

Review Article: *Kreutzer Sonata* *Variations*

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***The Kreutzer Sonata Variations: Lev Tolstoy's Novella and Counterstories by Sofia Andreyevna Tolstaya and Lev L'vovich Tolstoy.* Ed. and trans. Michael R. Katz. Foreword by Ekaterina Tolstaya. Afterword by Andrey Tolstoy. New Haven: Yale UP, 2014. 384 pp. Hardcover. ISBN: 978-0300189940.**

A friend proposed a graduate seminar called “Bad Novels by Great Novelists” and asked me, an English professor, for suggestions. Amused, I offered up *Mansfield Park* by Jane Austen, *A Tale of Two Cities* by Dickens, *The Fixed Period* (science-fiction!) by Anthony Trollope; in case he didn't already have it on his list, I tossed in *The Kreutzer Sonata*.

One problem I foresaw (it didn't matter, the class didn't run) is that if you don't know the *great* novels they wrote, you essentially don't know those authors, and then you and your students end up kicking around grand mistakes instead of humbly admiring the highest achievements of human imagination. To have students read *The Kreutzer Sonata* or even *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* and not

have *War and Peace* or *Anna Karenina* under their belts prejudices anything they might conclude about those authors. Professor Katz has compiled an anthology of sorts that just might make it possible to teach *The Kreutzer Sonata* on its own.

When it isn't a madman's lucid, riveting tale of murdering his wife *The Kreutzer Sonata* is like having to listen to a beloved relative speak his racism or other pet stupidity; Tolstoy condemned himself as a “fornicator” (Katz 316; August 19, 1889) and, like Pozdnyshev, tortured himself for it. Pozdnyshev recalls his honeymoon:

“It's awkward, shameful, vile, pitiful, and, the main thing, it's boring, unbelievably boring! It's something like what I experienced when I was learning how to smoke: I felt nauseous and my saliva was flowing, but I kept swallowing and pretending it was very nice.”

Pozdnyshev goes on:

“[...] [I]t's completely unnatural. Ask any child, any uncorrupted young woman.

[...]”You say, it’s natural! It’s natural to eat. And it’s enjoyable, easy, pleasant, and not at all shameful, from the very beginning; but this is vile, shameful, and painful. No, it’s not natural. And, I’m convinced, an uncorrupted young woman always hates it.” (23–24)

I squirm because we all know that Tolstoy, not dressed as a madman, said such things himself (and worse!); despite the ignorance of such opinions, Pozdnyshv is as intense and focused as Dostoevsky’s protagonists:

“When people say that they don’t remember what they did in a fit of rage—it’s nonsense, not true. I remembered everything and didn’t stop remembering even for one moment. The higher I turned up the steam of my rage, the brighter the light of consciousness burned within me, by which light I couldn’t help but see everything I was doing. I can’t say that I knew beforehand what I’d do, but at the time I was doing it, even, it seems, for a few moments before, I knew what I was doing, as if to make repentance possible, and so I could tell myself later that I could’ve stopped. I knew that I was stabbing her below the ribs and that the dagger would penetrate.” (66)

And though we’ve seen jealousy depicted in many of Tolstoy’s earlier works, his series of descriptions of jealousy are, in Pozdnyshv’s mouth, never bettered by the writer himself or by anyone else anywhere:

“Whether it was because once I’d settled in the car, I vividly imagined that I’d already arrived, or whether it was that railway travel has such a disquieting effect on people, but as soon as I sat down I could no longer control my imagination, and it began incessantly conceiving scenes with extraordinary clarity that inflamed my jealousy, one after another, each more salacious than the last, all on the same theme, about what was happening there,

without me, and about how she was betraying me. I burned with indignation, rage, and some peculiar feeling of intoxication with my own humiliation, as I contemplated these images, and I couldn’t tear myself away from them. Not only that, but the more I contemplated these imaged scenes, the more I believed in their reality. It was as if the vividness with which these pictures appeared to me served as proof that what I was imagining was real. Some devil, as if against my own will, devised and proposed the most terrible ruminations.” (58–59)

Now *that* is jealousy. So even in a “negative, evil” work (Tolstoy’s own words (Katz 316; July 24, 1889)), he creates absolute marvels.

The first and last words about *The Kreutzer Sonata*, however, ought to belong to Chekhov, whose full assessment, in an 1890 letter, in the miniscule “Ruminations” section, is clipped down by editor Katz, so I’ll restore it here in Michael Henry Heim’s translation:

Do you mean you really don’t care for *The Kreutzer Sonata*? I won’t say it’s an immortal work or a work of genius—I’m no judge of that—but in my opinion, among the mass of what is presently being written here and abroad, you won’t find anything to match it in importance of conception or beauty of execution. Even without mentioning its artistic achievements, which are in certain passages astounding, you must be grateful if only because the work is extremely thought-provoking. As you read it, you can barely keep from shouting, “That’s true!” or “That’s ridiculous!” True, it has some very irritating faults. Besides the ones you listed [Simon Karlinsky’s editorial note tells us that Alexei Pleshcheyev, Chekhov’s letter’s recipient, had called it “paradoxical, one-sided, extraordinary and possibly false”], there is one that I am unwilling to pardon the author, namely the audacity with which Tolstoy treats topics about

which he knows nothing and which out of obstinacy he does not wish to understand. For example, his opinions on syphilis, foundling homes, women's revulsion for sexual intercourse and so on are not only debatable; they expose him as an ignorant man who has never at any point in his long life taken the trouble to read two or three books written by specialists. Nevertheless, these faults are as easily dispersed as feathers in the wind; the worth of the work is such that they simply pass unnoticed. And, if you do notice them, the only result is that you find yourself annoyed it has not escaped the fate of all human works, all of which are imperfect and tainted. (*Anton Chekhov's Life and Thought* 155–157)

The “Epilogue” only serves to remind us that when Tolstoy doesn't have the real world—that is, his *narratively* imagined world to complicate his vision—he convinces himself in ever-tightening knots. He reflects on the ideal of chastity:

For a great many people such thoughts seem strange and even contradictory. And they really are contradictory, but not within themselves; these thoughts contradict our entire way of life. Necessarily one wonders: who is right? These thoughts or the lives of millions of people, including mine? I also experienced this very feeling to the highest degree when I arrived at the convictions I now proclaim. I never expected that the course of my thoughts would bring me to the place it did. I was horrified at my conclusions, wanted not to believe them, but it was impossible not to. No matter how contradictory these conclusions are to the whole structure of our life, no matter how they contradict what I used to think and even proclaimed, I had to accept them. (Katz 305)

In the spring of 1891, he observed, less argumentatively, in his diary:

An afterword to the afterword: 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 that can be regarded or thought about only with revulsion under the influence of sexual desire. Even in order to have children you wouldn't do this to a woman you love.

How sad! How much Tolstoy suffered over what could have been his life's sweetest, keenest, repeatable joy! The sixty-two-year-old concludes those thoughts with a touchingly wrought revelation: “I'm writing this at a time when I myself am possessed by sexual desire, which I can't fight against” (319).

Sofia Andreyevna Tolstaya's *Whose Fault?*, which she wrote, Katz says, “sometime during the period 1891–94” (xvi), is rather interesting. She probably knew the text of *The Kreutzer Sonata* as well as or better than Tolstoy did, and Katz neatly tags in her quoted prompts from the novella that she used to inspire her refutation of it. Occasionally she displays a characteristic vanity regarding her alter-ego Anna's purity and beauty, but for the most part she expertly moves the story along. Like a parody, it absolutely leans on our knowledge of its original, as its full title (*Whose Fault? Apropos of “The Kreutzer Sonata”*) indicates. Sofia Andreyevna reflected in *My Life*: “Of course, as an inexperienced writer, I did not fulfil my task very well, but I wrote with considerable enthusiasm, always keeping in mind the background of Lev Nikolaevich's *Kreutzer Sonata*, which served as a pattern for my story” (340).

The husband (a vain prince and second-rate writer of articles) ends up *accidentally* killing Anna by throwing a paperweight at her; struck in the temple, she slowly expires, slowly enough to give her a chance to *forgive* her husband and give him a lesson: “I wanted a different kind of love. One like ...” Anna raised her eyes to her husband and, as if

recognizing him with effort, added, “You’re not to blame. ...You couldn’t understand that...” (163).

In the midst of Sofia Andreyevna’s story, there are absolutely revelatory details that humanize what we can’t help, blushing, from inferring about the Tolstoys’ sex life:

The prince knew that later that same evening his wife would let her dark golden hair down onto her bare shoulders, undress in front of the mirror, and turn to look at him as he entered the bedroom; recalling that such a moment was near at hand, he gladly stood to greet the famous author, who assumed that the prince’s display of joy was due to his own arrival. (122)

When the prince finds Anna and their composer-neighbor standing in the forest after she has fallen off a horse, he feels a jealous rage; having contained himself, he brings her home and is smitten by her roused beauty:

He walked away for a moment and locked the door to the room; coming up to his wife, he bent over and kissed her breast. Anna shuddered and retreated. But the prince pressed her to him and placed his lips passionately on her shoulder, her lips, and then embraced her.... She no longer resisted. Closing her eyes, thinking not about her husband, yet unaware of what she was doing, she trembled in his embrace. The prince was delighted by his wife’s submissive, passionate response. She gave herself to him entirely... but her closed eyes saw only Bekhmetev; her imagination pictured him at the moment of his silent confessions... (145)

Sofia Andreyevna’s other unpublished novella, *Song without Words* (1898), springs from a later family incident, after she fell in love with the pianist and composer Taneev or with his music. It is impossible to believe that *Song without Words* could have been a serious effort; it is repetitious and dreamy, as if she hadn’t revised it. Perhaps

Katz simply should’ve summarized it as “A Song with *Way Too Many Words*”—it’s ninety pages!—offered a few quotations, and moved on. Here’s one full paragraph:

The painful period of suffering as a result of Sasha’s unexpected and undesired love for Ivan Ilych had begun to pass and was gradually being replaced by the opposite sensation, when love becomes a heartfelt celebration, a radiant, joyful affection for the entire world and all humanity. Everything became important and interesting, everything sparkled and was straightforward; Sasha had sufficient energy and strength to do everything. She had enough love for her own happiness, even though it was not reciprocated. With all her being she strove toward this reciprocity and believed in it, but for the present, it was not necessary. Only in her imagination did she devise the most insane scenes of mutual love between herself and Ivan Ilych. She dreamt that she would inspire him and together with him would serve that art they both loved so much. Never once did the possibility enter her head that she would betray her husband—she did not consider this love a betrayal; her husband remained her husband and she remained his honest wife who loved him after a fashion—but her relationship to Ivan Ilych was something special, poetically artistic, a spiritual celebration, a gift from on high. (237)

Sasha—poor thing!—winds up committing herself to a “University Clinic for Nervous Diseases” (250). No one will be enlightened or amused by Sofia Andreyevna’s long-unpublished second novella: bad fiction by an otherwise usually interesting woman.

Equally bad, but in its own unhappy way, is son Lev L’vovich’s *Chopin’s Prelude*, which was published in 1898. Komkov is Lev L’vovich’s anti-Pozdnyshev monologist:

“Well, what do people generally understand by the word ‘love’? What’s the strongest, craziest love, as they say? You’ve become a man, reached sexual maturity; you need a woman who would complement your personality and continue your bloodline.

“You search for her and right away you see millions of them all around. But people have arranged things so badly in our society that for thousands of reasons it’s not easy to connect with the one you’ve selected. The first reason is that the woman you’ve chosen is dressed.

“Well, so you fall in love with this woman who’s wearing a dress; you long for her as much as you will, until you’re nearly insane; you dream about the possibility of uniting with her—in a word, you’re in love—the degree depends on you. Usually the more obstacles there are to your uniting with her, the stronger your love. If you remove all obstacles the love vanishes. In its place comes marriage, that is, the cohabitation of a man and a woman for the purpose of continuing the human race and for mutual fulfillment.” (277)

Lev L’vovich even directly quotes from *The Kreutzer Sonata* to show where his old man’s wrong. And it’s not that his old man’s *not* wrong; it’s that papa’s novella is a forest fire and sonny’s response is peeing on it:

“The concept of an ideal marriage can exist, an ideal solution to the sexual question, the notion of a chaste marriage—all these ideas can be clearly defined and expressed without contradicting logic or truth; but the concept of an ideal death or annihilation, or the ideal nonexistence of life and the world is incomprehensible to everyone.

“Yes, yes, that’s the primary error of *The Kreutzer Sonata* and its Afterword, since it’s already clear that I’m referring to them.” (282)

Papa’s blunt assessment of *Chopin’s Prelude* is just right: “Stupid and untalented” (xvii).

The *story* of family members having written “counterstories” in response to the great writer’s disturbing novella is biographically important and could be very amusing in fiction. But, having read *Song without Words* and *Chopin’s Prelude*, our only benefit is knowing now that we weren’t missing anything.

Part two begins with the section “Ruminations on Tolstoy’s *The Kreutzer Sonata*”; a selection of a dozen quotations by various readers seems skimpy. This is an instance where a typical old-school Norton Anthology would do a better classroom job by including actual literary criticism. Katz places Tolstoy’s “Epilogue to *The Kreutzer Sonata*” in the second section as well as the three-page unremarkable fiction fragment by Tolstoy from the 1860s entitled “The Wife Murderer.”

Sofia Andreyevna’s and Lev L’vovich’s recollections of Tolstoy’s writing of the novel are redundant if one reads daughter Alexandra’s better, clearer account, which is included, but only *after* theirs. The excerpts from Tolstoy’s letters and diaries are relevant but much briefer than what Leo Wiener, in 1904, extracted from Tolstoy’s letters and diaries (unhelpfully only dated as a whole as “188–1890”) and appended to his translation as “On the Relation between the Sexes.” (Wiener’s selections include this Wilde-like gem, which Oscar of course would have polished into humor: “One must always marry just as one dies, that is, only when it is not possible to do otherwise” (465).) An all-inclusive collection of *everything* Tolstoy said and wrote about the novella would’ve served Katz’s volume better than the spare clippings from Lev’s and Sofia Andreyevna’s diaries and letters. Great-(great-?)grandson Andrey Tolstoy’s Afterword is of no literary value.

Katz’s short introduction to the book is good and his translation of *The Kreutzer Sonata* is fine, but how is his translation any better than copyright-free versions by Aylmer Maude (who

includes a 21-page appendix of “Readings of the Lithograph” that offers variants) or by Wiener or the 2009 one by Pevear and Volokhonsky? Here are a couple of the famous or startling sentences with Katz’s and earlier translations:

Сердце вдруг сжалось, остановилось и потом заколотило, как молотком. Главное чувство, как и всегда, во всякой злости, было—жалость к себе. (PSS 27: 56)

“My heart suddenly contracted, stopped, and then started thumping like a hammer. The main feeling, as always in any rage, was self-pity.” (Katz 49)

“My heart suddenly contracted, stopped, and then began to beat like a hammer. My chief feeling, as usual whenever I was enraged, was one of self-pity.” (Maude 179)

“My heart was suddenly wrung, stopped, then began to pound like a hammer. The main thing, as always in any anger, was pity for myself.” (Pevear and Volokhonsky 141)

“My heart was compressed and stopped, and then began beat as with a hammer. The chief feeling, as during every rage, was that of compassion for myself.” (Wiener 382)

Я хотел бежать за ним, но вспомнил, что было бы смешно бежать в чулках за любовником своей жены, а я не хотел быть смешон, а хотел быть страшен. (PSS 27: 78)

“I wanted to chase after him, but remembered that it would be absurd to go running after my wife’s lover in my stocking feet, and I didn’t want to be ridiculous, I wanted to be terrifying.” (Katz 65)

“I wanted to run after him, but remembered that it was ridiculous to run after one’s wife’s lover in one’s socks; and I did not wish to be ridiculous but terrible.” (Maude 202)

“I wanted to run after him, but remembered that it would be ridiculous to go running after my wife’s lover in my stocking feet, and I didn’t want to be ridiculous, I wanted to be frightening.” (Pevear and Volokhonsky 158)

“I wanted to run after him, but recalled that it would be ridiculous to run after my wife’s lover in my socks, and I did not want to be ridiculous, I wanted to be terrible.” (Wiener 408)

Take your pick! I’d have a hard time, though, justifying why I needed my students to buy the whole new volume for the sake of *Whose Fault?*

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