

CHAPTER 6

Tolstoy's Divine Madness— An Analysis of *The Kreutzer Sonata*

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Whom God loves, him He tries.

—Leo Tolstoy¹

The Kreutzer Sonata (1889) was probably Tolstoy's most confrontational work. In Russia (and the United States), its publication and distribution were banned immediately. Because of its views on sex and marriage this novella was labeled as "immoral," and its literary value was disputed. These criticisms have never subsided. In 2009, the reputed Tolstoy scholar and the translator of *War and Peace* and *Resurrection*, Anthony Briggs, wrote that *The Kreutzer Sonata* goes to "absurd extremes," and is "the world's worst story about the evils of sex, and one that would no longer be given shelf-room had it been written by anybody else."² Another admired literary critic, George Steiner, had commented more modestly that, in *The Kreutzer Sonata*, "the elements of articulate morality have become too massive to be absorbed into the narrative structure."³

I contend that such criticisms are unfounded. The form of Tolstoy's work is not arbitrary and does not stand on its own but is closely related to the content and the symbolism of the novel. Like Beethoven's sonata for which it was named (Sonata for Piano and Violin, No. 9, in A Major, Op. 47),⁴ Tolstoy's novella is an extraordinary work of art, a disturbing work whose form, content, and symbolism we have not yet properly learned to appreciate.

FORM

Never in his late works in general, and least of all in *The Kreutzer Sonata* in particular, does Tolstoy neglect artistic form in pursuit of a moral cause. What he does is to experiment with form, in the hope of bringing it to a closer, simpler, and more organic relationship to what he then saw as the vital function of art. The published version of *The Kreutzer Sonata* was the ninth draft of the story.

Tolstoy considers storytelling to be the most natural form of art: we are all storytellers, and in this sense all of us are literary artists. The simplest form of storytelling is a form of confession. According to one of Tolstoy's earliest and most important critics, Merezhkovsky, "the artistic work of Leo Tolstoy is at bottom nothing else than one tremendous diary, kept for fifty years, one endless, explicit confession."⁵

The Kreutzer Sonata also has the form of a confession. During a long night journey on a train, the main character confesses how out of jealousy he killed his wife. Confession is a voluntary admission that something has gone wrong. To confess means not to accuse others for what we are responsible and not to cover up the truth about ourselves.

In the most famous work published under the name "Confessions," that of St. Augustine, man is portrayed as a riddle unto himself because of the rift between body and soul. While Dostoevsky's confessional work, *Notes from the Underground*, continues in this tradition, Tolstoy's main influence is not Augustine but Rousseau. Of all of Rousseau's works, his *Confessions* impacted Tolstoy the most, "thundering through his brain like an earthquake."⁶ Unlike in Augustine's and Dostoevsky's works, in Rousseau's *Confessions*, the self—and the nature of man in general—is not a mystery. Rousseau celebrates the independence of an autonomous individual and focuses on the rift between an individual and society. Pozdnyshev, Tolstoy's main character in *The Kreutzer Sonata*, also sees the ultimate cause of his crime in society, rather than in his own divided nature. The divided, hypocritical nature of society, which preaches one set of values and lives by another, is the final source of Pozdnyshev's moral degradation and his slip into madness.

The first draft of Tolstoy's work was called "A Confession of a Madman." Nevertheless, this work is not just a confession, just as it is not merely a philosophical and moralistic treatise. The work has a literary introduction, with a few peripheral characters setting up the scene for Pozdnyshev's narration. The main character is described as dressed in a traditional Russian way, with an embroidered shirt, while his "opponent," the violinist Trukhachevsky, wears

the latest Parisian fashion. Although the story for the most part consists of the main character's narration, Tolstoy does not miss the opportunity to mention "his cough, or laugh, almost like a sob." The narrator makes tea, too strong for a normal person, "as strong as his passion." Nor does Tolstoy forget to make us laugh every once in a while, although he is dead serious about his subject-matter. In the fury of his jealousy, Pozdnyshev wants to kill the man who he believes is his wife's lover, but he changes his mind because he has no boots on—having taken them off to better overhear a conversation between his wife and her suspected lover. In one of the culminating scenes of *The Kreutzer Sonata* when Pozdnyshev breaks into a room with a dagger, determined to avenge his pride and kill, he makes the following confession: "I wanted to run after him, but I remembered that it is ridiculous to run after one's wife lover in one's socks; and I did not wish to be ridiculous but terrible." He adds: "In spite of fearful frenzy I was in, I was all the time aware of the impression I might produce on others, and was even partly guided by that impression."⁷

Augustinian and Dostoevskian struggle of the sinful flesh with the God-given soul is here replaced by an individual's struggle to liberate oneself from the dreadful influence of one's society. Pozdnyshev does not succeed in this: not only is he aware even in the moment of frenzy of what others may think of him, but he acts in a way in which society expects a deceived husband to act. Then, this same society rewards him for being its faithful member: despite the fact that, in the eyes of God, murder is considered the worse crime a human being can commit, society sticks to its values and frees a husband who had every reason to suspect that his wife was not faithful to him. Tolstoy uses the confessional form not only as a narrative device but as an instrument of mockery.

Let us also not overlook that Tolstoy does change the title of his work, from "A Confession of a Madman" to "The Kreutzer Sonata." Later, we will consider what this reference to Beethoven's sonata symbolizes in this context. For now, let us focus on Tolstoy's attempt to call attention to the connection between his story and the art form of music in general, and sonata in particular. From the artist's diary and the testimony of various witnesses, we know that Tolstoy decided to write this story in 1887, after the performance of Beethoven's sonata in his Moscow home. (when I. Lasota played the violin part, with Tolstoy's son Sergei at the piano. Tolstoy declared to those present that, when finished, his story should be read aloud by one person. Indeed, if we pay more attention to the narrative form, Pozdnyshev's confession reduces us, the audience, to listeners, just as the performance of music does. As Merezhkovsky observed,

the hero is “reduced” to “a mere plaintive voice and a pair of eyes, glowing with feverish, half-crazy fire.”⁸ As we would sit in the semi-darkness of a concert hall, Pozdnyshv and his listener are sitting in the semi-darkness of the moving train, advancing in regular, rhythmic motions through the darkness of the night. The confessional form that Tolstoy uses in this work is a combination of storytelling and music.

A closer look at the structural ordering of Tolstoy’s work reveals that it also has the form of a sonata. This musical form usually consists of three (sometimes four) movements. After a brief introduction, it normally follows the fast-slow-fast tempo. Tolstoy’s *Kreutzer Sonata* contains a similar structure. The first two sections present an introduction to the story. The first “movement” consists of sections III–XII, the second of sections XIII–XVIII, and the final one of sections XIX–XXVIII.⁹ The first “movement” covers the period in the hero’s life before his marriage. It deals with the excitement of youth, with emphasis on his loss of innocence and subsequent courting of his future wife. The second “movement” covers the married life of Pozdnyshv. It describes his bittersweet honeymoon, the subsequent begetting, and rearing of children, the growing rift between spouses, and the beginning of the husband’s jealousy. The last “movement,” which is expected to bring a resolution of the tensions developed in the previous two parts, increases the tempo again and culminates in the murder of Pozdnyshv’s wife and his “awakening.” And, just as we think that we will come out of the semi-darkness of the journey through the night and break into the light, Tolstoy surprises us. Where we end up at the end of the story is not in light but in complete darkness, yet to be (somehow) dispelled. “Had I then known what I know now, everything would be different,” confesses Pozdnyshv. “Nothing would have induced me to marry her. . . . I should not have married at all” (233).

We expect Pozdnyshv to say that nothing would have induced him to murder his wife. However, Tolstoy draws us deeper into the content of his story: the physical murder is just a visible manifestation of the true, psychological and spiritual murder that occurred earlier and was merely disguised by the socially approved form of marriage. As Pozdnyshv puts it: “They asked me at the trial with what and how I killed her. Fools! They thought I killed her with a knife” (183–84).

Tolstoy’s narrative form, his combination of confessional storytelling and music, does not allow for a resolution of the tension—as long as the source of the tension is not removed. The socially approved forms of life pull us deeper and deeper into the darkness of immorality and decadence. It is this originally

designed form of *The Kreutzer Sonata* that prompted such a sensitive reader like Anton Chekhov to proclaim: "It is hardly possible to find anything of equal importance in conception and beauty of execution. Apart from its artistic merits which are in places amazing, we should be grateful for the story alone, for it stimulates thought extremely."¹⁰ A similar view was voiced by Romain Rolland: "In the power of its effects, in passionate concentration, in the brutal vividness of its impressions, and in fullness and maturity of form, nothing Tolstoy has written equals *The Kreutzer Sonata*."¹¹

CONTENT

Even more than its artistic form, the content of *The Kreutzer Sonata* angered its critics. To quote Briggs again, this novella "is a shrill indictment of human sexuality. . . [in which Tolstoy] insists that sex is at the root of all human misery, and it should be done away with—even if it means the extinction of the human species. . . . A work of absurdity, insulting to the intelligence and artistically inept, *The Kreutzer Sonata* is among the worst things ever to come from Tolstoy's pen, and it deserves nothing more than oblivion."¹²

Harsh judgments, no doubt. To see whether they are justified, we need to look at the novella itself to get a closer understanding of what it is about. In doing so, it is essential not to overlook that the primary role of the narrator is to raise questions rather than to offer answers. If so, let us look at the questions raised.

Pozdnyshv questions sex, because it focuses on carnality rather than on spiritual love, or it focuses on exploitation, rather than on a spiritual union. He questions the institution of marriage, which is based more on custom and utility rather than on any ideal. Is marriage still the best way of structuring social life, or has it outlived its traditional function? He questions the hypocrisy of the civilization that insists that we give up sex with our bodies but not with our minds and hearts. He questions passions and agitations, like those provoked by music, because we do not have a clear—or even good—answer to the questions: Passions for what? Agitations for what? Finally, all the questions raised in the novella culminate in the one that is of central significance for its author: "But why live?" (183).

That this difference between asking questions and answering them was very important for Tolstoy himself, we can see from the following quote: "In nearly all the letters, congratulations, and addresses [for his eightieth birthday], the same thing is repeated—it has simply become a truism—that I have destroyed religious delusions and opened the way for the search after truth. If it is true, it is just what I wanted and tried to do all my life, and this is very dear to me."¹³

For Tolstoy's main character, sex is certainly as much of a symptom as it is the cause of the social malaise. What really matters for Pozdnyshev is all the energy that goes toward sexual satisfaction, all the deceptions and lies, all the dehumanization of other human beings so that they may serve as mere objects of our sensual gratification. What bothers Pozdnyshev is that the pursuit of self-gratification, together with other lies and deceptions sanctioned by society, turns us away from more lofty goals, from the pursuit of the goals toward which humanity should be directed.

The disastrous consequences of our obsession with sensual gratification are not limited only to the treatment of other people as instruments, objects and things. They also spawn jealousy and crimes, like the one committed by Pozdnyshev. Such consequences, Pozdnyshev comes to believe, can be eliminated only with the abstinence from sex, only with complete celibacy.

Although this proposal continues to provoke severe criticisms, it is by no means new. In many religious and spiritual traditions, celibacy has traditionally seen as the most direct path of purification and the approach to God. In the Matthew Gospel, which Tolstoy quotes before the text of *The Kreutzer Sonata*, Jesus calls his followers to chastity, and nowhere in the New Testament is this call repudiated. As Aylmer Maude points out, the lessons of the New Testament with regard to sex and marriage are the following:

1. A married man should not divorce his wife to take another woman.
2. It is wrong to look at a woman as an object of desire.
3. For the unmarried it is better not to marry and be chaste.¹⁴

All three points are consistent with what Pozdnyshev advocates as a result of his unfortunate experiences. Regardless of what we think of Pozdnyshev's call to chastity, it is important to distinguish an effect from a cause, a symptom of a disease from what leads to it. The central motive of the third "movement" of *The Kreutzer Sonata*, just like that of a musical sonata, is a constant yearning for a resolution. This is what Pozdnyshev hears in the dialogue of piano and violin during the performance of Beethoven's piece, and this yearning is what he attempts to bring to materialization in his married life. In the rage of jealousy, Pozdnyshev "resolves" the tension by killing his wife. In the reflective semi-darkness of the train-journey, one year later, he advocates celibacy. What he thereby wants to accomplish is not a return to the Augustinian suppression of the flesh. His proposal is far more radical. If the soul is as poisoned as the flesh, let it go to hell as well! Dostoevsky's madman, the man

from the underground, selfishly exclaims: “Well, so far as I’m concerned, blow the world so long as I can have my cup of tea.”¹⁵ In Tolstoy, even a madman wants to go to heaven; even he is striving toward the highest; even he wants to endear himself to God.

Only he does not know how to do it. In the section of *The Kreutzer Sonata* that precedes the murder, the conductor enters the train compartment and puts out the candle because dawn is approaching. The confession of a madman is almost over and the tension of the narrative is at its highest point. As he and his listener are awaiting the light of a new day, the suffering man may soon be (temporarily) relieved of his psychological burden when his story is over. Only—in contrast to Beethoven’s piece—hope is not restored at the end of this confession, at the end of this “sonata.” Instead of hope, there is a fall into an even deeper madness, more bloodshed, and further deprivation. Yes, Pozdnyshv is aware that celibacy would lead to the extinction of the human race. He answers our concerns with an unpleasant, rarely directly confronted question: And why should the human race continue to exist?

SYMBOLISM

To what extent are the views expressed by Tolstoy’s character also those of his author? A. N. Wilson is right to claim that “it is a gross oversimplification to think that Pozdnyshv is Tolstoy.” But he goes too far when he adds, immediately after, that, “On the contrary, [Pozdnyshv] is the greatest indictment of the Tolstoyan view of men and women that was ever imagined.”¹⁶ It is closer to truth to say that there must be some overlap between the views of the author and his main character. The key question is: To what extent?

In the Epilogue, written after the publication of *The Kreutzer Sonata* met with fierce resistance, Tolstoy writes:

Many, very many people will regard these thoughts as strange and even contradictory. They really are contradictory, but not among themselves. These thoughts are contradictory to our whole life, and involuntarily the doubt arises who is right: these thoughts, or the lives of millions of people and my own? I experienced the same feelings in the highest degree, as I arrived at the convictions which I am expounding here: I had not in the least expected that the progress of my thoughts would bring me to what it has. I was terrified at my deductions and wished not to believe them, but it was impossible not to believe. However much these deductions contradict

the whole structure of our life, however much they contradict that which I thought and expressed before, I was compelled to acknowledge them.¹⁷

Tolstoy may have forgotten that Pierre Bezukhov had already entertained such thoughts in *War and Peace*.¹⁸ There, however, they were not of central importance and represented only of the stages in Pierre's development. In *Resurrection*, the novel that in many ways is a continuation and further elaboration of the topics presented in *The Kreutzer Sonata*, Tolstoy makes the main character, Nekhliudov, repeatedly wonder: "Am I out of *my* mind, because I see things that other people don't see, or are *they* out of *their* minds, the ones who are doing what I am seeing?" Nekhliudov could not quite make up his mind:

Yet these people (and there are so many of them) have been doing those amazing and horrifying things with such serene assurance, not only that this is unavoidable, but that they are performing an essential and useful public service, that it is hard to imagine that they are all out of their minds." He couldn't accept that he was out of his mind because he knew his thinking was so clearly ordered. This is why he was in a state of constant perplexity.¹⁹

Most of those surrounding Tolstoy dispelled their perplexities once and for all. In connection with his overall behavior and thoughts, the passages like these quoted above led them to conclude that he, Tolstoy, was mad. His own brother often claimed that Tolstoy "was a great writer, but he went crazy . . . he was absolutely an insane individual." His wife, Sofia Andreevna, similarly proclaimed: "No one knows Lyovochka [diminutive form for Leo] but me. I am the only one who knows him. He is a sick and abnormal person."²⁰

Fortunately, not everyone was of the same opinion. Clifton Fadiman, for instance, spoke of Tolstoy's "abnormal normality."²¹ Maksim Gorky was among those most sympathetic. He saw in Tolstoy "an old magician . . . who knows the beginnings and ends of things, and reflects on the end of the stones, the grasses of the earth, of the waters of the sea, and on everything from moon to sun. The sea is part of his soul, and everything about him comes from him and out of him."²²

Before deciding this question of madness, let us reconsider the meaning of the words "madness" and "mad." When we look at a dictionary, it is striking how "madness" can cover a vast variety of states: insanity, craziness, lunacy, mania, rage, frenzy, or just distractedness. Similarly, "to be mad" has even more synonyms: mentally ill, insane, crazy; frenzied; wildly excited; frantic; showing or

resulting from lack of reason; foolish and rash; senseless; unwise; or blindly and foolishly enthusiastic or fond; infatuated, etc.

Let us thus not assume that madness must mean only one thing or refer to a single state of affairs. In fact, we can recognize four kinds of madness in Tolstoy's work:

1. Madness of a sick man—in *The Kreutzer Sonata*, Pozdnyshev characterizes himself as “something of a madman” at the end of the novel (sec. xxviii). (That is why *The Kreutzer Sonata* was initially entitled, “A Confession of a Madman.”)
2. Madness of the normal man—of “normal” people and their “normal” ways of life—which Tolstoy's character exposes and criticizes in *The Kreutzer Sonata*, and which Tolstoy relentlessly denounced and attacked in all of his later works. (E.g., in *Resurrection*, Nekhliudov comes to the realization that, “These people accept as a law something that is *not* a law, and they fail to acknowledge the urgent, eternal and immutable law that God Himself has inscribed in men's hearts.”²³)
3. Madness of a “holy fool” (*yurodivyi*). Holy fools in Russia were those who voluntarily relinquished all material comfort and lived like vagabonds. They deliberately challenged social conventions, unafraid to speak the truth and expose the falsehood of the commonly accepted way of life, while also willingly accepting humiliations and insults in order to conquer pride and achieve greater meekness. Tolstoy admired holy fools since his childhood, and to the end of his days was hoping to become one of them. (During his work on *The Kreutzer Sonata*, in August of 1889, Tolstoy wrote in his diary: “I need to be a holy fool in my writing too.”²⁴)
4. Divine madness—Tolstoy accepts the “eternal and immutable law that God Himself has inscribed in men's hearts,” yet he could not overlook, for instance, that it is said in the Gospels that one must love one's neighbor, and even one's enemy. A view like that, although in contradiction with our normal views, would exert influence on him, without him being able to understand how or why.

To clarify this last kind of madness, the least understood, yet the most important, let us turn to music and what it symbolized for Tolstoy. *Mousikos* is something belonging to the Muses—a gift from the Muses—and it has always puzzled the aestheticians whether music is the lowest of all fine arts, or the highest and the purest. Tolstoy thinks that it could be both. In the words of Thomas Mann,

Tolstoy's attitude toward music . . . is most instructive. When he met Berthold Auerbach in Dresden, that not too profound moralist told him that music is an irresponsible enjoyment, and added that irresponsible enjoyment is the first step toward immorality. Tolstoy, in his journal, made this clever and abominable phrase his own. His hatred and fear of music had the same moral and social basis as his hatred and fear of Shakespeare. We are told that at the sound of music he grew pale and his face became drawn with an expression very much like horror. Notwithstanding, he was never able to live without music. In his earlier years he even founded a musical society. Before beginning work he habitually seated himself at the piano—that means a good deal. And in Moscow, when he sat beside Tchaikovsky and listened to the composer's *Quartet in D major*, he began to sob at the *andante*, before everybody. No, unmusical he was not. Music loved him, even though he, great moralizing infant that he was, felt that he ought not to return her love.²⁵

Music loved Tolstoy, yet he trembled in its presence. He knew that music, like all forms of art, is able to communicate. Yet, what does music communicate? And does music communicate it properly? What if music does not communicate clearly? What does music communicate, for example, when it agitates without showing us where this agitation should lead? These are the concerns expressed by Pozdnyshv:

They played Beethoven's *Kreutzer Sonata*. . . . It is a terrible thing, that sonata. And especially that part [the first movement] . . . Music makes me forget myself, my real position; it transports me to some other position not my own. Under the influence of music it seems to me that I feel what I do not really feel, that I understand what I do not understand, that I can do what I cannot do (214).

This may be the key moment in the entire novella. Pozdnyshv recognizes the ennobling force of music—as did Tolstoy. While he is listening to Beethoven's divine music, there is no room for jealousy, and he even sees his wife as transfigured—not perhaps in the way he recognizes her after he stabs her, but certainly as different from the annoying woman with whom he has been fighting for years over the children, their nursing and upbringing, their sex life. . . . Music elevates them both, and yet, he fears music, as did Tolstoy. Pozdnyshv fears music because while listening to music, his will, his reasoning, even his life, are not his own. While listening to music, he feels in power of

some other, perhaps higher but certainly more a powerful and uncontrollable force. He is not himself. He is transposed to participate in some other form of life, in something that is beyond his control.²⁶

That is precisely why his fear of music is so powerful, perhaps even more powerful than in the case of a strong sexual infatuation, and why the novella is entitled “The Kreutzer Sonata.” Our entire moral life is premised on us having control over our choices and actions. It is promised on our ability to make rational decisions as to what we, as rational beings, should do, and then act accordingly, but musical infatuation, perhaps even more strongly than sexual infatuation, deprives us of the control of our reasoning ability and of our actions. Pozdnyshev may not have been sophisticated enough to understand the significance of this point, but Tolstoy certainly knew what was at stake. He also knew that this loss of control over our own rationality and moral choices has both a bad side and a good side. It is what made Pozdnyshev a murderer and Beethoven (as well as Tolstoy) an outstanding artist.

Put differently, despite making some outrageous statements about Beethoven (“he is growing deaf, he cannot hear and is beginning to write totally contrived, unfinished and therefore often meaningless, musically incomprehensible works”²⁷), Tolstoy realizes that music is a kind of magic, a mystery that can connect us with the highest and the lowest realms of being. He senses that music can intertwine two kinds of madness: the sublime madness of a musical genius (Beethoven), and the ridiculous madness of a man who murders his wife in blind passion. He also knows that, at its best, music is a divine manifestation of the human soul.

In this regard, Tolstoy's true predecessor in the mysteries of divine madness (and love) is Plato, especially in the *Phaedrus*. This dialogue is the apology of Eros, just as the dialogue *Apology* is the apology of Socrates. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates distinguishes between four forms of divine madness (inspiration):

1. Prophetic (Apollo),
2. Mystical (Dionysus),
3. Poetic (the Muses),
4. Erotic (Aphrodite).²⁸

Plato may have been the first to argue that love is a kind of madness and that madness can be a gift from god. Furthermore, he claims that this gift from god is finer than self-control needed for morality, which is of a merely human origin. The madness of love is the best of the four kinds of divine madness,

because this kind of madness can lead to a new discovery of philosophical truth. It can lead to the heights that moderation, ordinary reasoning, and the normal way of life cannot even fathom.²⁹ According to Dudley Young's interpretation,

In the *Phaedrus* Plato recognizes that most of us are not up to the higher calling, and offers a limited blessing to those lovers who occasionally submit to "their full desire" so long as "their minds are not wholly set thereupon" (256c). This is more than he allows either in the earlier *Symposium* or the later *Laws*. But what is truly remarkable in the *Phaedrus* is that even those who would seek the ultimate blessing of wisdom must pass through the divine madness of erotic love. The agonizing temptations of sexuality cannot be avoided by the aspiring philosopher, lover of wisdom, for it is only in renouncing the all-too-human desire to possess and therefore devalue the beauty of the loved-one that the gods allow the chosen few access to the central mystery—that human fulfillment can be possessed only by those who sacrifice their desire to possess it. And this, according to Plato, is the life truly worth living, where the energies for love and war are reconciled at last in the generative perception of beauty.³⁰

Iris Murdoch, among others noticing profound similarities between Plato and Tolstoy, points out that both have ambivalent feelings about sex and hate obscurities and pretensions in art. Murdoch calls Plato and Tolstoy "two great puritans" who had a fear of art, and to an extent a fear of pleasure.³¹ For both of them, there are two kinds of art, and although they may be equally needed, they cannot be equally esteemed—one kind of art simply gives pleasure and comfort to people, while the other teaches them. For Tolstoy, as for Plato, art per se, or art in the highest sense, is not the transmission of just any feeling but only of the highest feelings—the feelings flowing from religious perception. In Tolstoy's words, "art is a human activity having for its purpose the transmission to other of the highest and best feelings to which men have risen."³² For both Tolstoy and Plato, the way toward the highest and best feelings to which men have risen leads through the renunciation of sexual desire, through chastity. This call to chastity, which sounds so "absurd" and "insulting to our intelligence," appears definitely as a sign of madness, and it cannot but look like madness of a sick kind as long as it is not understood that chastity is not a goal but a means. It is but a symbol of our search for something higher—a higher form of personal devotion that should lead to a humane resolution of the tensions of the common life, rather than to jealousy and murder.

This is the true difference between Tolstoy and his hero Pozdnyshv; this is the key difference between madness as sickness and madness as divine inspiration that so many critics of the great Russian author have missed. Pozdnyshv's madness leads to violence and dehumanization, to the murder of his wife and his own spiritual death. Nonetheless, his society—our society, our advanced civilization—can accept, excuse, and tolerate this horrible event! So, we are quick to denounce as “absurdity, insulting to the intelligence,” Tolstoy's divine inspiration, his attempt to redirect us toward the highest and the best.

Yet, what is it that Tolstoy proposes? What is it that he attempts to teach us? One of those lessons concerns a higher form of love, a loftier goal than what we find in sex and marriage as is usually understood. In our age, marriage is more of a utility than an ideal: “The principal cause of family unhappiness is that people are brought up to think that marriage brings happiness.” Yet, insists Tolstoy, it is just the opposite: “Man survives earthquakes, epidemics, terrible illnesses, and every kind of spiritual suffering, but always the most poignant tragedy was, is, and even will be the tragedy of the bedroom.”³³

As opposed to sex and marriage, which so dominate our way of thinking and our social behavior, Tolstoy wants to redirect us to the spiritual love as it is revealed in the Gospels. In his words, “Christ never laid down rules of conduct. He establishes no institutions, not even that of marriage.”³⁴ Jesus, Tolstoy constantly reiterates, is not focused on the institutions but sees as his mission the promotion of love: “Love is the essential faculty of the human soul. We love not because it is our interest to do so but because love is the essence of who we are, because we cannot but love.”³⁵ Indeed, Tolstoy insists that, “Love is the manifestation within oneself of God.”³⁶

Why can't Pozdnyshv see this? Why does he never come out of the semi-darkness of his distorted world to see the light of love? For this reason: “You need courage and boldness for faith and for love. . . . One has to love even more, then love will become faith. When you love a woman, she is the best in the world, and that is already faith; an unbeliever cannot love.”³⁷

Pozdnyshv has neither courage nor boldness for faith and for love. Nor does our age, so proud of its achievements, and yet so poor in faith and love. Is this not the reason why Tolstoy's *Kreutzer Sonata* appears as “absurd” to us and as “insulting our intelligence?” Is this not the reason why we do not recognize that Tolstoy's divine madness issues a challenge to us all to abandon the madness of our “normal” ways of life and become more loving and more humane?

ENDNOTES

- 1 Alexander B. Goldenveitser, *Talks with Tolstoy*, trans. S. S. Koteliansky and Virginia Wolf (New York: Horizon Press, 1969), 189.
- 2 Anthony Briggs, Introduction to Leo Tolstoy, *Resurrection*, trans. A. Briggs (New York: Penguin, 2009), xvi. In his book, *Tolstoy* (New York: Norton, 1988), 384, A. N. Wilson reverses the question: if we were to read *The Kreutzer Sonata* without knowing its author, would we suspect that Tolstoy wrote it?
- 3 George Steiner, *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky: An Essay in the Old Criticism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), 283.
- 4 Beethoven named the sonata after the French virtuoso, Rudolphe Kreutzer, who he met and befriended in 1798 in Vienna. The sonata was first performed on May 24, 1803, in Vienna, with the Englishman G. P. Bridgetower playing the violin and Beethoven at the piano.
- 5 Quoted from Thomas Mann, "Goethe and Tolstoy" (1922), in *Essays of Three Decades*, trans. H. T. Lowe-Porter (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), 100.
- 6 Quoted from Anthony Briggs, *Brief Lives: Leo Tolstoy* (London: Hesperus Press, 2010), 19.
- 7 Tolstoy, *The Kreutzer Sonata*, in *The Death of Ivan Ilych and Other Stories*, trans. Aylmer Maude (New York: Signet Classic, 1960), 228. Further reference to this text only will be given in the text of the paper in parentheses.
- 8 Dmitry Merezhkovsky, *Tolstoy as Man and Artist* (New York: Scholarly Press, 1970), 150.
- 9 For further discussion of this idea, see Dorothy Green, "The Kreutzer Sonata: Tolstoy and Beethoven," in *Tolstoy's Short Fiction*, ed. and trans. Michael R. Katz (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991), 443–44. For valuable discussion of the connection between literature and music, see Rosamund Bartlett, "Sonata Form in Chekhov's 'The Black Monk,'" in *Intersections and Transpositions: Russian Music, Literature and Society*, ed. A. B. Wachtel (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 58–72. See also the following two articles by Bartlett: "Shostakovich and Chekhov," in *Shostakovich in Context*, ed. R. Bartlett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 199–218; and "Tchaikovsky, Chekhov and the Russian Elegy," in *Tchaikovsky and his World*, ed. Leslie Kearney (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 300–318.
- 10 Quoted from Ernest J. Simmons' "Introduction" to Leo Tolstoy, *Short Novels* (New York: The Modern Library, 1966), 2:xv. For Chekhov's "second" thoughts about this work, see Rosamund Bartlett, *Tolstoy: A Russian Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011), 329–30.
- 11 Romain Rolland, *Tolstoy*, trans. Bernard Maill (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1991), 225.
- 12 Briggs, *Leo Tolstoy*, 85–86. In *What Is Art?*, written about the same time as *The Kreutzer Sonata*, Tolstoy also discusses his deepening concern about sex and societal "erotic mania"; see *What Is Art?*, trans. R. Pevear and L. Volokhonsky (New York: Penguin, 1995), 61–63, 143–44.
- 13 Goldenveitser, *Talks with Tolstoy*, 203.
- 14 Aylmer Maude, *The Life of Tolstoy: Later Years* (London: Constable, 1910), vol. 2, 389.

- 15 Dostoevsky, *Notes from the Underground*, sec. ix. Quoted from *Great Short Works of Fyodor Dostoevsky* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 370.
- 16 Wilson, *Tolstoy*, 385. Wilson is equally wrong to insist that *The Kreutzer Sonata* is not about sex, but that it is intended as a murder story. On the occasion of the controversy that *The Kreutzer Sonata* had created, then the sixty-three-year-old Tolstoy wrote in his diary (October 30, 1891): "Whether I explained properly or not why the greatest sexual continence is necessary, I don't know. But I do know for certain that copulation is an abomination which can only be thought of without revulsion under the influence of sexual desire. Even in order to have children you wouldn't do this to a woman you love. I'm writing this at a time when I'm possessed myself by sexual desire, against which I can't fight." Quoted from Wilson, *ibid.*, 390–91.
- 17 For the Epilogue of *The Kreutzer Sonata*, see "*The Kreutzer Sonata*" *Variations: Lev Tolstoy's Novella and Counterstories* by Sofiya Tolstaya and Lev Lvovich Tolstoy, ed. and trans. Michael R. Katz (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 297–308.
- 18 See, for instance, *War and Peace*, bk. V, chap. 1.
- 19 Tolstoy, *Resurrection*, 471.
- 20 Ivan Bunin, *The Liberation of Tolstoy: A Tale of Two Writers*, ed. and trans. Vladimir T. Khmelkov (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 71, 98.
- 21 Clifton Fadiman, Foreword to *War and Peace*, trans. Louise and Aylmer Maude (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1942), xxviii.
- 22 Quoted from *Critical Essays on Tolstoy*, ed. Edward Wasiolek (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1986), 29.
- 23 Tolstoy, *Resurrection*, 401.
- 24 Quoted from Bartlett, *Tolstoy: A Russian Life*, 333.
- 25 Mann, "Goethe and Tolstoy," 116–17. See also Alexandra Tolstaya, "Tolstoy and Music," *Russian Review* 17 (1958): 258–62.
- 26 For further discussion of this point, see Tolstoy, *What Is Art?*, sections VII (especially page 41) and VII (especially 52–53).
- 27 *Ibid.*, 97.

Rolland offers the most satisfactory answer to the question of why "should Tolstoy have chosen Beethoven, the purest, the chastest of all?—Because he was the most powerful. Tolstoy had early loved his music, and he always loved it. . . . Tolstoy forgets one thing: the mediocrity and the lack of vitality in the majority who make or listen to music. Music cannot be dangerous to those who feel nothing. The spectacle of the Opera-house during a performance of *Salomé* is quite enough to assure us of the immunity of the public to the more perverse emotions evoked by the art of sounds. To be in danger one must be, like Tolstoy, abounding in life. The truth is that in spite of his injustice where Beethoven was concerned, Tolstoy felt his music more deeply than the majority of those who now exalt him. He, at least, knew the frenzied passions, the savage violence, which mutter through the art of the 'deaf old man,' but of which the orchestras and the virtuosi of to-day are innocent. Beethoven would perhaps have preferred the hatred of Tolstoy to the enthusiasm of his admirers." Rolland, *Tolstoy*, 229, 233.

- 28 Plato, *Phaedrus*, 265ab. For a historical overview of the connection between arts and madness, see Ilya Vinitsky, "Madness in Western Literature and the Arts," *The Routledge History of Madness and Mental Health*, ed. G. Eghigian (New York: Routledge, 2017), 153–71.
- 29 Plato, *Phaedrus*, 244a. See also Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 201–17.
- 30 Dudley Young, *Origins of the Sacred: The Ecstasies of Love and War* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1991), 204–5.
- 31 Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, ed. Peter Conradi (London: Penguin, 1997), 247, 400.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 211.
- 33 Quoted from Simmons, "Introduction," xiii.
- 34 Tolstoy, *Spiritual Writings*, ed. Charles E. More (Maryknol, NY: Orbis, 2006), 159.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 191.
- 36 *Ibid.*, 144.
- 37 Quoted from *Critical Essays on Tolstoy*, ed. Wasiolek, 31.