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“Though this be Madness”: Sofia Tolstaya’s Second Response to *Kreutzer Sonata*

Madness need not be all breakdown. It may also be breakthrough. It is potentially liberation and renewal as well as enslavement and existential death.

R. D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience* (1967)

[...] when a heroine goes mad she always goes into white satin[...].

Richard Sheridan, *The Critic* (1779)

Lev Tolstoy’s controversial novella *The Kreutzer Sonata* (1889) is a fictional narrative that takes the form of a heart-rending confession by a conscience-stricken Russian aristocrat. Years earlier, the hero Pozdnyshev had married a much younger woman, partly to satisfy his intense physical desires; over time, he becomes pathologically jealous of her non-physical, but deeply emotional, relationship with a musician. In a fit of fanatical rage, Pozdnyshev murders his wife and is subsequently condemned to recite a brutally frank account of his crime to any interested listener. In Tolstoy’s telling of the tale, the reader is the captive listener, figured as a fellow railway passenger addressed by Pozdnyshev on an all-night journey.

Tolstoy’s faithful and devoted wife of nearly fifty years, Sofia Andreyevna Tolstaya (née Behrs) (1844-1919), not only repeatedly and laboriously copied her husband’s story each time he made revisions to satisfy the censors, but also wrote at length about it in her own letters, diaries, and her voluminous autobiography. She disagreed markedly with Tolstoy’s emphases and conclusions at almost every turn; moreover, she was deeply embarrassed that the reading public had construed the story as a reflection of her own marriage to the

famous writer. In a most extraordinary and intriguing twist of events, Sonya turned to writing fiction herself. She composed two “counter-stories,” her own literary challenge to *The Kreutzer Sonata*, texts that remained in manuscript form, buried in her archive until a few years ago.

In the second of her stories, “Song Without Words” (1898), Sofia Andreyevna explored the relationship of a talented composer and musician with members of the Tolstoy family circle. In fact, during the summers of 1895-97 Sergei Taneyev (1856-1915), who had studied composition with Tchaikovsky and piano with Nikolai Rubenstein, visited the Tolstoy estate in Yasnaya Polyana. Sonya developed a deep attachment to him that evidently embarrassed her children and enraged her husband. Taneyev himself, it seems, was more attracted to men than to women, and remained largely unaware of the intensity of Sonya’s affection.

In Sofia’s story, the young heroine Sasha, distraught after the death of her mother, emerges from her mourning only to become consumed by an interest in music, and by a man who both composed and performed it. When the musician consistently rebuffs her advances, the heroine, manifesting an array of strange symptoms, sinks into madness. The tale ends when she finally decides to have herself committed to a “University Clinic for Nervous Diseases.” Sofia Tolstaya’s story reveals a deep understanding of a woman’s psychology: her depression, her obsessive-compulsive behaviors, and suicidal tendencies.

Madness as both a fact of life and a theme in literature has been investigated thoroughly. Foucault’s classic study *Madness and Civilization* (1965) describes the shift from the medieval period when insanity was considered part of everyday life: Fools and madmen (and women) walked the streets freely. He argues that it was only in the early 1800s that such people began to be considered a threat, resulting in the building of asylums to house them,

thus erecting literal and metaphorical walls between the “insane” and the rest of society.

Whereas Foucault generally ignored the issue of gender, Phyllis Chester, in her book on *Women and Madness*, remedied that deficit. She notes that as early as the sixteenth century, women had been “shut up” in madhouses by their husbands. By the seventeenth century, special wards in France’s most famous mental asylum, Salpêtrière, were being reserved for prostitutes, pregnant women, poor women, and young girls.

In her study on the subject in nineteenth century English culture, *The Female Malady*, Elaine Showalter argues that madness was perceived as essential female nature unveiling itself before scientific male rationality. Women were viewed as irrational creatures, identified with nature and the body, while men represented reason, discourse, culture, and mind. She notes that by mid-century, women had become the majority of patients in public lunatic asylums, by virtue of their confining roles as daughters, wives, and mothers; they were often mistreated by the male-dominated and possibly misogynistic cadre of male health providers.

In Russia, the shift from a medieval to a modern view of madness occurred later, only in the middle of the eighteenth century. Tsar Peter III issued a decree that “mad people were not to be sent to a monastery, but rather to a special house, as was the case in foreign countries.” This represented a new, more “rational,” Western way of regarding the insane: they were no longer relegated to the tradition of holy fools who came under the jurisdiction of religious authorities. Responsibility was shifted from the church to medicine, from superstition to science.

Empress Catherine II established the first institutions for the mentally ill, the so-called “yellow houses” in response to principles of the European Enlightenment. Ironically, this “modernization of the mad,” though depriving them of their special status, resulted in their being

fed, clothed, and housed, in a word, better treated than they had been during the early period (Brintlinger 3-19).

Articles about mental illness appeared in the Russian periodical press as early as 1759. During the next century, calls for more humane care of the mentally ill, the establishment of “lunatic asylums,” as well as diagnostic and therapeutic procedures began to appear. By the 1860s the number of medical journals had grown rapidly as reports on the care of the insane in other countries were proliferating. The popular press soon followed the lead with quasi-scientific articles; popular lectures were devoted to the subject, as were fictional pieces about madness. Interest was rapidly increasing among various levels of society (Shereshevski 155-69).

Insanity in Russia (and even more so in the Soviet Union) had another, very different association: namely its link with political dissent. The concept of revolutionary insanity first emerged as a medical diagnosis during the French Revolution. It quickly spread to Russia. Catherine’s reaction to Aleksandr Radishchev’s *Journey from Petersburg to Moscow* (1790) was couched in medical terms: The author was diagnosed as “infected and full of the French madness” and compelled to confess that he had written “an insane book.” The first of Pyotr Chaadayev’s *Philosophical Letters* (pub. 1836) elicited a similar “diagnosis” from Nicholas I: the author was declared officially insane and placed under house arrest, with daily medical supervision for more than a year (Miller 105-16).

Turning from “real life” to “real literature,” European writers produced no shortage of deranged characters, primarily women. Shakespeare, Sir Walter Scott, Wordsworth, Dickens, Balzac and Flaubert, Goethe, and many others come to mind. The classic study of English Victorian literature from a feminist perspective by Gubar and Gilbert, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, takes its title from the most famous example of an

insane captive: Rochester's wife Bertha Mason in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847). Other English women writers including Jane Austen, Mary Shelley, and George Eliot depicted powerful cases of insanity. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) and Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening* (1899) are two early and notable American contributions to the genre.

What about Russian writers? I have argued elsewhere that dreams and the unconscious emerged as areas of exploration with great originality in nineteenth-century Russian fiction (Katz). Related to this growing interest in the irrational realm of human experience, the theme of madness became a much-explored domain in the writings of male authors with their male heroes. The list of insane characters in nineteenth century Russian letters is both long and distinguished: Chatsky, the hero of Griboyedov's comedy *Woe from Wit* (1824), is deemed mad for political reasons; Pushkin's Evgeny from "The Bronze Horseman" (1833) and Germann from "The Queen of Spades" (1833) are driven mad by traumatic events both involving young women; Gogol's narrator Poprishchin in "Notes of a Madman" (1835), Dostoevsky's Golyadkin in *The Double* (1846) and Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot* (1868), among his other works, and Chekhov's "Ward No. 6" (1892) all present different aspects of the theme of insanity.

According to one scholar, male madness was presented in Russian literature either as a sign of romantic genius, as a by-product of a politically repressive state, or as a means to explore deviant social and political provinces of human experience (de Sherbinin 727-33).

But where, oh, where, are the madwomen? In a recent article on the subject, Julie de Sherbinin explains:

Because of the Russian intellectual preoccupation with public issues of political repression and social oppression – the domain

of men in a patriarchal culture – rarely did the mad woman show her face. (727)

It is even possible that Russian life resulted in less insanity among women; she continues:

Of course, the shape of Russian social life was different from that of Europe: with an undeveloped bourgeois culture, the stifling interior spaces of the family home that gave rise to female psychosis and consequent broad prognoses of madness were much less pronounced. (728)

Karamzin's sentimental heroine "Poor Liza" (1792) "throws herself *into* the water" after discovering that the beloved rake Erast had married a rich, middle-aged widow; Dostoevsky's gentle heroine in "Meek One" (1876) throws herself *out of* a window, too damaged by the hero's tyrannical personality to accept his transformation; and Tolstoy's charismatic and demanding *Anna Karenina* (1877) throws herself *under* a train when she comes to believe that Vronsky no longer loves her (enough).

It was only at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, as the "woman question" was moving to the forefront of public discourse, that female madness became a popular subject in Russian literature. Less well-known male authors including P. I. Dobrotvorsky, A. M. Fedorov, and P. D. Boborykin, and outstanding women writers including Zinaida Gippius in her short story "The Madwoman" (1906), and most famously, Anastasia Verbitskaya in her novel *The Keys to Happiness* (1909-13), treated the subject, although in the latter work, the heroine's insanity can be seen more as a protest against reigning social and political norms than as mental illness (de Sherbinin 731).

Madness in Sofia Andreyevna Tolstaya's story "Song without Words" includes a brief historical survey of Russian attitudes toward the malady. When the heroine feels the onset of mental disease, she retreats to a convent to seek spiritual

consolation from an elder, but to no avail. The advice she receives there does not help her sort through her own motives or solve her dilemma. The traditional treatment in medieval Russia proves to be inadequate to meet the demands of modern life. Then the heroine is prevailed upon to visit the son of a friend, a young man who has refused to enter the military on grounds of conscience (a swipe at Tolstoy's pacifism). She finds him confined to a military hospital where he is being held while his case is being investigated. The model is medical, but the reason for his incarceration is political, recalling the fate of Radishchev, Chaadayev, and numerous others during the Soviet period. Lastly, the heroine takes herself off a mental asylum and has herself committed for a course of unspecified treatments.

Sasha's descent into madness is signaled by a variety of devices. As she begins to realize that the charismatic musician, Ivan Il'ich, cares only for his music and not for her, she states, "I seem to be losing my mind," "You must think I'm insane," and "Forgive me... if my soul fractures." Her actions become bizarre and unpredictable: she suddenly helps a water carrier move a heavy barrel into a courtyard; then she impulsively picks up a fussy child and helps a mother who is trying to cross a busy intersection. After an enforced separation from the musician, Sasha falls into a deep depression, sobbing, weeping, and rushing to the piano to play first one piece, then another, in a futile attempt to conjure up the composer's presence.

She wanders the streets of Moscow, sees an assortment of strange visions and hallucinations, and contemplates suicide, only to conclude that the water in the Moscow River is too filthy even to throw herself in. She seeks out an old friend who immediately realizes the terrible state she is in. Sasha is taken home where she spends three days in bed, with minimal improvement in her condition. Finally, with a tremendous burst of determination, she resolves to take herself off to a clinic. Sasha

hires a cab and has herself delivered to the "University Clinic for Nervous Diseases." There we are privy to her extraordinary interview with the admitting physician. She composes a bizarre letter to her husband where she attempts to explain her desperate situation, and asks him to pay for her treatment. Here is her most unusual letter in full:

Pay the cabby eighty kopecks. I've entered the hospital for nervous diseases because I have no self-control left and no ability to restrain myself. Come confer with the doctor about my care. Send me clean underclothes, a clean dress, and everything else clean, all clean....

Yesterday I read Dante's *Purgatorio* and suddenly realized that I've been sullied by everything and can't be admitted to the Heavenly Conservatory. You know that Ivan Il'ich is no longer in Moscow. The water in the Moscow River is very dirty and there's so much filth at the Moscow Conservatory. He couldn't tolerate it; now he's teaching and playing in the Heavenly Conservatory and is summoning me there as well.

Have another white dressing gown made for me as soon as possible; some mud was splattered on mine today and I'm in despair – yet another unnecessary spot....

I would like to cleanse my soul, however, neither you nor anyone else can take it in hand; no one has clean hands, and my soul is free....

Please, forgive me for this disturbance; when I'm clean and healthy, I'll come back home....

"That's enough," the doctor said to Sasha, somewhat vexed. "Now write your address."
(232)

Sofia Tolstaya's "Song Without Words" not only explores the heroine's compulsive fascination with music and her extraordinary descent into mental illness, it also describes in rich detail the world of a Moscow composer, in particular, the

masculine milieu of a music conservatory. It hints suggestively at the clandestine unacknowledged relationships between teachers and students, calling attention to an element of homoerotic attraction. This was a taboo subject at the time, yet one of great personal importance to Sonya, given her long-held suspicions about some of her husband's sexual proclivities. Such themes contribute to making this work unique among writings by other women of her day.

A young woman's descent into madness, poignantly described by a talented woman writer; the medieval model of treatment (convent), compared with a "medical" model for political reasons (military hospital), and an asylum for the mentally ill; Sasha's obsessive focus on filth and cleanliness; her vivid hallucinations, impulsive actions, and contemplated suicide – Sofia Andreyevna's "Song Without Words" stands as an extraordinary achievement and a milestone of sorts in Russian cultural history. As Polonius concludes in his famous aside in *Hamlet*, "Though this be madness, yet there is method in't."

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Notes

I am now completing work on new, annotated translations of Tolstoy's *Kreutzer Sonata*, Sofia Andreyevna's two counter-stories, "Whose Fault?" and "Song Without Words," and Lev L'vovich's counter-story, "Chopin's Prelude." The translation is scheduled for publication by Yale UP in 2014. Translated quotations from Sofia Andreyevna's stories are taken from this forthcoming volume.

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