

## Roundtable Discussion

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Amy Mandelker, *Framing Anna Karenina: Tolstoy, the Woman Question, and the Victorian Novel*. Illinois: Ohio State UP, 1993.

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Amy Mandelker argues three interwoven theses in her ambitious book: one biographical, informed by feminist perspectives (was Tolstoy a misogynist?); one literary-historical (does Tolstoy belong to the ranks of the Realists?); and one theological ("iconic aesthetics" and the challenge it poses to our Western view of mimesis). In so doing, she presents a persuasive and highly integrated alternative vision of *Anna Karenina* that presumes, in turn, an integrated "no-crisis" understanding of Tolstoy's own very long life story. She provides some intriguing close readings: Varenka and Koznyshev out mushroom-picking, Anna in anguish and excitement over her English novel on the train to Petersburg, the various episodes that involve painting and portraits. Here I would like to highlight two aspects of the book that strike me as especially productive for our further reconceptualizing of Tolstoy. In the tradition of the great *netovshchik* himself, both are negations of conventional (and often unexamined) wisdoms.

First: Was Tolstoy a Realist? Mandelker says no—although this fact, if truth be told, is no special disappointment, since it turns out that almost no great Russian writer of the Realist period in fact belonged to it: Dostoevsky was a "Romantic Realist" (Donald Fanger), Turgenev was "Beyond Realism" (Elizabeth Cheresch Allen), Chekhov was an impressionist (Savely Senderovich). What matters in these discussions, clearly, is that "Realism" receive a sufficiently robust definition to enable us to exclude a writer from its midst. Mandelker provides such a definition, at least on the basis of *Anna Karenina*, and on two planes: first, by showing Tolstoy's canny (and subversive) blend of Victorian novel and French novel of adultery, which challenged the "consensual collectivity" (73) in which Realism (loosely defined) is usually assumed to be grounded; and second, drawing on the work of Richard Gustafson, she posits in place of the usual "realistic" criteria of mimesis and verisimilitude the more Orthodox idea of an "iconic aesthetics." In that aesthetics, the verbal or visual icons that for her constitute the novel's meaning-system "are not representations but rather direct windows into heaven" (80). Thus Mandelker joins Vladimir Alexandrov and other scholars presently engaged in refining Tolstoy's artistic position "between prosaics and poetics." In creative response to Gary Saul Morson's prosaic reading of *War and Peace* and its compositional principle of "scattered potentials," she suggests a specifically lyrical motivation—one that has at its base not the "mirror" mimesis of Western novels but rather the emblematic, the transcendent, and a focus on the moral effects of contemplation on the spectator. Paradoxically, these two strong readings are not mutually exclusive. Mandelker provides a different

sort of motivation for Tolstoy's absolute language, taking it out of Bakhtin's logos-centered treatment and into the realm of the divine Image.

The second highly attractive argument in Mandelker's book is her reformulation of Tolstoy and the female question. Tolstoy is not a misogynist, she persuasively argues, if we make some effort to see his views in the context of the patronizing feminism of his time (her case in point is John Stuart Mill) and if we eschew our own post-Freudian reflexes about active sexuality as always central to self-fulfillment. Tolstoy insists that womanly pursuits are both superior to male ones and singularly unglamorous; that passionate love and motherhood can co-exist in the same body; and that radical chastity was an honorable choice for a human being (not merely a reaction to disappointments in the erotic realm, nor an outgrowth of Tolstoy's own personal anxieties). To my mind, this sort of rigorous, informed feminist thinking about great—and greatly vulnerable—male writers applies the best of new theory in a responsible and most provocative way.

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Amy Mandelker's *Framing Anna Karenina* has become the first book I turn to for ideas about Tolstoy's novel. Her monograph was an ideal choice for Ohio State's *Theory and Interpretation of Narrative*, a series which evidently seeks to occupy the middle landscape between out-and-out theory and practical criticism. *Framing Anna Karenina* is a worthy contribution to the current state of our critical dialogue on such issues as the feminist reading of Tolstoy (especially the question of his misogyny), genre criticism (*Anna Karenina* and the realist novel), and the poetics of prose (the inter-implicated topics of framing, ekphrasis, the sublime, and mythopoesis). Although these concerns provide the major terms of reference for Mandelker's work, the next turns in critical theory are unlikely to make her book obsolete, because it possesses strengths of a different order as well: first, Mandelker is a superb close reader, whose explications of the key passages suggested to her by her theoretical concerns do justice to Tolstoy's call for critics to bring to light his novel's "labyrinth of linkages." Second, this is a truly comparative work. Professor Mandelker's sustained juxtapositions of Tolstoy with the Victorians (Dickens, Eliot, Thackeray, Trollope, and many others) and, less extensively, with such classics of modernism as Proust and Joyce, are always illuminating.

Mandelker belongs with those feminist scholars who argue against dismissing Tolstoy's vision of gender relations by applying the label 'misogyny' to them. Hers is the most nuanced, detailed, and sustained elaboration of the position that (a) Tolstoy should not be looked at from a presentist perspective and (b) along with misogynist elements, his writings also contain a powerful feminist critique of gender inequality and its implications for both men and women. I for one am convinced.

Mandelker sees Tolstoy as striving to achieve in *Anna Karenina* what she calls an "iconic aesthetics": just as an icon, for the faithful, is not a representation but a window into transcendent truth, so the verbal image