conclusion that for Tolstoy "art is thus not some static concept or entity, but a dynamic process, an event that is continuously happening between the object of art and the beholder" (Silbajoris 107).

¹⁰ Harold Bloom renders the idea of the impossibility of the correct interpretation most radically:

Rhetorical, Aristotelian, phenomenological, and structuralist criticisms all reduce, whether to images, ideas, given things, or phonemes. Moral and other blatant philosophical or psychological criticisms all reduce to rival conceptualizations. We reduce—if at all—to another poem. The meaning of a poem can only be another poem (Bloom 94).

See also, for example, Stanley Fish's insistence that "explaining and changing cannot be opposed activities . . . because they are the same activities" (Fish 211).

¹¹ The painting's subject matter is clearly symbolic and relevant to Anna's and Vronsky's predicament. Yet they remain blind to its "message." For a more detailed discussion of the role of the images of Christ and Pilate for the entire novel see Kupreianova 126-134; Vetlovskaiia 17-23; Gustafson 142-3.