

Foreword

Driven by irresistible sexual torment to its final, glorious act of penetration, Leo Tolstoy's *The Kreutzer Sonata* is among the most disquieting works of world literature. 'When reading it one can hardly refrain from exclaiming "That is the truth!" or "This is absurd!"' wrote Anton Chekhov amid the furore that followed the story's publication in 1889, provoked by Tolstoy's assault on the institution of marriage, plea for abstinence and gleefully murderous narrative. Even the American president Theodore Roosevelt was inspired to call the author a 'sexual moral pervert'.

Engaging with it now is scarcely less bracing, an affront to one's casual twenty-first century convictions. One modern critic has labelled it 'the ugliest, maddest thing ever written about sex and marriage by any major figure'. Others have accused Tolstoy of misogyny, misanthropy, even repressed homosexuality. Here, it is fair to say, the conflict between the spiritual, sensual and social that powers Tolstoy's writing reaches its darkest, bloodiest apotheosis.

For Tolstoy (1828-1910), the novella was the product of two years of profound unhappiness and religious conflict that led to his temporary abandonment of fiction in the mid-1880s. The origins of the plot lie in a fragment dating from the early 1860s entitled *The Wife-Murderer*, while the narrative structure and the central figure of Pozdnyshev were prompted by a chance meeting with a cuckold in a railway carriage. A performance in early 1888 of Beethoven's violin sonata gave the tale its tempo and title, yet the true thrust of the piece is rooted in Tolstoy's agonised sexual relations with his wife Sofia Behrs. The younger Tolstoy's romantic desire for a pure marriage that would put an end to his self-confessed perversions (reflected in Eugene in *The Devil*) had been eroded through thirty years of libidinal turmoil and mundane bickering. Now delivering his thirteenth child and

devoting herself to preserving her husband's literary legacy, Sofia had come to inspire disgust in him, which frequently took violent form. *The Kreutzer Sonata* is, in large part, confession.

The exact dates of the composition of the final draft are unknown, though the awkward structure suggests much of it was completed quickly, powered by the force of dawning revelation. The narrative voice (Tolstoy at his most Dostoevskian) is itself unstable. The curious narrator who indulges Pozdnyshév's railway carriage monologue is a coy cipher; when Pozdnyshév takes flight (fuelled by his mysterious tea), we hear Tolstoy's voice wobbling through. Many of Pozdnyshév's revelations of married life are lifted directly from the author's own, while the convictions expressed, however crazy they appear, are fully felt, even if Tolstoy claimed chastity was an ideal rather than an absolute. 'The substance of what I was writing was just as new to me then as it is now to those who are reading it,' he wrote in a letter of 1890; 'at first I was stricken with horror and did not want to accept it; subsequently, however, I grew convinced of its truth, saw the error of my ways and rejoiced at the joyful transformation that awaited me and others.'

That the censors of Tsar Alexander III would seek the novella banned was a given; that their actions would only increase its *succès de scandale* more so, as readers eagerly distributed illegal lithographs and handwritten copies of the original manuscript. Sofia pulled a deft piece of literary sleight-of-hand for it to be published above ground, obeying the Tsar's decree that it could appear only as part of a 'Complete Works' so as to be priced out of the financial reach of the masses, while ensuring that those 'Complete Works' were made available volume by volume. Not surprisingly, sales of the slim, affordable thirteenth tome containing *The Kreutzer Sonata* far outstripped the others. Her troubles must be seen as her attempt to come to terms with a story which must have been humiliating in the extreme; as the

devoted secretary of his legacy, she sought to legitimise her own unhappy tale, passing it off as art.

At root, Pozdnyshev's tract is a reversal of the famous opening to *Anna Karenina* – that all unhappy families are unhappy each in their own way. No longer: 'Everyone thinks his own miserable marriage is unique,' says Pozdnyshev, but 'ninety-nine per cent of all married couples live in the same hell I lived in, and this cannot be otherwise.'

The cause of this unhappiness is sex, which must provoke jealousy and hatred in both husband and wife for 'their co-operation in defiling a human being'. Even in the relatively civilised parts of nineteenth-century Russia, society resembles a kind of licensed brothel, where young girls of good family are whored by their parents to rich young men turned bestial by their desire.

Tolstoy found his response to the eponymous Beethoven sonata mirrored his attitude to sex: immense personal agitation followed by extreme self-revulsion and generalised indignation that such vices should be so widely indulged and exalted. 'How can one allow anyone who pleases to hypnotize another, or many others, and do what he likes with them?' thunders Pozdnyshev. 'An awakening of energy and feeling unsuited both to the time and the place, to which no outlet is given, cannot act but harmfully.' (For impact, it is the Perlman/Ashkenazy recording on Decca, with its mix of passionate abandon and burlesque mockery, that chimes perfectly with the affair of Pozdnyshev's wife and Trukhachevsky, and illuminates the story vividly).

Tolstoy's shaky science is one of the aspects that caused Chekhov to cry absurdity. 'His remarks about syphilis, Foundling Hospitals, women's aversion to contraception, etc., are not merely open to dispute, but frankly reveal an ignorant man who during his long life has not taken the trouble to read a few books by specialists,' complained the doctor. Today, pathology and psychology have advanced to such a degree we

may dismiss many claims out of hand; certainly no one admires auto-castration as a remedy for widespread sexual frustration, as Tolstoy once did, citing the example of the American Shakers.

Given its excesses, the tale is thus frequently sidelined as a work notable principally for its place in Tolstoy's biography, and its significance in ushering in his final phase of writing (which led, too, to *The Devil* and *Father Sergius*). Yet *The Kreutzer Sonata* deserves to be taken seriously in and of itself – and not dismissed as the work of a man who, in today's climate of defensive permissiveness, would be instructed to 'lighten up'.

Simply, it stands at the beginning of a canon of modern literature that takes the insatiability of lust as its overriding theme – from DH Lawrence and James Joyce through to Philip Roth, John Updike and Michel Houellebecq, whose zeitgeist-capturing 1998 novel *Atomised* bears extremely close comparison. *The Kreutzer Sonata's* central idea must be even more urgent in today's hedonistic society, when sex, through advertising which must stimulate desire where there was none before, actively drives our global economy, and promiscuity is cited as the reason for the most dramatic attacks on Western culture. In the late nineteenth century, Tolstoy's hyper-sensitivity to sex led him to see it in places where few others could; in doing so, he could be astonishingly prescient. Take his description of woman subjugated sexually, seeking power through spending: 'Go round the shops in any big town! Look whether in any of these shops there is anything for the use of men. All the luxuries of life are demanded by and maintained by women! Millions of people, generations of slaves, perish in factories merely to satisfy women's caprices.'

Even if we disagree with the prescriptions, we can admire the perception, and even at his most melodramatic, Tolstoy's here is still masterful. Take Pozdnyshev's obsession with Trukhachevsky's 'specially developed posterior'; or the all-too-believable irritation Pozdnyshev's wife displays as she is

discovered. Even that description of music as ‘an awakening of energy and feeling unsuited both to the time and the place’, in condemning captures its power. ‘If the earth itself could write,’ Isaak Babel said, ‘it would write like Tolstoy.’

We must make ourselves eunuchs and let ourselves die out is Tolstoy’s response to all this sin, quoting Matthew’s gospel. To those who find this unacceptable, Tolstoy fires back: ‘In defending our indulgence in sexual intercourse are we really concerned with the extinction of the species? What we are really concerned with is our own pleasure.’ Harsh – but fair? Brace yourself.

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