

Genre and the Temptations of Narrative Desire in *Kreutzer Sonata*

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As Tolstoy was completing *Anna Karenina* in 1877, he began to experience the spiritual crisis that he later chronicled in *A Confession*. This led to his well-known repudiation of the vast majority of his previous works and a period during which he abandoned fiction entirely, writing only religious works. When he returned to fiction in 1882, it was to write a series of didactic novellas or *povesti*, *Death of Ivan Il'ich* (1886), *The Devil* (1889), *Kreutzer Sonata* (1889), *Father Sergius* (1890) and *Master and Man* (1895). These works are marked by an uneasy orientation towards their own fictional status. Characterized by a dogmatic narrative voice and the use of the kind of authoritative non-novelistic statements that Gary Saul Morson has called “absolute language,” they seem to attempt to avoid the ambivalence and moral equivocations that Tolstoy had begun to associate with the realm of fiction (“Absolute Language” 667–687). *Kreutzer Sonata* stands out from the rest of the 1880s–1890s novellas in its narrative framing: The dogmatic voice is not that of the narrator or implied author, but rather that of the protagonist, Pozdnyshv. A murderer who claims to have been driven to kill his wife by the unbearable nature of relations between the sexes, a moralist whose ideas about marriage and sexuality are unmistakably shared by his creator, and a

narrator with contempt for novelistic description, Pozdnyshv is, on the one hand, a stand-in for Tolstoy’s own ambivalent attitude toward fictional narrative in this period. On the other hand, Pozdnyshv seems to embody the very ambivalence that so disturbs Tolstoy. As the story of a narrative transaction between Pozdnyshv and the unnamed frame narrator, *Kreutzer Sonata* dramatizes the act of storytelling itself, forcing the reader to consider Pozdnyshv’s and Tolstoy’s narrative motivations as well as his or her responses to the story being told.

This article builds on the studies of Charles Isenberg and Kåre Johan Mjør in its examination of how *Kreutzer Sonata*’s status as frame narrative binds together Tolstoy’s project with that of his protagonist, linking the act of murder with the narration of that act, embedding in the act of narration the reanimation of the desire that originally led to the murder, and implicating Tolstoy and the reader in the narrative fulfillment of that desire (Isenberg 79–108; Mjør 67–105). My study follows in the tradition of scholarship that sees *Kreutzer Sonata* as reflecting Tolstoy’s anxieties about the relationship between art, adultery, and fictional truth. These anxieties would find their clearest expression in his 1898 treatise, *What Is Art?* (Coetzee 195–205; Rischin 43–54;

Herman 20–36). Unlike these other critics, however, I argue for *Kreutzer Sonata* as an expression of Tolstoy's discomfort with narrative fiction itself, specifically with what Peter Brooks has referred to as its "erotics," the way that narrative, particularly in longer genres such as the novel, arouses in its reader a desire to know the end of the story that is akin to sexual desire (37). I place this discomfort in the context of the contested realm of genre in Tolstoy's post-conversion phase, particularly his move from the novel to the didactic novella (*povest'*) in the 1880s-1890s.¹ I argue that *Kreutzer Sonata* constitutes an attempt to banish the erotic potentiality from the sphere of narrative even as Tolstoy himself recognizes the impossibility of that goal within a work of narrative fiction. The novella also stands as a formal atonement for *Anna Karenina*, the clearest example of Tolstoy's own earlier narrative promiscuity. Even as he embraces a generic form that seeks to resist the dangers of his novel of adultery, Tolstoy keeps *Anna Karenina* continually in mind. Structured within *Kreutzer Sonata*, with its injunction against adultery, is a warning about the analogous dangers of narrative itself, and above all of the seductions of the novel.

Prohibiting Desire: The Epigraphs of *Kreutzer Sonata*

Kreutzer Sonata begins with a pair of epigraphs that make clear the story's didactic intent, framing it as an attack on uncontrolled sexuality.² The first epigraph, "But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her in his heart already," is from Matthew 5: 28 (PSS 27: 7; the cited text comes from Katz's translation of Tolstoy's epigraph). The meaning of this simple prohibition of adultery is elaborated through the juxtaposition of the second epigraph—again, in Katz's translation—from Matthew 19: 10–12:

His disciples say unto him, If the case of the man be so with *his* wife, it is not good to marry.

But he said unto them, All *men* cannot receive this saying, save *they* to whom it is given.

For there are some eunuchs, which were so born from *their* mother's womb: and there are some eunuchs, which were made eunuchs of men: and there be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He that is able to receive *it*, let him receive *it*. (PSS 27: 7)

This Biblical passage comes from a discussion of divorce between Christ and some Pharisees sent to test him. The Pharisees ask Christ whether divorce is lawful. He answers that a man and his wife become one flesh under God, and no man can separate them. When they respond that Moses commanded that a man divorce his wife, Christ answers that anyone who divorces his wife for reasons other than sexual immorality and then remarries has committed adultery. Tolstoy picks up the passage when the Pharisees suggest that under such circumstances, it is perhaps better not to marry. He thus excises the specific context of the injunction against divorce and emphasizes instead Christ's radical answer, which seems to call for the annihilation of all desire, emphasizing the moral imperative of celibacy, as symbolized by self-castration.

This radical lesson is emphasized within the body of *Kreutzer Sonata*, where the first epigraph is invoked explicitly, and the second implicitly. When the narrator objects to Pozdnyshev's fulminations against the sexual act, suggesting that reproduction is the aim of human life and that absolute celibacy would lead to the end of the human race, Pozdnyshev insists that the aim of life is not merely the propagation of the species but rather "goodness, righteousness, love," rearticulating the argument that lies at the heart of Tolstoy's own non-fictional work, "On Life" (PSS 27: 29–31; 26: 313–443). Pozdnyshev subsequently insists that Matthew 5: 28 "doesn't just apply to the wives of other men, but expressly and above all to our own,"

thus bringing the first epigraph to bear on his own story and admitting his own guilt at having been sexually attracted to his wife (PSS 27: 31). This aligns author and protagonist, making Pozdnyshv the voice of Tolstoy's own views on sexuality. Lest there be any doubt about Tolstoy's own position, he reiterated it in the "Afterword to *Kreutzer Sonata*," which forms what Isenberg has called a tripartite homiletic together with the epigraph and the story (PSS 27: 79–92; Isenberg 80). A simple prohibition on adultery thus becomes reconceived as a fictional representation of the dangers of all desire within, as well as outside of, marriage.

Yet there is a certain irony in the very fact of fiction and its devices being marshaled against the force of desire. In its invitation to see the world through the eyes of another, fiction relies on the reader's desire to know the end of the story, on the reader's desire to understand the situation of narrator or protagonist. As Isenberg points out, a call for self-castration at the opening of a work of fiction comes dangerously close to a suggestion that the narrative about to begin should itself be silenced. By drawing attention to problems of narrative motivation at the very opening of the text, the epigraphs to *Kreutzer Sonata* hint at connections between sexual desire and narrative that will become clear only later in the story.

The epigraphs frame *Kreutzer Sonata* as an argument against sexual desire and the institution of marriage. The argument is taken up immediately in the narrative frame, a conversation about marriage among a group of strangers on a train (PSS 27: 7–15). The passengers give voice to a number of stock contemporary responses to the problem of marriage until their animated conversation is abruptly silenced by the interjection of Pozdnyshv, recently released from a prison sentence for the murder of his wife (PSS 27: 15). Rebuffed by all but one of the other passengers, Pozdnyshv offers to tell his story to that one remaining listener, the frame narrator. The opening of the narrative contract, his offer, "Would

you like me to tell you how that love led me to what happened to me?" emphasizes the link between his own story and the conversation in the train, presenting his account as a tragic proof of the crisis of contemporary marriage (PSS 27: 16). Yet Pozdnyshv's account turns out to implicate far more than just marriage. It is an exposure of the entirely false moral and social foundations on which marriage and family are built, of the physical passions that have distracted people from the true spiritual aims of life (PSS 27: 30). Pozdnyshv finds culpability in the entire structure of expectations around sexuality and its role in marriage that have become "second nature" to those of his own social background (PSS 27: 22–23): in the conflation of beauty with virtue; in the medical establishment's collusion in the pursuit of sexual pleasure as separate from procreation; and in the privileging of convenience and personal comfort over moral and spiritual considerations (PSS 27: 21, 39–40, 47). At the same time, Pozdnyshv's account seems calculated to absolve himself of the murder of his wife, thus creating a profoundly morally problematic subtext to his story and undermining his own authority as spokesman for Tolstoy and his beliefs. As Aldanov suggests, Pozdnyshv blames himself not for the murder but rather for the sexual relationship with his wife (51). He presents himself as a perfectly ordinary member of the gentry who entered into a normal marriage, the experience of which ultimately led him to murder his wife. He seeks to show that he could not have acted differently, constantly insisting that, "all husbands who live as I did, must either live dissolutely, separate, or kill themselves or their wives as I did" (PSS 27: 50). The only thing that sets him apart from the crowd is the transformation he experienced while in prison, which led him to see marriage in its true light. He continually emphasizes the difference between his narrated and narrating selves, and his claims of transformation are an essential part of his own exoneration.

The theories of sex and gender relations backed up by pseudo-scientific evidence that dominate the first half of the story serve as the explanatory narrative for Pozdnyshev's rewriting of his past. They are presented as proof of his own transformation since the murder, of his own liberation from the yoke of desire and his present state of enlightenment. Yet his account changes radically halfway through the work, with the appearance of the violinist, Trukhachevsky, who Pozdnyshev imagines is the seducer of his wife. Here Tolstoy shifts his critique of society's sickness from the level of content to the level of form. Pozdnyshev's generalizations about sex and marriage are replaced by an agitated account of his act of murder. This agitation is proof and expression of his renewed infection with the very symptoms he had sought to diagnose, the sexual jealousy that caused him to kill his wife (PSS 27: 52–78). His theories fade into the background and Pozdnyshev becomes increasingly agitated by the memory of his actions, losing control over the process of narration.

As he relives the past through the narration of his marriage, that past gradually begins to infect the present. The feverish passion that precipitated the murder is reciprocated on the level of the narration as Pozdnyshev re-experiences the violent desire that caused him to kill his wife. This recurrence of desire is just one more weapon in the ideological arsenal that Tolstoy trains on society; he shows that even Pozdnyshev himself is not immune from the influences of the corrupt ideas that he spent the first half of his story attempting to expose.

Pozdnyshev's narration is accompanied by the consumption of very strong tea, which acts as a stimulant. The effects of the tea are increasingly felt during the course of the narration by both Pozdnyshev and the narrator himself, and intensify the nervous energy and agitation that propel the story forward (PSS 27: 16, 20). As Pozdnyshev finally reveals the circumstances of the murder, the story of his jailhouse conversion fades away, and

the gap between his narrated and narrating selves is erased. The collapse of his narrative in the face of the truth of his wife's death leaves a troubling question mark over his wife's death and the true culpability of the social system he seeks to hold responsible.

Narrative Desire in the Novel and the Novella

A work as concerned with the problems of sexual desire, death, and narration as *Kreutzer Sonata* seems ripe for consideration within the terms of psychoanalytic narratology. One of the primary proponents of this critical approach, Peter Brooks, argues that desire plays a crucial role in shaping narrative structure (37–61). Brooks takes his model of desire from Sigmund Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, with its vision of man as governed by two competing drives: Eros, the desiring instinct, and Thanatos, the death instinct (37).

For Freud, Eros is a libidinal creative energy that is more than just sexual desire, but which is expressed in desire (50). It opposes the entropy and stasis of the death instinct. For Brooks, narrative is structured by two analogous principles: one that demands movement, change, transformation, and the other, which is oriented towards closure. The reader's experience of narrative is informed by the tensions between these two principles. Narratives tell stories of erotic desire, but they also arouse in their readers a desire that is at once erotic and epistemic, a desire to know the story's ending. They often begin in what Brooks describes as a state of erotic arousal, attempting to elicit the reader's desire to know more through the presentation of some kind of epistemic or erotic lure (38). Soon the reader becomes overcome by curiosity and the desire to understand, an impulse that leads irrevocably to the end of the story, the moment when closure brings the promise of meaning to the whole.

Yet, as Walter Benjamin has argued, narrative resolution is also a way of exploring the totality of

perspective that is normally blocked off from us by the fact of our own mortality (100–101). Since we cannot access the ending to our own story, the resolution of another story stands in for the finalized, meaningful perspective on life that death normally prevents us from accessing. It furthermore offers the retrospective knowledge that is denied to us in our own lives. Our desire for the end and the determinant meaning that it offers is always tempered by our knowledge that the end is marked by death and silence.

Thus, for Brooks, narratives are powered not just by desire for the resolution of the ending, but also by a deferral of that resolution (3–23). The narrative twists and turns that defer endings reflect at once fear of finality and pleasure at the intensification of desire that postponement brings. This combination of longing for the absolute knowledge of the ending, and the awareness that death is the price of this knowledge, is the engine of narrative desire. The satisfaction of curiosity provided both by sexual climax and by narrative climax (ending) stands in for the inaccessible knowledge that comes with death. Just as erotic desire is intensified by a long deferral of the pleasure of consummation, so the reader's narrative desire is inflamed by the delaying tactics employed by a story's author.

The dynamic of these two conflicting desires, one for the ending and the finality of death and the other for the pleasure of postponement, is most significant in long narrative genres such as the nineteenth-century novel. Here the length of the work means that the tensions between the impulse to continue the story and the orientation towards the ending are intensified, inflaming the reader's desire to know the ending. This desire grows proportionally in relation to the length of its deferral. The scope and complexity of the textual universe and the reader's lengthy epistemic investment in the story mean that the correspondence between the reader's own life and the life of the protagonist is even more marked.

The desire to know the ending becomes even more freighted with significance for the reader, even more markedly opposed to his or her longing for, and awareness of, the impossibility of accessing such a position of knowledge in relation to his or her own life.

Nowhere are narrative and erotic impulses as closely intertwined as in the novel of adultery, where the protagonist's erotic desire becomes a figure for the reader's desire to know the end of the story. Here the depiction of the act of adultery itself constitutes the narrative's first act of consummation, the first taste of the fruit of the tree of knowledge for both protagonists and readers, and thus the first foreshadowing of death. The adulterous protagonists' desire for one another is modeled in the reader's desire for the resolution of their relations. The social and moral tensions that the adulterous relationship creates serve to heighten the desire both of the adulterous lovers and of the reader, for whom the deferral of the inevitable discovery makes the anticipation of such an ending even more charged. In the novel of adultery, the narrative movement from beginning to end is rendered even more meaningful by the tangible finality of death that hangs over the ending. This model of desire is central to Tolstoy's own novel of adultery, *Anna Karenina*.

This dynamic became increasingly repellent to Tolstoy in later years and may have influenced his abandonment of the novel as a genre. His renunciation of the novelistic form coincided with the beginning of his demonization of sexual desire. According to a draft version of *A Confession*, he had begun to experience the brunt of the crisis that led to this renunciation in 1877, as he was completing work on *Anna Karenina* (PSS 23: 494). No work was more repugnant to him at the turn of the 1880s than *Anna Karenina*, which seemed to exemplify the false teachings he had propagated and the immoral subjects that he had exploited. In a letter to Vladimir Stasov of May 1881 he wrote, "Concerning *Karenina*, I assure you that for me

that abomination does not exist and that I am only annoyed that there are people who want this for some reason" (PSS 63: 61).

From 1877, the year he completed *Anna Karenina*, to 1889, when he began work on *Resurrection*, Tolstoy completed no novels. He turned instead to the didactic novella, which imposed a double set of constraints. He would be constrained narratively by the restrictions of a shorter form, and morally by the self-imposed limitations on subject matter and point of view dictated by his conscience. As Morson points out, in their insistence on using "absolute language," the didactic novellas seem to approach the status of anti-fictions ("Absolute Language" 667–687). Yet perhaps what they really aspire to is to complicate profoundly for the reader the experience of sharing the life of another, and the other vicarious pleasures that the novel seems to encourage. John Kopper has argued that a central aspect of the didactic novellas is the way in which they redefine the nature of the event in narrative, flouting the codes of narrative fiction ("Narrative of Sex" 171). Both *Death of Ivan Il'ich* and *Kreutzer Sonata* introduce the deaths around which they are structured at the outset, preempting the ending and forestalling both the reader's desire for an ending and its pleasurable deferral through the erasure of narrative suspense. Both make use of frame narrators and didactic narrative perspectives to challenge and provoke the reader out of complacency and into an active engagement with the text and the moral problems it poses, in a process that Shklovsky famously identified as "estrangement" or "defamiliarization" (6–9). Though Tolstoy could not entirely fortify his works against the possibility of arousing in his audience the vicarious pleasures of reading, he nonetheless sought to neutralize them by revealing their dangers and arming the reader against their seductions.

Central to *Kreutzer Sonata* is Tolstoy's depiction of an act of narration, the narrative

transaction that takes place between Pozdnyshv and the narrator. This depiction dramatizes the dangers and allure of narrative desire. In a discussion of Balzac's frame narratives, Brooks analyzes the particular ways in which desire is marshaled in the narrative transaction (216–238). Framed narratives stage the narrative situation, representing the perspective of the reader through the position of the frame narrator to whom the tale within a tale is told. The reader's narrative desire is figured in the frame narrator/listener's curiosity concerning the ending of the tale. Yet at the same time, the frame narrator is implicated in the telling of the story in a way that the reader is not.

Between the frame narrator (now narratee) and the storyteller (now narrator), a process takes place that Brooks likens to the process of transference in psychoanalysis (225–228). The act of narration fulfills a therapeutic function for the storyteller; it becomes a way of coming to terms with a traumatic past. The storyteller becomes the analysand, with the listener standing in as analyst. The presence of the listener means that the past can be safely revisited by the storyteller. The analysand, writes Brooks, like the fictional narrators of Balzac's framed narratives, "always has a story to tell, but it is always a story that is not good enough: links are missing, chronologies are twisted, the objects of desire are misnamed" (227). The story can be made whole and understood only with the help of the listener.

For Brooks transference is "at once the drive to make the story of the past present—to actualize past desire, and the countervailing pressure to make the history of this past definitively past: to make an end to its reproductive insistence in the present, to lead the analysand to the understanding that this past is indeed past, and then to incorporate this past as past, so that the life's story can once again progress" (227–228). The narrative transaction makes this process explicit, allowing the storyteller/analysand to gain control over the traumatic events of a fictional past and rewrite the

story with the active collaboration of the listener/analyst.

This model provides a crucial insight into the complex dynamic that animates the narrative transaction of *Kreutzer Sonata*. Like the transactions that Brooks examines in Balzac's novels and stories, the narrative transaction of *Kreutzer Sonata* treads a high-pressure tightrope-walk between reliving the past and putting it to rest (Mjør 95). Telling his story provides Pozdnyshv with the opportunity to revisit the traumatic past that has haunted him during his years of incarceration. Narrating his story on his own terms offers the dual possibilities of making sense of the past, and of making his wife's death ethically meaningful as part of a lesson on the evils of marriage that might prevent others from following the same path. The frame narrator is necessary to dramatize the narrative situation and to receive Pozdnyshv's lesson, but he plays a passive role in the narrative transaction. He does not help Pozdnyshv to put his past behind him; instead he helps perpetuate the latter's self-deception, responding with questions only during Pozdnyshv's exposition of his theories and then listening coldly as the speaker lives through his experiences once again.

The listener is silent because there is no space for his response in Pozdnyshv's transaction. Pozdnyshv tells his story not for the narrator but rather for himself and for Tolstoy, for his account has a metaliterary framing. The close connections between author and protagonist introduced by the accord of text and epigraph are backed up by Pozdnyshv's frequently stated mistrust of novels and insistence on the non-novelistic status of his account. His rejoinder to his fellow traveler's claims that erotic love, or one person's preference for another, can last for a lifetime is to insist that this happens only in novels and never in real life (PSS 27: 13). His complaint that the pre-marital sexual escapades of heroes are never represented in novels recalls Tolstoy's own treatment of Kitty's

revolted discovery of Levin's sexual past before their wedding in *Anna Karenina* (PSS 27: 21).

Pozdnyshv is a murderer, a morally suspect mouthpiece for his creator; yet in his rejection of the novel and its assumptions, as well as in his theories of sex and marriage, he seems to articulate Tolstoy's own fears. Like his creator, Pozdnyshv is aware of the dangerous power of the act of narration. Yet he is prepared to marshal that power for the sake of exposing the false foundations of marriage and society itself. He takes refuge in the comfort of an ordered narrative, telling the narrator, "If I am to tell it, I must tell how and why I married and what kind of man I was before I married" (PSS 27: 16). Yet he is also ambivalent towards the act of narration; he first responds to the narrator's concern that telling his story might prove painful to him with the admission that keeping silence is painful, but then prevails upon him to reiterate his willingness to hear the story. This ambivalence signals the presence of Pozdnyshv's own repressed desire that will emerge during the course of his narration.

Representing Pozdnyshv's Desire

Pozdnyshv's story is structured by the two conflicting desires that Brooks identifies: the desire for the ending that will give meaning to his story, and the desire to defer what will only reaffirm his own guilt. His story articulates the conflict between his need to re-experience the murder through the act of narration so as to give his wife's death narrative shape and therefore retrospective meaning, and the equally strong impulse to rewrite the story of that death in a way that will put to death his own narrative desire, that will enact a process of narrative self-castration. His attempts to inscribe his own story into a larger vision of the relations between men and women are undertaken not only with the aim of self-exoneration, not only to convince the narrator of the desirability of his goal of universal chastity, but also in an attempt to

repress the desire that he re-experiences through the retelling of the story of the murder.

Pozdnyshev's narration is characterized throughout by a vacillation between the impulses of narrative deferral and narrative momentum, reflecting the dynamics of Brooks' model of narrative desire. He employs various different strategies of narrative retardation, theorizing and generalizing, appeals to statistics, and a tendency to raise his own particular example to the status of universal law. Mjør points out that the digressions are entirely on the level of Pozdnyshev's narration; the narration of *Kreutzer Sonata* is linear and episodic (81–82). His rant against the malign influence of doctors on women and on the young, his provocative analogies between wives and prostitutes, and young people and forced cucumbers are all employed in an effort to defer the moment when he must introduce to his interlocutor the character of Trukhachevsky, and then recount the violinist's meeting with his wife and the chain of events that lead to the murder. Yet at the same time Pozdnyshev's narration is occasionally overtaken by a feverish staccato forward motion such as the accounts of his courtship of his future wife, his honeymoon, and the jealousy that he experienced when his wife ceased breast-feeding her children and became sexually available once more. Here the narration foreshadows the frenzy that will accompany the retelling of the appearance of the violinist and the arousal of his jealousy.

The introduction of the figure of Trukhachevsky marks a turning point in the story, as Pozdnyshev's desire for narrative resolution overcomes his desire for narrative deferral. The gap between experienced past and narrating present is erased, and Pozdnyshev begins to re-inhabit the inflamed passions that led him to murder. His desire breaks free of its moorings and emerges in the narration as he remembers and re-experiences his own response to Trukhachevsky's relations with his wife. Once his wife is rendered a desired object

once more through the power of the violinist's lust, his own interest in her is reinvigorated; he imagines her as different, as having her own story, a narrative from which he is himself excluded. Here Tolstoy shows the dangerous power of the fiction he is creating, the dangers of immersing oneself in the story of another. Pozdnyshev becomes a reader of that other story, and his newly awakened desire for his wife is overwritten and compounded by his desire to see that story resolved. Its logical endpoint, the consummation of the relations of his wife and Trukhachevsky, appears as doubly precipitous: It would both render his wife desirable and at the same time block off his own relations with her forever. He perceives the electric current of attraction between them signaling both narrative potential and sexual connection, and when his wife's initial refusal to play with the violinist threatens to derail the momentum, Pozdnyshev becomes irritated and demands Trukhachevsky's immediate return (*PSS 27: 53–54*). The new narrative that had been awakened by his wife's renewed sexual availability is transformed by the appearance of Trukhachevsky as the previously free-floating force of her sexuality contacts its intended object. Even as he recognizes this narrative scenario beginning to develop between his wife and the violinist, Pozdnyshev is unable to prevent the drama from playing out. He both wants it and does not want it.

When he is away in the country, Pozdnyshev suddenly realizes that the glances exchanged by his wife and Trukhachevsky during the recital of "Kreutzer Sonata" represent the narrative consummation of their relationship, the beginning of the story of their mutual interactions (*PSS 27: 63–64*). The rewriting of the scene of the recital represents Pozdnyshev's attempt to take the reins of the narrative, to place at the center of the story a scene whose significance he had not quite realized at the time (*PSS 27: 64*). Here multiple levels of consummation merge into one another: the union of the musicians, the violent combustion of

Pozdnyshév's own desire to control the outcome of that union, and the coming together of his narrated and narrating selves in the expectation of the imminent fulfillment of narrative desire in the act of murder. This unification of perspectives is finally achieved when Pozdnyshév remembers his long return journey by rail (PSS 27: 65–68), when frame and narrative merge in the double image of the train, as he completely re-enters his previous experiencing self and relives the experience through his act of narration (Isenberg 83). The location of the narrated and narrating selves becomes one as the narrator remarks that in the half-light of morning he is no longer able to make out the figure of Pozdnyshév, while the tone of the narration achieves fever pitch (PSS 27: 65).

Seated in the train, Pozdnyshév yields once more to the emotional dynamics that had led him to commit the murder. A potent symbol of the destructive symptoms of modernity, the train is an appropriate setting for the barrage of images of his wife's infidelities that inflame his fevered imagination (PSS 27: 65–66). These pictures constitute narrative scenarios that completely absorb Pozdnyshév: "I could not tear myself away from them; I couldn't help looking at them, couldn't efface them, and couldn't help looking at them" (PSS 27: 65–66). They model the narrative scenarios of *Kreutzer Sonata* itself, into which the reader is drawn as irrevocably and as menacingly as Pozdnyshév himself. As Charles Isenberg points out, the use of a train for narrative layering is itself a device taken from *Anna Karenina* (82–83). This evocation of Tolstoy's own novel of adultery serves to draw attention to the perilous risks associated both with the depiction of adultery and with the exploitation of narrative desire. Here the murderous fantasies of the narrated Pozdnyshév, the narrative desire of the reader, the narrator, and Pozdnyshév himself, and Tolstoy's recollection of his novelistic sins all collide in a combustible cocktail that sends the plot careering forward,

encouraged by the thrust of the movement of the train.³

The Dangerous Allure of Narrative Desire

Some critics have analyzed the *Kreutzer Sonata* in the light of the ideas expressed in Tolstoy's 1898 treatise *What Is Art?*, which he was working on at the same time (Møller 9–10; Baer 39–46). Tolstoy's treatise argues for a definition of art as a communication channel between the artist and his audience, a medium through which the artist "infects" (заражает) his audience with feelings which he himself has experienced (PSS 30: 27–204; Emerson 237–241; Scanlan 657–677). It is this process of "infection" (заражение) or "contagion" (заразительность) that lies at the root of the work of art's effectiveness: "The stronger the infection, the better is the art" (PSS 30: 149).

For Møller and others, *Kreutzer Sonata* is an example of the contagious artistic morality that is called for in the treatise, an embodiment of the three principles of originality of feeling, clarity, and sincerity according to which for Tolstoy the value of true art can be ascertained. Olga Matich has pointed out the ubiquity and potency in Tolstoy's works of the 1880s and 1890s of medical metaphors borrowed from degeneration theory to describe both carnal relations and the functioning of art (29–30, 48). The medical discourse of infection and contagion in *What Is Art?* serves as a model for conceptualizing the power of a work of art's relationship to its audience while warning of the dangers inherent in this process. The perils of this power in a work of "bad" art can be seen in the effects of the recital of the sonata on its audience in *Kreutzer Sonata*. The musical performance reveals the dangerous structural similarities between the effects of art and desire, similarities that were all too obvious to the author of *Anna Karenina*. Perhaps the idea of the contagious morality, something that the best works of art instill in their audience, can be seen as Tolstoy's attempt to harness the energies that texts arouse in their

readers and channel them into a morally acceptable form, to capture and control the dangerous power of narrative that is embodied within novels such as *Anna Karenina*, and turn it into a force for the good.

As David Herman points out, the risks inherent in the idea of artistic contagion were obvious to Tolstoy (33–34). The paradox at the heart of *Kreutzer Sonata* is that for Tolstoy and Pozdnyshv to convince the reader of the corruption inherent in the institution of marriage, to “infect” him or her with their radical program of chastity, it is necessary to mobilize the reader’s own narrative desire, to invest the reader in Pozdnyshv and his story. Yet once that mobilization has taken place, the truth of the murder is revealed. The jealousy that motivates the murder is recreated on the level of the narration, as Pozdnyshv remembers and re-experiences his erotic desire, channeling it into the telling of the story. The dangers of this mobilization are represented in the narration in Pozdnyshv’s own narrative desire, successfully repressed for half of the work, but then reignited by the appearance of Trukhachevsky. It is important to point out that in the final version of *Kreutzer Sonata*, unlike in the early drafts, there is no evidence of any adulterous relationship between Pozdnyshv’s wife and Trukhachevsky; the betrayal may be entirely in Pozdnyshv’s mind. Imagining it inflames Pozdnyshv’s and the reader’s narrative desires in ways that are similar and just as dangerous.

In embryonic form, the novel of adultery is embedded in *Kreutzer Sonata*, reminding Tolstoy of the un-expiated sins of his authorship of *Anna Karenina* and of the risks of narrative desire. By allowing Tolstoy to invoke his own culpability as author of the earlier novel of adultery, the double train image opens up the process of authorial atonement, even while alluding to the omnipresent danger that remains whenever narrative desire is awakened. It moreover points towards his paradoxical feelings about the novel. In 1889, when

Tolstoy was working on *Kreutzer Sonata*, *Anna Karenina* was on his mind. In a letter of that year written to G. A. Rusanov, he enumerated a number of scriptural and philosophical works that he claimed always to have in his possession, before confessing almost sheepishly to the continuing temptations of the novel:

All the same, I sometimes feel like writing, and just imagine, most often it is precisely a novel, a broad, free one like *Anna Karenina*, into which without any strain everything could go that I think I have understood from a new, unusual, and humanly interesting angle. The rumor about a novella [*povest*] has its foundations. (PSS 64: 235)

The story referred to here is *Kreutzer Sonata*. The juxtaposition of the two works is telling; Tolstoy’s dissatisfaction with his story plays out against his nostalgia for the narrative expanse of *Anna Karenina*. The description of the work as “broad” and “free” emphasizes both the sheer narrative scope of the novel and the creative liberation it brings. It suggests the mature Tolstoy’s longing for the unfettered creativity of the younger self who has not yet recognized the moral responsibilities that his older self knows govern his inspiration. But it also seems to point towards the textual energies of a novel such as *Anna Karenina*, where the distance between the beginning and the ending is several hundred pages, where arrival at the ending is so constantly deferred and so infinitely pleasurable. Within the terms of Brooks’ model of narrative as simultaneously inviting desire for the ending and inflaming that desire through narrative diversions and digressions that withhold and postpone the ending, *Anna Karenina* is a novel that takes narrative desire to a fever pitch. The way the text produces, marshals, and organizes desire points towards another kind of freedom in which the novel revels, the very freedom that the novella tries desperately to repress: the free play of erotic energies within narrative. Tolstoy has not forgotten

his moral objections to *Anna Karenina*, but he seems nostalgic for its formal freedom. The novel's formal plenitude allowed for its exploitation of narrative desire and was the source both of the work's moral taint and of its allure.

The murder scene represents the narrative climax of *Kreutzer Sonata*, the fulfillment of the dual desires of Pozdnyshév's narrated and narrating selves. It likewise offers the immediate annihilation of those desires, which is simultaneously the knowable ending towards which the reader's desire has, all along, been directed (Møller 14; Jackson 280–291). The moment that he relives the memory of the murder, the stakes are suddenly lowered, and he has nothing else to prove. As he describes the murderous act, he emphasizes his own clarity and determination, insisting that this is no crime of passion committed in the madness of the moment (PSS 27: 74). His refusal to recognize the power of his jealousy indicates his denial of his desire. He looks forward to the murder as a narrated event with the foresight of experience. His role as narrator allowed him to rewrite his enslavement to desire as premeditation. Yet by this time, the narration has belied the story concocted in accordance with the principles of the "moral revolution" Pozdnyshév experienced in prison. It is only after he sees the face of his dead wife that he feels remorse, a sentiment that is relived in the narration, the final stages of which are punctuated by sobs and ellipses (PSS 27: 77–78).

The stimulation of the tea has worn off, and Pozdnyshév's energies are spent. His narration ends with regret and silence. He no longer attempts to inscribe into his story any meaning other than the finality and futility of his wife's death. The irrevocable sense of an ending that he experiences as he watches his wife die is repeated at the end of the frame narrative; both the narration and the story end with the same words, with his plaintive plea for forgiveness (PSS 27: 78).

The redemptive claims of his formally revelatory theories of sex have been punctured by the process of narration and his final reoccupation of the role of jealous murderer of his own wife. Yet if Pozdnyshév seems to be broken by his act of narration, his ideas live on beyond *Kreutzer Sonata*, reiterated by Tolstoy himself in the "Afterword to *Kreutzer Sonata*."

Chastity as Ideal and Genre Compromise: The "Afterword to *Kreutzer Sonata*"

As the narrative transaction of *Kreutzer Sonata* is fulfilled, the past is made past, but Pozdnyshév remains unchanged by the story. He cannot move on. His theory of sex and marital relations is eclipsed by the buildup and aftermath of the wife's murder. If the narrative transaction fails to bring successful transference, fails to allow him to inscribe the story of his past into a redemptive present through its incorporation into a convincing program for sexual abstinence, then where does that leave Tolstoy's own attempt to disavow the narrative energies of his own earlier novel of adultery? This question is answered to some extent by Tolstoy's "Afterword to *Kreutzer Sonata*," written in April 1890 in response to the public debates over the story's sexual morality (PSS 27: 79–92; Møller 181–187). In the "Afterword," he begins by laying out five points that he claims are integral to the argument of the story. These include prohibitions on debauchery before or after marriage, on the use of contraception, on making children into playthings, and on elevating the importance of the sexual act above all other human aspirations. However, once he has set out these prohibitions, Tolstoy turns to the question of sex within marriage, arguing that marriage is not a Christian institution and insisting that complete chastity should be the goal for all Christians. He writes:

Chastity is neither a law nor a precept but an ideal, or rather one of the preconditions of an ideal. An ideal is only genuine, however, when

its realization is only possible in idea, in thought, when it is only attainable in the infinite and when, consequently, the possibility of approaching it is an infinite one. If there were an ideal that was not only attainable, but that could be imagined by us as being attainable, it would cease to be an ideal. (PSS 27: 84)

The “Afterword” thus brings *Kreutzer Sonata* full circle, returning to the message of the second epigraph and making its meaning explicit. Herman is right to point out that the very existence of the “Afterword” suggests the failure of *Kreutzer Sonata* as a work of infectious art according to the definition of *What Is Art?* (36). The fact that Tolstoy felt compelled to respond to the letters of confused readers demonstrates that clarity at least was missing from the work.

Despite its dogmatic tone and its clear precepts, the “Afterword” underlines, in one regard at least, the ambivalence of the message of *Kreutzer Sonata*. It offers guidance not just in the realm of sex, but also in the realm of narrative. In the light of the epigraph, the ideal of chastity takes on a double meaning: As in Pozdnyshev’s narration, sexual desire becomes reborn as the desire for narrative fulfillment, so here the epigraph’s invitation to castration becomes reconceived as a call for the abdication of narrative desire. If this seems like an unlikely conclusion for a work of narrative fiction, we should remember the story’s hermeneutic key, the alluring but cautionary invocation of *Anna Karenina*. By invoking his novel of adultery in the train scene, Tolstoy sets up a generic model of absolute sinfulness, of total subjection to narrative desire that can be measured against the narrative energies that animate this didactic novella. In invoking the idea of Mrs. Pozdnyshev’s illicit relations with Trukhachevsky, Tolstoy likewise sets up a model of sexual and emotional relations that is more transgressive than the Pozdnyshevs’ own marriage. Just as *Kreutzer Sonata* grudgingly

accepts the unfortunate necessity of marriage as unavoidable to channel sexual desire and prevent the greater sins of uncontrolled sexuality, so too it reluctantly recognizes the necessity of exploiting and channeling narrative desire. The latter becomes reconceived as artistic contagion to infect the reader of the didactic short story with its message while avoiding the limitless eroticized narrative energy of a work like *Anna Karenina*.

The *povest*’, with its limitations of space and perspective, reduces the scale of the reader’s investment in the narrative. Just as chastity represents the ideal towards which humanity should be striving, rather than a reality that it can embrace, so the abdication of all narrative desire can be seen as a future goal, or perhaps a message to a select few, as the epigraph suggests, rather than an immediate interdiction.⁴ The didactic novella can be seen as a generic compromise, an attempt to counteract or repress the untrammelled narrative desire that leads to adultery and to the novel, while tacitly accepting the novella’s role in infecting the reader with a powerful moral message. The renunciation of the novelistic form in its titillating, upper-class guise in favor of the didactic novella represents for Tolstoy the possibility of securing himself against the narrative promiscuity of a work like *Anna Karenina*, even while *Kreutzer Sonata* demonstrates that the self-castration of narrative desire remains for the time being an impossible ideal for both Pozdnyshev and his creator–author.

Notes

Translations of the Jubilee edition are my own, except those taken from *Kreutzer Sonata*, which are from Katz (ed.), *Tolstoy’s Short Fiction*.

1. On Tolstoy’s move to the *povest*’ in this period, see Freeborn (127–141); Kopper, “Less Matter, More Art: Tolstoy, Briefly” (347–357). On the genre history of the *povest*’ see di Salvo, “*Povest*” (283–288).

2. Isenberg identifies the epigraph as an example of what Gary Saul Morson, borrowing from Mikhail Bakhtin, calls “absolute language,” statements that

refuse to enter into dialogue with other utterances, that brook no opposition (Isenberg 80, 164; Morson, *Hidden in Plain View* 9–36). Morson also points to the “Afterword to *Kreutzer Sonata*” as an example of absolute language. See also Morson, “Tolstoy’s Absolute Language” (667–687).

3. Gustafson sees the train as contributing to Pozdnyshchev’s sexual arousal, while Isenberg suggests that the jolt of the train imitates the fits and starts of the narration itself as well as Pozdnyshchev’s sexual obsession into the language of the machine (Gustafson 354; Isenberg 84, 166).

4. Of course the idea of the work containing a message to the select few is an even greater transgression against the doctrines of *What Is Art?* than the existence of the “Afterword.” In his treatise Tolstoy inveighs against art works that divide their audience through their obscurity or elitism (*PSS* 30: 89–11).

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