The Kreutzer Sonata
and Other Stories

Leo Tolstoy

Translated by Roger Cockrell
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Nikolai Ilyich Tolstoy, Tolstoy’s father

A young Leo Tolstoy in 1848

Tolstoy’s wife Sofya with her younger children: left to right, Mikhail (Misha), Andrei (Andryusha), Alexandra (Sasha) and Ivan (Vanechka)
Yasnaya Polyana, where Tolstoy spent most of his life

The house in which Leo Tolstoy was born
Introduction

In the opening chapter of his story ‘The Devil’ (published posthumously in 1912), Tolstoy makes the following observation: “People usually think that it is old men who are for the most part conservatives, and that it is young men who are innovators. This is not totally correct. Most conservatives are young people – young people who want to live, but who neither think nor have the time to think how they should live and who therefore take as their model the life they have always known.” Although Tolstoy goes on to apply this pronouncement to the story’s young hero, Yevgeny Irtenyev, it also offers an illuminating insight into his own mind and convictions. It reminds us of his delight in challenging received opinion, as well as of his lifelong preoccupation with the question of how one ought to live. Why was life so important, he asked, if its only goal was the achievement of one’s personal happiness, and if one lived it just for its own sake without any regard for its meaning? If, moreover, it is to have a meaning, what should be its source, and what possible models could one adopt that might act as agents of change in one’s life?

Such concerns are evident in each of the four stories that appear in this volume. When ‘The Kreutzer Sonata’ was first published in 1890, abstract issues of this kind were, however, overshadowed by the immediate impact of this most unusual story. Condemned as “incoherent, filthy and immoral” and initially banned by the censor, the story was approved for publication after a personal appeal by his wife Sonya to the Tsar, but even then only as part of
a complete edition of his works. This was not merely the inevitable reaction of “less enlightened” times, for ‘The Kreutzer Sonata’ still retains the power to shock today. Within just a few pages, readers find themselves pitched into a breath-taking assault on the decadence, hypocrisy and immorality of upper-class Russian society. Dogmatic moralizing on the sins of sexuality and the consequent need for chastity goes hand in hand with the account of the breakdown of a marriage, which picks over the bones of a doomed relationship in graphic detail. All the while, the hot-house atmosphere generated within the claustrophobic setting of a railway carriage is compounded by the unsettling effect of the train’s movement over the rails.

Whose voice is this? Are these the random ravings of a semi-deranged individual, or is Pozdnyshev a mouthpiece for Tolstoy’s own opinions? In his ‘Afterword’ to the story, published in 1890 and reproduced here, Tolstoy defends the position taken by Pozdnyshev in considerable detail, making it clear he shares most of his views. But there is one major qualification: whereas Pozdnyshev sees universal chastity as an absolute requirement, Tolstoy maintains that it should not be a binding precept, but an ideal towards which human beings should strive. The fact that it might never be achieved, he argues, does not invalidate it as an idea – quite the contrary: once people start focusing on the theoretical achievement of an ideal rather than on the process of working towards it, then it loses its significance.

One of the more puzzling aspects of the ‘Afterword’ is the absence of any reference to music. This seems rather strange: after all, Tolstoy chose to name his story after a well-known Beethoven sonata, and Pozdnyshev’s attack on music’s pernicious effects in Chapter 23 is particularly impassioned. The reason for Tolstoy’s reticence may well lie in his own ambivalent attitude, reflecting
the dualism in his character between a deeply ingrained asceticism and an equally profound sensuousness. There are many references in his letters and notebooks attesting to his love for music, but there is often an admixture of fear. For him, as for Pozdnysh, “purposeless” music such as ‘The Kreutzer Sonata’ seemed to possess erotic and therefore disturbing implications; the more he was attracted by a piece of music, the more he apparently feared it, and the more he feared it, the more fiercely he condemned it.

The unsettling effect of music on the human psyche is also evident in ‘After the Ball’, although here it is expressed with greater subtlety. The narrator’s inner journey from passionate, unthinking love to conscious disillusionment is paralleled by the stark contrast between the romantic music of the ballroom and the terrifying whistle of the pipe and beat of the drum – a hauntingly incongruous accompaniment to the flogging of the unfortunate prisoner. Unlike ‘The Kreutzer Sonata’, however, readers are left to come to their own conclusions, thereby increasing the force of the questions Tolstoy is implicitly asking. How can two such contrasting worlds coexist? How can society allow them to coexist? How can that colonel on the dance floor, with his fine manners and tender, affectionate smile, be the same man as the monster on the parade ground the very next day? “In order to turn someone from a human being into a beast,” Tolstoy wrote while serving in the army in the Caucasus, “you only need to take him away from his family, put a uniform on him and start beating a drum.” This exemplary and wonderfully balanced short story, written by Tolstoy when he was in his eighth decade, is testament to his undiminished ability to startle his readers with the freshness and clarity of his vision.

With ‘Master and Man’ we move into a completely different milieu – away from ballrooms, drawing rooms and upper-class
urban life, and into the apparently unchanging, and certainly more physically challenging, world of provincial Russia. The plot centres on the relationship between the “master”, Vasily Andreich Brekhunov, and his servant, Nikita, and their disastrous mid-winter journey. ‘Master and Man’ is more openly dogmatic than ‘After the Ball’: Tolstoy makes his dislike of Orthodox ritual and his preference for his own idiosyncratic version of the Gospels very plain, and the moral of the contrast that emerges between Nikita’s calm acceptance of life’s vicissitudes and Brekhunov’s obsession with status and money could hardly be more pointed. For some, Tolstoy’s uncompromising moral stance detracts from the story’s interest; for others, it is this position which gives ‘Master and Man’ the integrity it would otherwise lack. What is not open to question, however, is Tolstoy’s skill in creating such a vividly realized world. The disorientating effects of the storm, with its whirling snow and buffeting wind, the recurring images of the moaning willow trees, the mugwort and the frantically flapping line of washing assume the characteristics of a nightmare. We ride off together with Brekhunov as he dashes away on his mindless bid for freedom, and the one-to-one relationship between Nikita and the horse Mukhorty seems the most natural thing in the world. Tolstoy brings each character, however small his or her part, to life, even if only for a moment: think of the horse thief in Grishkino, of the unfailingly cheerful and semi-literate Petrukha, or of the browbeaten little pony hobbling through the snow as it strives to get the party of drunken revellers home. With such instances, the illusion that we are part of a real, rather than fictional, world becomes complete.

The final story in this collection, ‘The Prisoner in the Caucasus’ (1871–72), was Tolstoy’s response to Pushkin’s Byronic poem of the same title written some fifty years earlier.* Tolstoy recasts
Pushkin’s plot by using simple, concise language and by stripping it of any romantic associations: Pushkin’s passionate Circassian maiden, who falls in love with the Russian officer and helps him to escape, is replaced by a young Tatar girl, who is motivated solely by pity. The story lacks psychological depth (it was originally intended as part of a project to educate young people), but it rises above the commonplace partly because of the unsentimental, but not entirely unsympathetic, portrayal of the Tatars and their way of life. What shines through above all, however, are the young girl’s feelings of compassion and common humanity, together with the hero Zhilin’s instinctive desire to help his fellow prisoner Kostylin, even though it is against his own best interests.

While working on an early draft of War and Peace, Tolstoy wrote as follows:

*If I were told to write a novel in which I could establish the correct view of social questions, I wouldn’t bother spending two hours on something like that. But if someone told me that what I write now will be read by today’s children twenty years on, and that they will laugh and cry over it and come to love life, then I would devote my whole life and all my powers to it.*

In less than two decades, at the end of the 1870s, he was to undergo a spiritual crisis that resulted in a re-evaluation of his role as a writer and of his place in the world; to his wife Sonya’s chagrin, he rejected his previous work, viewing it as decadent and pointless. Yet it can be misleading to see this critical period in Tolstoy’s life as forming a rigid dividing line between an earlier period in which he produced great works of fiction, and a later period in which he concentrated on religious, moral and philosophical questions. His later fiction in particular arose out of the tension
between the urge to show us all how we should lead our lives, and the impulse simply to tell a story and to engage our hearts and minds; the balance swung now one way, now the other. But right to the end, whether as moralist or artist, he never failed to astonish the world with the force of his personality and the creative power of his imagination.

TRANSLATOR’S NOTE

Each of the stories translated here is strikingly different in tone, and I have tried to convey this difference. Despite this, one of the characteristics of Tolstoy’s prose is his tendency to repeat certain words and phrases, most marked here in ‘The Kreutzer Sonata’ and the ‘Afterword’. Examples include “Not only... but also”; “This is not the point... the point is”; “indeed” (v samom dele); and “after all” or “that is to say”, as a translation of the notoriously difficult and frequently used Russian word ved’. Although it is possible to ring the changes, I have generally chosen to stay with the original, not least because the hypnotic monotony of such phrases complements the repetitive tedium associated with a long railway journey.

I would like to record my thanks to my wife Patricia and to Julia Kostyuk of Exeter University’s Russian Department for all their help and suggestions in the translation of these stories. Also to Alessandro Gallenzi and Christian Müller at Alma Classics for their continued encouragement and painstaking editing. Any remaining errors and infelicities are of course entirely mine.

– Roger Cockrell
The Kreutzer Sonata
and Other Stories
The Kreutzer Sonata

But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.

– Matthew 5:28

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 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.

– Matthew 19:10–12

1

It was early spring. We were now into the second day of our journey. Passengers who were only travelling short distances came and went, but there were three people in the carriage who, like myself, had been there from the very start: an unattractive, elderly lady with an exhausted-looking expression who was smoking cigarettes and wearing a hat and a coat that could almost have belonged to a man; her friend, a talkative man of about forty with smart new luggage; and a short man with nervous jerky movements who had so far kept himself to himself, although his exceptionally bright eyes were constantly
flitting from one thing to another. He was not an old man, but his curly hair was obviously going prematurely grey. He was wearing an old, expensively tailored overcoat with a lamb-skin collar and a tall hat of the same material, and whenever he unbuttoned his coat you could see he was wearing a jacket with an embroidered Russian shirt underneath. He possessed one more peculiar characteristic: every so often he would emit strange sounds, as if he were clearing his throat or stifling a laugh waiting to be released.

For the whole of the journey thus far this man had studiously avoided any contact or familiarity with his fellow passengers. Whenever his neighbours had tried speaking to him, he had answered briefly and abruptly, but for the most part he had read, or looked out of the window and smoked a cigarette, or he had taken some provisions out of his old travelling bag and drunk tea or munched on a snack.

Sensing that he found his solitude burdensome, I tried several times to strike up a conversation with him, but each time our eyes met – which happened frequently as we were sitting diagonally opposite one another – he turned away and went back to his book or looked out of the window.

In the late afternoon of that second day we stopped at a station, and the nervous man got off the train for some hot water and brewed himself some tea on his return. The man with the smart new luggage (a lawyer, as I found out subsequently) and his female companion, the lady in the man’s coat who smoked, went off to have some tea in the station buffet.

While these two were gone, several new people joined us, including a tall, clean-shaven old man, clearly a merchant, with a wrinkled face and wearing a mink fur coat and a cap with an enormous peak. The merchant sat down opposite the seats vacated by the
lady and the lawyer, and immediately launched into a conversation with a young man with the air of a salesman who had also just got on the train.

I sat diagonally opposite to them and, since the train was not moving, I was able to hear snatches of what they were saying whenever there was nobody walking through the carriage. The merchant began by explaining he was on his way to his estate, which was only one station away. Then, as always happens on such occasions, the two of them turned to a discussion on prices, then on trade, then, inevitably, on the current state of the Moscow market, and finally moving on to the subject of the Nizhni Novgorod fair.* The salesman started talking about the drinking exploits of a certain rich merchant known to both of them at the fair, but the old man interrupted him to regale him with his own account of drinking bouts in Kunavino,* in which he himself had once taken part. He was obviously proud of such exploits, and with evident pleasure related the story of the occasion in Kunavino when he and this same mutual acquaintance had been out drinking and they had got into such mischief that he could only describe what happened in a whisper. The salesman thought this was so funny that his guffaw resounded throughout the carriage, while the old man also burst out laughing, revealing a couple of yellow teeth.

Not expecting to hear anything of interest, I stood up, intending to take a stroll along the platform before the train departed. In the doorway I came face to face with the lawyer and his lady friend, engaged in lively conversation as they walked along.

“You won’t have time,” the sociable lawyer said. “The second bell’s going to go any minute now.”

And, indeed, the bell rang before I could reach the end of the train. When I returned to the carriage, the lady and the lawyer
were continuing their lively conversation. The old man sat opposite them, staring ahead of him in stony silence and occasionally chewing his teeth in disapproval.

“Then she came straight to the point and told her husband,” the lawyer was saying with a smile as I walked past, “that she could not, and did not want, to live with him since…”

But that was all I was able to hear. More passengers came in after me, followed by the conductor, and then a porter rushed in, and for a little while the carriage was so noisy it was impossible to hear a word anyone was saying. When everything had quietened down and I could hear what the lawyer was saying again, their conversation had clearly moved on from discussing a particular case to broader considerations.

The lawyer was talking about divorce and how it had become a much discussed topic among the general public in European society, and saying that cases of it were now becoming more and more frequent here, in Russia. Suddenly aware he was the only one talking, the lawyer stopped what he was saying and turned towards the old man.

“Things weren’t like that in the old days, were they!” he said, with a pleasant smile.

The old man wanted to say something in reply but, at that moment, the train set off, and the old man removed his cap, made the sign of the cross and whispered a prayer to himself. The lawyer averted his eyes and politely waited. When the old man had finished praying and crossed himself three times, he replaced his cap firmly and solidly on his head, settled himself in his seat and started speaking.

“There were such cases then, sir, only fewer of them,” he said. “What’s going on nowadays is only to be expected; too much education, in my opinion.”
By now the train was picking up speed the whole time, rattling over the points, and I found it difficult to hear what was being said. It was an interesting topic, and I changed my seat to be closer to him. My neighbour, the nervous man with the shining eyes, had also clearly become interested and was listening intently, but without getting up from his seat.

“But why’s education such a bad thing?” the lady asked with a barely perceptible smile. “Was it really better in the old days, when a bride and groom got married before they’d seen each other?” she continued, replying, as many women do, not by answering what the old man had actually said, but by what she thought he was going to say. “You had people marrying the first man who came along, not knowing whether they loved or even liked him, and then spending the rest of their life in misery. And you think that’s better, do you?” she said, evidently addressing her remarks to the lawyer and myself, and hardly at all to the old man she was talking to.

“They’re too well educated,” the old man repeated, giving the lady a scathing look, without answering her question.

“I’d like to know why you think there’s a connection between education and the breakdown of a marriage,” the lawyer said, smiling barely perceptibly.

The merchant was about to say something, but the lady interrupted him.

“No, those times have gone,” she said. But the lawyer stopped her.

“Hold on, let him say what he thinks.”

“Education only leads to a lot of stupidity,” the old man said doggedly.

“People who don’t love each other are forced to marry, and then everyone’s surprised they can’t live in harmony,” the lady said quickly, looking round at the lawyer and at me, and even at the
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salesman who had got up from his place and begun listening to the conversation with a smile on his face, his arm resting on the back of his seat. “After all, it’s only animals who can be mated as their owner wishes, isn’t it! Human beings, on the other hand, have their own inclinations and preferences,” she added, clearly wishing to rile the old man.

“You’re wrong there, madam,” the old man said. “An animal is just an animal, but human beings are subject to laws.”

“Yes, but how can you live with someone when there’s no love?” the woman asked, still hastily wishing to express her opinions, which she no doubt considered very novel.

“They didn’t bother with such matters in the old days,” the old man said portentously. “It’s only caught on very recently. Nowadays the woman says, ‘I’m leaving you’– something even men have started doing nowadays. ‘Right,’ the woman says, ‘here are your shirts and trousers; I’m going off with Vanka, his hair is curlier than yours.’ Try arguing with that. But, as far as a woman is concerned, what should come first of all is fear.”

The salesman looked at the lawyer, then at the lady and finally at me, clearly uncertain whether or not to smile, prepared either to approve of or ridicule the old man’s words, depending on how they would be received.

“What are you talking about? What kind of fear?” the lady asked.

“I mean when a woman is afraid of her husband; that kind of fear.”

“But those times have gone, my dear man,” said the lady, by now rather angry.

“No, my dear lady, those times will always be with us. The first woman, Eve, was created from the rib of a man, and that’s how it
will be for the rest of time,” the man said, with such a convincing and triumphant shake of his head that the salesman immediately decided the merchant must have won the argument and erupted in loud laughter.

“That’s seeing things from the man’s point of view,” the lady said, determined to hold her own, looking round at the rest of us. “You grant yourselves freedom, but you want to keep women locked up in a tower. And in the meantime you give yourselves permission to do what you want.”

“It’s not a question of permission. No matter what a man does in the home it never benefits from his efforts, whereas a woman is a fragile vessel,” the merchant continued confidently.

The merchant’s self-assured tone was evidently winning over his listeners, and even the lady felt a little crushed. But she was still not prepared to give in.

“All right, but I think you’ll agree that a woman is a person, with feelings, just like a man. What then is she to do if she doesn’t love her husband?”

“Doesn’t love her husband!” the merchant echoed menacingly, with an exaggerated movement of his lips and eyebrows. “She has no choice but to love him!”

The salesman was especially taken by this unexpected argument, and he made a sound signifying his approval.

“No, you’re wrong, she doesn’t have to love him,” the lady said. “And if she doesn’t, then there’s no way she can be forced to, is there?”

“But what if a wife is unfaithful to her husband, what then?” the lawyer asked.

“That mustn’t happen,” the old man said. “You have to make sure that it doesn’t.”

“But what if it does? Such cases are not unknown.”
“With some people maybe, but not with our sort,” the old man replied.

Everybody fell silent. The salesman moved a little closer. Clearly not wishing to be left out, he said with a smile on his face:

“Well, I don’t know. There was a scandal involving one of our young lads. Also very difficult to say where the fault lay. This woman turned up in his life. She was a flighty little thing and soon started playing around. He was a straightforward young lad, with a bit of education. Her first affair was with an office clerk. He tried to get her to mend her ways, but she carried on as before. She played all kinds of dirty tricks on him, including stealing his money. So he beat her. And, what do you think? Things only got worse. She had a fling – if you’ll pardon the expression – with a heathen, a Jew. So what was he to do? He threw her out altogether. He’s now living the bachelor life and she’s just drifting about.”

“Well, he’s an idiot,” the old man said. “If he’d started out by not letting her do what she wanted, if he’d put a real stop to it all, she’d probably still be with him. You have to curb their freedom from the very beginning. Trust the woman in the home, not the horse in the field.”

At that moment the conductor came in asking for any tickets for the next station. The old man handed his in.

“That’s right: if you don’t rein women in early on, you’re really asking for trouble.”

“But what about that story you told of those married men going on a binge at the fair in Kunavino?” I asked, unable to hold back any longer.

“That was different,” the old man said, and lapsed into silence.

When the whistle sounded, the merchant stood up, retrieved his travelling bag from under his seat, wrapped himself up warmly and, raising his cap, went out onto the brake platform.
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