

Daniel Rancour-Laferriere. *Tolstoy on the Couch: Misogyny, Masochism and the Absent Mother*. New York: New York University Press, 1998. Pp. viii + 270.

Tolstoy on the Couch is the latest in a series of psychoanalytic studies of Russian literature and culture by Daniel Rancour-Laferriere. That Rancour-Laferriere should be drawn to study Tolstoy is not surprising. Obsessed with his own psychology, and prone to self-revelatory excess, Tolstoy left ample record in both his diaries and his public pronouncements of his tortured spiritual development. His fictional work too is riddled with literary alter-egos representing his own spiritual conflicts and development. In *The Kreutzer Sonata*, the text that serves as the focal point for Rancour-Laferriere's study, the main hero espouses views that the author later chose to restate as his own. The intersection of literature and psychoanalysis that we encounter here is also historically grounded, in that *The Kreutzer Sonata* was written in the late 1880s, just at the time when our modern understanding of psychology and the unconscious was beginning to take shape. If Freud provided a theoretical framework in which to describe the entanglement of the psyche in the snares of sexual desire and expression, then Tolstoy's hero is one of the first literary representations of this modern, sexualized self. We can easily imagine Pozdnyshev serving as a case study for Freud: deeply disturbed psychologically, he displays readily discernible patterns of clinical abnormality. Tolstoy even seems to conceptualize the story as a case study, initially titling it *The Wife Killer*. It is in fact a very untraditional narrative, in many ways mimicking a long session of psychoanalytic confession, with the hero himself placed "on the couch."

Pozdnyshev is a more than willing analysand, but without a knowing analyst he neglects to provide information that would, in contemporary psychoanalysis, be sought in order to explain his sexual psychology. Rancour-Laferriere believes that this information can be found in the author's own biography, and thus interpolates extensively from Tolstoy's diaries, letters, and recorded

conversations. There are difficulties here, however. Just as Pozdnyshev is veiled in the darkness of his train compartment, fading in and out of view, effaced in the incoherence of his voice and story, so is the author veiled behind missing information, and by the devices of his literary intentions. Rancour-Laferriere wishes to show that these devices are transparent, and argues that they reveal how his intentions are grounded in Tolstoy's own aberrant psychology.

Pozdnyshev is transfigured from the representational into the living, apparently moved by events from an extratextual past that haunts his subconscious. At one point Rancour-Laferriere comments: "It is difficult to avoid the impression that Pozdnyshev is thinking of his own (never once mentioned) mother, who probably did not or could not breast-feed him, as he contemplates the morality of women whose low-cut dresses partially expose their breasts, and in particular as he obsessively ruminates on the behaviour of his (never once mentioned) wife." At other times the rhetoric seems to resemble that of a criminal investigation, rather than a psychological one, and Rancour-Laferriere approaches Pozdnyshev as if he were the perpetrator of a real crime, rather than a representational one. This investiture is revealing, for it emerges from Rancour-Laferriere's agenda—ultimately he wishes, as his title suggests, to place Tolstoy himself on the couch, and to hold him accountable for his transgressions. The Pozdnyshev who rises from the confessional couch at the end of the story, the one who appears to be invested with all of Tolstoy's own insight into what he has experienced, is not properly enlightened and self-aware. If he were to remarry, he "probably would kill again," Rancour-Laferriere argues; for this reason he, and his author, need psychoanalytic therapy.

There is some validity in this identification of author and hero; Tolstoy himself made this clear by defending Pozdnyshev's views in the "Afterword" to the text. Importantly, however, he identified with the views, not the actions, of his hero. Those actions, Tolstoy argued, stemmed from Pozdnyshev's not having foreseen the consequences of his sexual involvement with his wife.

For Rancour-Laferriere, Pozdnyshev emerges from his experience with "insight" that is every bit as murderous as the ignorance it displaces, and his views and actions cannot be so neatly separated. There is an abiding continuity at work according to Rancour-Laferriere: he sees Pozdnyshev/Tolstoy's sexual philosophy as inherently misogynistic, and therefore only sublimating what the murder accomplishes. This equation stimulates an interrogation not only of the text, but also of its sources in Tolstoy's own biography, and of the ways in which the beliefs it expressed played out in the later years of Tolstoy's marriage. To a considerable extent, Rancour-Laferriere's reading emerges from his own belief system, which confronts Tolstoy's with all the polemical passion that has characterized the reception of *The Kreutzer Sonata* since its appearance more than one hundred years ago.

Some readers will not find this approach appealing. Many find the meaning of the text precisely within the narrative tension that Rancour-Laferriere attempts to disrupt here. Tolstoy is not Pozdnyshev, after all, and to so completely identify him with his character deprives the text of much of the richness that lies in the gray area between reality and representation. Others will object to Rancour-Laferriere's expectation that Tolstoy's ideas and behaviour conform to current sexual "norms." Tolstoy, who lived long before the Hite Report, Masters and Johnson, and even Havelock Ellis, regarded his unhappy sexual relations with his wife differently than we would today. He was certainly not the only one to view chastity as a solution to his dilemma, as he was so fond of illustrating to his contemporaries by means of pointing to Russian and American sectarianism. Still others will raise the point, to be discussed below, that for Tolstoy chastity was the solution to a problem that was not only sexual in nature, but had to do with the greater moral topography of the self. From this point of view the centering of sexuality as the cipher of Tolstoy's psyche and moral universe is potentially limiting.

Even if one does accept the psychoanalytic premise of the study, there are considerable obstacles that the author must face. As Ran-

cour-Laferriere attempts to construct the central narrative of his exploration of Tolstoy's psyche, that of his loss of his mother when he was less than two years old, he is confronted by the paucity of information available to him, a limit which forces him to cast his material in as suggestive a light as possible. Using contemporary studies on child psychology and the effects of the "absent mother," he attempts to demonstrate that this event was critical in shaping Tolstoy's attitudes toward women, sexuality, and child-rearing. The death of his mother proved to the young Tolstoy, Rancour-Laferriere argues, that he was "unlovable and inferior," leading to narcissism and a lifelong battle with low self-esteem, and causing him to hate her (while of course loving her at the same time) for this abandonment. Tolstoy's attitude toward women, and more particularly toward the issues of breastfeeding and sexual intercourse, he suggests, was likewise formed under the influence of the trauma of losing his mother. There is certainly abundant evidence, in his own diaries and comments to others, of what Tolstoy himself referred to as his "cult" for his mother, and Rancour-Laferriere does a thorough job of producing this material. His interpretation of how this mother complex forms Tolstoy's views on women and sexuality centres on certain ontogenetic particulars—his mother died at that period in his life when Tolstoy should have been nursing at her breast, but had instead been given over to the care of a wet nurse. This freedom from her maternal responsibility allows her to be sexual with her husband once more, leading to the birth of Tolstoy's sister Maria, the consequence of which, in Tolstoy's understanding of events, was the loss of his mother's life (though this occurred several months after the birth of Maria). *The Kreutzer Sonata*, then, becomes an artistic exorcism of these demons; Tolstoy's belief system, as articulated by his literary hero, represents the misogyny and masochism that were born of this painful experience. Tolstoy, as Rancour-Laferriere argues, attempts "to master the trauma of the death of his mother by having had Pozdnyshev actively cause the death to happen."

While this is a fascinating narrative, the task

of supporting it through the biographical material proves considerably problematic. As Rancour-Laferriere works to give his argument interpretive depth, we feel him grasping for this material, and, at times, bending it into signifying dimensions that belie his own designs upon Tolstoy's psyche. At times his arguments rest too heavily upon semantic distinctions that might not operate on the psychic level that interests him: attempting to show significant lapses in Tolstoy's memory of his mother, for instance, he wonders that Tolstoy should have asserted that there existed no portrait of his mother, when in fact a girlhood silhouette (hardly a portrait) of her had been preserved. He also makes much of Tolstoy's claim that his mother died when he was one-and-a-half years old, when he was in fact almost two years of age. A comment by Tolstoy upon the occasion of meeting his future daughter-in-law (who shared the name and patronymic of his mother)—that now there would be a third "Maria Nikolaevna," is supposed to suggest that for Tolstoy his mother is still alive. Tolstoy writes that he never heard anything bad about his mother, to which Rancour-Laferriere responds that he knew that she was physically unattractive. He seems not to consider that Tolstoy might have been concerned primarily with her moral qualities.

It seems quite possible that none of these remarks represents the sort of Freudian slippage that Rancour-Laferriere seeks. Reading these passages in *Tolstoy on the Couch*, we can feel the therapist lean forward in his own chair, pushing his interlocutor along his own narrative path. Equally troubling are attempts to fashion Tolstoy's subconscious into a linguistic backwash of double-entendres. "Kr. Son.," an abbreviation for *The Kreutzer Sonata* used by Tolstoy in his diary, is read at one point as an "unconscious pun" (a bilingual one at that) referring to the 'Kreuz' (cross) of Sonia. A description by Tolstoy of his childhood relationship to nature is said to encrypt his feelings toward his absent mother, in part because the word for nature shares a common root (*rod'*) with words relating to childbirth. When Tolstoy's desire to be buried in the place of the "green stick" is connected to his birth on a green

leather couch, we feel that Lev Nikolaevich has been abducted into a Freudian master narrative that does considerable violence to his own standards of rhetorical credibility.

This master narrative offers a certain coherence to the ideas expressed in *The Kreutzer Sonata*, which have seemed so contradictory to readers with a more philosophical orientation. These same readers may find something troubling in this neatness, however. What do we make, for instance, of the contiguity of Tolstoy's ideas on sexuality with his pacifism, anarchy, religious heterodoxy, vegetarianism, and non-violence? For Rancour-Laferriere, Tolstoy's rejection of alcohol, tobacco, and meat are masochistic renunciations of the oral gratification that was denied him at his mother's breast as a child. The more ponderous notions of "unity" or "brotherhood," toward which all of these views incline, suggest a more complex picture, one that might more fully incorporate Tolstoy's adult experience, and his readings of philosophy and religion. (Rancour-Laferriere clearly has little patience for this latter alternative—at one point he refers to Tolstoy's efforts to articulate a Christian response to his moral sufferings as "quasi-theological drivel.")

Religious orientation is not a privileged realm impervious to the insights of psychoanalysis, but it should be remembered that Tolstoy adopted a strategy for spiritualizing the body that was common to religious traditions the world over, from Christianity to Buddhism to Russian and American sectarianism. Rancour-Laferriere views the text not in this context, however, but in that of his notion of normative behaviour ("most of Tolstoy's listeners and readers, he tells us, are ordinary, normal") that are explicitly coloured by our contemporary constructs of sexual relations. This diachronic confrontation is at times jarring: when toward the end of the book the author reminds us that Tolstoy was deeply wounded by his "abandoning, sexually active mother," I found myself wondering (facetiously, of course) if such ideas were admissible even into the subconscious of someone living in Tolstoy's time.

Tolstoy's failure to live up to these norms in his own marriage is also a target of Rancour-

Laferriere's critique, as the book closes with a chapter devoted exclusively to a defence of Tolstoy's wife, S. A. Bers. Tolstoy is blamed for her mental instability in her later years—it is reactive, based on his husbandly neglect. (Rancour-Laferriere appears to view the male as the essentially proactive subject, just as he accuses Tolstoy of doing.) Here, of course, he has a valuable ally in Tolstoy himself, who felt a deep sense of responsibility for the unhappiness of his wife, blaming himself for corrupting her as an innocent young woman. But Rancour-Laferriere inverts Tolstoy's own guilt, viewing his refusals to engage in sexual relations with his wife as sadistic, and suggesting that her unhappiness may have stemmed not from sexual excess, but rather from neglect.

Whether or not this was the case is no longer discernible for the scholar of today, just as there is a tremendous amount that we don't know about the childhood experiences that shaped the psychology of Tolstoy. Though Rancour-Laferriere does consider the possible influences of Tolstoy's various "maternal" stand-ins, who were involved in his upbringing even before his mother's death, there is, again, very little information with which to work. As he attempts to make the famous leather couch at Iasnaia Poliana into a locus of psychoanalytic inquiry, he encounters not Tolstoy himself, but a body of textual evidence, which, like creases in the surface of that couch, can give only a glimpse into what might have transpired there. The Tolstoy who lay there as a newborn is lost to us, as are the feelings that were nurtured in the depths of his psyche as a result of many other childhood experiences that left no visible crease on this surface. Rancour-Laferriere does an admirable job of illuminating some of the more obscure features of that topography, and has offered some provocative interpolations of missing data. His work is marked by the creativity that is required of this enterprise; it is an imaginative exploration that is by its very nature, however, open to questioning.

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I. B. Remizov. *L. N. Tolstoi: Dialogi vo vremeni*. Tula: Izdatel'stvo Tul'skogo gosudarstvennogo pedagogicheskogo universiteta im. L. N. Tolstogo, 1998. Pp. 302.

The author begins his study—actually a compendium of articles on three subjects—by calling for a more nuanced reading of Tolstoy's spiritual legacy than he argues still prevails in today's Russia. Remizov urges his readers to put aside their image of Tolstoy as the purveyor of a simplifying, patriarchal dogma, and to recognize the complex humanism of his subject. He suggests that readers take into account the dialectical interplay of personal experience, worldview, and artistic vision in the fiction and philosophy of the late Tolstoy. As Remizov seeks to demonstrate in the essays in this book, Tolstoy's philosophy remains centred around the individual, even as it investigates ethical universals. In readings of "The Raid" [Nabeg] and *Resurrection*, for instance, Remizov analyzes Tolstoy's use of linkages, contrasts, and juxtapositions that lend multidimensionality to the authorial position. He argues that in "The Raid," the characters live out various approaches to the problem of choice, as Tolstoy explores the possibility that there exists a harmonious correspondence between freedom and necessity. Remizov's chapter on *Resurrection* sets out to correct Bakhtin's perspective on Tolstoy's monologism, arguing that Tolstoy achieves dialogism when he represents Maslova and Nekhliudov as hypostases of one idea. Remizov is particularly concerned to show that Tolstoy conceived of intellectual inquiry as a continual process of searching, and that he never intended to monopolize the truth.

Drawing on the marginalia and notes on volumes in the library at Iasnaia Poliana, Remizov also devotes separate chapters to Tolstoy's reception of Plato, Montaigne, Gogol, Vladimir Solov'ev, and Dostoevsky. Although the information Remizov provides about the marginal commentaries is certainly of interest to specialists, his treatment of Tolstoy's dialogue with other writers seems aimed at non-specialists. He makes little use of secondary sources and, while thorough and