

# Suspicion on Trial: Tolstoy's *The Kreutzer Sonata* and Nabokov's "Pozdnyshov's Address"

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“ASK YOURSELF,” VLADIMIR NABOKOV ONCE WARNED THE BUD-  
 ding literary critic, “if the symbol you have detected is not  
 your own footprint” (*Strong Opinions* 66). The critic who tres-  
 passed on his work was “ask[ed] . . . to remove his belongings” (304).  
 Never shy about directing his readers how to read him, Nabokov has  
 earned a reputation as an artist unwilling to relinquish control over  
 the meaning of his art. As Zadie Smith observes, “It’s a brave critic  
 who dares tell Vladimir Vladimirovich” that the author is dead, his  
 intentions “only incidental to” the sense of his text (46). One could  
 say the same of Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy. From his earliest composi-  
 tions, Tolstoy instructed his readers how to understand his works,  
 both in the works themselves and in his forewords, afterwords, and  
 essays on art.<sup>1</sup> For all their differences as artists and thinkers, Tolstoy  
 and Nabokov are united in their imperative to teach readers how to  
 read them. No other writer in the Russian canon surpasses them in  
 their efforts to shape how their works would be received.

We tend to assume that interpretive license is good, and the more  
 of it we have, the better, the greater our intellectual freedom, so any  
 attempt to circumscribe our interpretations seems to fetter us. As a  
 result, Tolstoy and Nabokov have been accused (by Mikhail Bakhtin,  
 Maurice Couturier, and others) of being domineering authors, if not  
 tyrannical ones. Even readers who defend as instructive or useful the  
 reading lessons administered by Tolstoy and Nabokov admit that  
 we surrender some readerly autonomy in return for the pleasure or  
 knowledge obtained from them. (In this camp I would put Smith,  
 Eric Naiman, and Gary Saul Morson, among others.) But Tolstoy and  
 Nabokov did not share the assumption that unites these censures and  
 defenses of their prescriptions for readers: they did not believe that

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constraints on our intellectual freedom come entirely, or even primarily, from without. For them, external influences were often a less pernicious and insidious threat than the habits of our own minds, including our habit of decoding and demystifying the world according to our own favored concepts and categories.

It is true that both authors were wary of forces that adulterate perception, and each exhorted his readers to discern them as well. Tolstoy suspected not only social conventions but language itself of dissimulation. Nabokov was less suspicious of language than he was of those who wielded it cynically or clumsily: "All such great words as 'Beauty,' 'Love,' 'Nature,' 'Truth,' and so on become masks and dupes when the smug vulgarian employs them" (*Lectures on Russian Literature* 310). In some cases, these authors thought, the world has indeed been mystified, and by imposing on it certain explanatory frameworks the truth can be revealed. But in imposing these frameworks, they feared, the mind and its suspicions can also eclipse the external world. The idea that we might become imprisoned by our own habits of thought haunted Tolstoy throughout his life. His dread of it inspired Victor Shklovsky's theory that art serves to defamiliarize our lived experience (Shklovsky 5–9). Nabokov's concern, also lifelong, about the blindness induced by our own obsessions is manifested in the tragic solipsists and ego-maniacs who populate his fiction. The concurrence of these two threats, one from without and one from within, meant that Tolstoy and Nabokov could neither fully endorse suspicion nor fully disallow it, neither demand credulity from their readers nor prohibit it. Instead, each author negotiated—and has his readers negotiate—what Gabriel Josipovici has called a "dialectic of trust and suspicion" (257).

The authors' treatment of suspicion not only compels us to reevaluate their efforts to direct our reception of their work but also brings to light two interrelated presumptions shared by both sides of the current de-

bate over suspicious critique. Critics of what Paul Ricoeur identified as the hermeneutics of suspicion—interpretive practices aimed at unveiling what the text ostensibly conceals—contend that this mode of reading has become a new dogma, one that now obstructs more than it encourages good scholarship and good politics. In their accounts of suspicious reading, critics like Bruno Latour and Rita Felski have stressed the contingency of its predominance; they suggest that we may well have read another way, and perhaps one day will. Their accounts tend to identify suspicious reading as a product of our disciplinary histories, a "prevailing disposition" propped up by institutional codes and customs (Felski 187). Latour suggests that suspicious critique has outlived its usefulness, and he and Felski, along with a host of others, advocate replacing suspicious critique with other modes of reading. They exhort us to read differently, restoratively, reparatively, postcritically, or on the surface. Such critics, as well as those with whom they quarrel, seem to presuppose, first, that reading differently is largely a matter of choosing to do so and, second, that texts themselves do not incline us to read them one way or another. These linked presumptions assign readers mastery over what they read, but leave it a mystery why different texts sometimes seem to call for different ways of reading them, and why we cannot always read the way we would like to.

Much of the debate over suspicion has been pitched at the level of pedagogy, at the way we have been trained. Implicit in this pedagogical focus is the notion that how we read is up to us, or if not us then at least our teachers. Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus suggest that we have "train[ed] ourselves to see *through*" the text. We might, however, relinquish that training to look directly at the "evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts" (9). Latour compares students with "young cadets" who, trained in the procedures of critique, are equipped for yesterday's battles, not

tomorrow's (225). Bruce Robbins, standing on the other side of the debate, celebrates our well-honed capacity for "distancing ourselves from the values of the society around us." It is our schooling in critique that makes us more than mere "fans" or "adjuncts to the publishing industry" (372). Robbins ratifies the training others reproach, but in doing so he, too, proceeds from the premise that reading a certain way is mainly a matter of being taught to do so. At issue is a curricular decision. Indeed, at the very foundation of the concept of suspicious hermeneutics, Ricoeur installed the notion of suspicion as a decision: what united Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud was "the decision to look upon the whole of consciousness primarily as 'false' consciousness" (33).

What seems to be lost in our reading debates—and what I aim to elucidate—is that one might want to read unsuspiciously without being able to.<sup>2</sup> This predicament is at the heart of Tolstoy's novella *The Kreutzer Sonata* (1890) and the dramatic monologue it inspired, Nabokov's "Pozdnyshov's Address" (1926). These works dramatize the struggle against one's own unrelenting skepticism. In each text, the protagonist's (Pozdnyshov's) distrust of others makes him unreceptive to them, inducing an egoism and even a quasi solipsism that pave the way for a catastrophic moral failure: he murders his wife. Each Pozdnyshov discerns, however dimly, that his distrust is the source of his suffering, violence, and isolation. Yet his recognition of his suspicion, far from prompting him to give it up, only stimulates further and ever more sophisticated forms of skeptical decoding; as he descends deeper into his suspicion, it becomes the only way in which he can reckon with his crime, with other people, and with himself. Suspicion in these works is rendered not as a mere cultural fashion or an attitude that can be adopted and discarded at will but as a permanent, often malign, and self-reinforcing feature of the psyche. (The vicious circle they depict sometimes seems to

be mirrored in the discourse about suspicious critique, in which every effort to curb critique must anticipate the charge that it is merely a critique of critique.)

Critics of suspicion tend to posit, optimistically, that we can refrain from reading suspiciously as long as we are willing to give up the privileges and pleasures of suspicious critique. Tolstoy occasionally voiced similar optimism, particularly late in his life, when he came to extol art that expressed an idealized Christian faith. But in their works, as in a strain of thought extending from Stanley Cavell and Wittgenstein back into the early history of skepticism, Tolstoy and Nabokov suggest that distrust of the world and the words of others, though it might confer certain powers and pleasures, is also a burden, a state of mind to which we do not aspire but instead are condemned.<sup>3</sup> No one who has commiserated with Charles Kinbote in his cosmic loneliness can fail to grasp the way in which our own suspicions can sequester us from others. And in reflecting on our skepticism we often only burrow deeper into it. Hume, famously, could not think himself out of it; all he could do was distract himself with a game of backgammon. No exhortation to regard the world differently will ever free us from it entirely.

Still, neither of my authors despairs. They are not Beckett. In the two parables of interpretation I will examine, Tolstoy and Nabokov suggest that while skepticism cannot be willed away, it can be momentarily allayed by art itself. For them, responding to a text with trust is a matter less of orienting ourselves toward it in some particular way, as advocates of restorative, reparative, and other nonsuspicious hermeneutics suggest, than of encountering a text that manages not to cede us full control over its meaning. From the author's perspective, it is a matter of constructing such a text. Certainly the effect of this encounter depends on the reader as well, and not merely on the reader's seeking out the right texts to read. It would be naive to deny

that the reader can read with varying degrees of attention, creativity, sympathy, and so on. But for Tolstoy and Nabokov, it would be just as naive to deny that the effect also depends on the text itself.

Both authors imagined that a certain kind of artwork—one in which the author and reader encounter each other in the right way—can offer the reader relief from the burden of skepticism. In *The Kreutzer Sonata* and "Pozdnyshev's Address," Tolstoy and Nabokov set off controlled explosions of suspicion: they stimulate our suspicion in order to cast doubt on its virtues and point up the possibility of a more trusting attitude to the author. Indeed, trust between author and reader is at the heart of each writer's aesthetic worldview. To partake of aesthetic enjoyment, Tolstoy contends, a reader must "сознательно подчиняется заражению того чувства, которое испытывал художник" ("consciously submit to being infected by the feeling experienced by the artist"; "О том, что называют искусством" 252).<sup>4</sup> Nabokov envisions a great book as something that binds the author and reader in a "spontaneous embrace" in which they are "linked forever if the book lasts forever" (*Lectures on Literature* 2). Both authors sought to construct texts capable of staging such an encounter.

### A Surfeit of Suspicion

Tolstoy's *The Kreutzer Sonata* is told by an unnamed narrator traveling on a night train. The narrator listens to fellow passengers discuss modern-day relations between men and women. A quiet, solitary passenger grows excited by the conversation. He, Pozdnyshev, suddenly accuses the travelers of subtly referring to his own, unhappy family life. When those unsettled by his accusation disperse, he offers to tell the narrator the story of how he killed his wife. Pozdnyshev recounts his sexual history, his cynical courtship of his wife, their unhappy marriage, and the arrival of a

musician, Trukhachevsky, whom he suspects of having seduced her. Returning home one evening and finding her and the musician alone together, Pozdnyshev murders her. It is never confirmed that they were having an affair, but the court acquits Pozdnyshev nevertheless, justifying his actions as an attempt to defend his "поруганную честь" ("outraged honor"; Крейцера соната 49; *Kreutzer Sonata* 398). Pozdnyshev explains the murder differently. He portrays himself as a victim of corrosive social forces, blaming his actions first on his vulnerability to the depraved customs of his social class—the gentlemanly habits of drinking alcohol and frequenting brothels—then on the inherent vileness of sexual love, and finally on the intoxicating effect of music. Pozdnyshev compares the impressions produced by music with those produced by hypnosis and argues that it was the terrible power of this art that seduced his wife and that compelled him to kill her.

Tolstoy makes it hard for the reader to take Pozdnyshev's story of his own vulnerability at face value. Even if we share his suspicions of this or that social custom, we are also suspicious of Pozdnyshev himself. Why? First, because Tolstoy marks him as a paranoiac: Pozdnyshev believes people are speaking about him even though they are not, and he believes his wife has betrayed him even though the novella furnishes no proof of that. As Vladimir Golstein observes, Tolstoy's decision to make his protagonist "vain, selfish, and self-righteous" primes us to reject Pozdnyshev's claims to be a "helpless passive entity" (453, 454). Tolstoy, Golstein argues, "alerts us from the start that Pozdnyshev intends to turn his confession of murder into a narrative of justifications and evasions" (454). We have a second ground for suspicion. Pozdnyshev himself hints that his social explanations may obscure a more fundamental failing all his own: his unrelenting egoism, narcissism, and isolation—an isolation fueled, ironically, by his suspicion of the social world.



At several points in the story, Pozdnyshev reveals a connection between his egoism and his crime. He acknowledges that he felt his wife's body belonged to him "как будто это было мое тело" ("as if it were my own"; Крейцера соната 68; *Kreutzer Sonata* 418). And he admits that only after the murder did he see recognize her humanity: "в первый раз увидал в ней человека" ("for the first time I saw a human being in her"; 77; 427). These disclosures suggest that we ought (with Tolstoy's blessing) to read against the thrust of Pozdnyshev's social explanations for his crime, to see instead his self-absorption lurking behind what he has done. Tolstoy's friends, who responded to early versions of the story, understood Pozdnyshev in precisely this way: as an egoist rather than a mere victim of his circumstances (Gudziy 624, 584).

Pozdnyshev's brutality stems not from an excess but from a lack of vulnerability to the external world, an unresponsiveness to the people and things around him that is exacerbated by a distrust of them. He is not exactly a solipsist—he does not doubt the existence of other people—but he no longer believes that other people have thoughts and motives that differ from his. His wife's inner life is so hard to fathom that he can conceive of it only as a reflection of his own: "и остались мы друг против друга в нашем действительном отношении друг к другу, то есть два совершенно чуждые друг другу эгоиста, желающие получить себе как можно больше удовольствия один через другого" ("We were left confronting one another in our true relation: that is, as two egoists quite alien to each other who wished to get as much pleasure as possible each from the other"; Крейцера соната 32; *Kreutzer Sonata* 380). Pozdnyshev imputes to his wife his own egoistic and libidinous urges. This inability to imagine inner lives other than one's own is, for Tolstoy, tantamount to insanity. A formula appears in Tolstoy's diaries: "Сумасшествие это эгоизм, или наоборот: эгоизм . . . есть сумас-

шествие" ("Madness is egoism, or conversely: egoism . . . is madness"; Дневники 1895).

And Tolstoy compels us to simulate this form of madness—Pozdnyshev's madness—in our own reading of and reasoning about the novella. As we read, we suspect both with and against Pozdnyshev, now adopting his perspective, now deconstructing his account. Tolstoy, as Morson has argued, is a master of "reader-implicating" fiction (477), and in *The Kreutzer Sonata* we are made to share Pozdnyshev's entrapment by adopting his suspicious hermeneutics. In partaking of Pozdnyshev's predicament, having a taste of the madness it entails, we perceive a warning from the author: if you are not yet concerned about becoming trapped in your own mind, you ought to be. We recognize that Pozdnyshev's hermeneutic exertions lead only to further entrapment and isolation—he will, we intuit, continue to travel alone, buttonholing passengers whose own stories he admits he cannot absorb "потому что продолжал думать о своем" ("because [he] continued to think about [his] own affairs"; 67; 417)—and worry that such suspicious hermeneutics might do the same to us.

*The Kreutzer Sonata* thus performs a controlled explosion of readerly suspicion: instead of denying our deconstructive impulse, it recognizes it, sympathizes with it, and even encourages us to follow through on it, all within the safe confines of the story itself. Pozdnyshev, on the plane of the story, goes mad, but we, looking on with Tolstoy, learn our lesson.

In 1926, just four months after the publication of his debut novel, *Mary*, a young Nabokov had an occasion to retell Pozdnyshev's story. Nabokov's friends at the Berlin Journalists and Writers' Union invited him to play the role of Pozdnyshev at a literary event featuring a mock trial of Tolstoy's protagonist. Nabokov accepted the challenge and detailed his preparations for it in letters to his wife, Véra. First he studied Tolstoy's novella: "I read *The Kreutzer Sonata* today: a rather vulgar little pamphlet—although once it seemed very

'powerful' to me" (Letter [6 July 1926] 125). Then he composed his defendant's speech and rehearsed it with the other players: "I read my 'speech' at the committee meeting (praise and more praise . . .)" (Letter [12 July 1926] 139). Finally, having performed his monologue, Nabokov, whose self-assurance antedated his masterworks, wrote to Véra that he had created a Pozdnyshev "completely different" from Tolstoy's original (Letter [13 July 1926] 142).

Nabokov did indeed create a Pozdnyshev who departed from its model. He stripped the protagonist of his contempt for sexual love as well as his ambition to be an object lesson to his listeners. Whereas Tolstoy's Pozdnyshev presents himself as a warning against the general sins of sex and marriage, Nabokov's insists on the particularity of his marital strife: "Я понял что грешен не брак вообще, а грешен был именно *мой* брак—оттого что я грешил против любви" ("I understood that it was not marriage itself that was sinful, it was only *my* marriage that was sinful—because I sinned against love"; "Речь Позднышева" N38f).<sup>5</sup> In rewriting Pozdnyshev, Nabokov replaced the character's meditations on social ills with vivid recollections of the night he fell in love: "малейшие мелочи той прогулки, цвет воды, отражение кустов" ("small trifles of that walk, the color of the water, the reflection of the shrubs"; N38a). These precise, idiosyncratic memories reinforce the singularity of the character; it is hard to symbolize your entire social class when you are noticing the reflection of a particular shrub. Nabokov's Pozdnyshev declares: "Я ничего не знаю. Помню только, что был слишком предубежден против истинной страсти, истинной возвышенной любви, чтобы оценить, освободить новое для меня чувство которое я испытал в тот вечер" ("I don't know anything. I only remember that I was too prejudiced against true passion, against true transcendent love, to appreciate and liberate the new feeling I experienced that night"; N38). True to his

lifelong protest against moral generalization, Nabokov creates a Pozdnyshev who disavows any lessons to be learned from his life.

Nabokov's departures from Tolstoy attest to what the young author found most vulgar in the novella—namely, Pozdnyshev's absolutist condemnation of sexual love. But what Nabokov preserved is equally important. Nabokov retains Pozdnyshev's chief afflictions: his self-absorption and ensuing isolation. Like Tolstoy, Nabokov regards the character's blinding egoism as the root cause of his violence. Instead of doing away with Pozdnyshev's obsessive theorizing, Nabokov merely alters his theories, and in fact inverts them. He presents Pozdnyshev's puritanical lessons as the source of his error, not as the result of his eventual revelation. In Tolstoy's version of their courtship, Pozdnyshev believes that he loves his wife when really he only lusts after her. The truth of their relationship is obscured by his belief that sexual desire and love can coexist. This false belief dooms his marriage. Nabokov's Pozdnyshev, in contrast, believes that he only lusts after his wife when really he loves her. The truth of their relationship is obscured by his belief that sexual desire and love cannot coexist. This false belief dooms his marriage. Nabokov's Pozdnyshev explains, "Вы понимаете я по слепоте своей ведь решил про себя, что мне нужно только ее тело, решил что она знает это" ("You see, in my blindness, I had decided that I only needed her body and that she knew this"; N38e). Nabokov inverts the content of Pozdnyshev's postmurder revelation. Love does not mask what is, in reality, lust; rather, that idea itself—the cynical idea that love is always, at bottom, lust—threatens to obscure love where it does exist.

Stripping Pozdnyshev of his stark ethical prescriptions, Nabokov makes him his own. Nonetheless, the monologue retains what is central to Pozdnyshev's tragedy and to Tolstoy's broad moral vision: the idea that brutality is born of unrelenting self-absorption

reinforced by distrust. And distrust not only of his wife and those near to him, but also on a grand scale: Nabokov's Pozdnyshv, like Tolstoy's, once believed that women surreptitiously control the world. Both subscribed to this conspiracy "как иные верят миром управляют масоны" ("the way some people believe that the world is run by Freemasons"; N38c) and were inspired by it to judge women harshly, when in fact, as Nabokov's Pozdnyshv admits, "я женщин не знал вовсе и о душе женщины никогда и не задумывался" ("I knew nothing of women and never once contemplated the contents of a woman's soul."; N38c). For all his Nabokovian alterations of Tolstoy's tale, Nabokov still depicts someone whose world is eclipsed by his own suspicious theories, his hyperactive ego, and the patterned chatter of his mind.

Indeed, it seems likely that Tolstoy's novella had once appeared powerful to Nabokov because, despite its moralizing, it portrayed precisely the kind of tragic monomania that concerned him, too, and that he would explore again and again in his fiction, most memorably in his twin madmen Humbert Humbert and Charles Kinbote. Nabokov's Pozdnyshv is an early prototype for these characters, all imprisoned by their own obsessions, all attempting to escape by means of self-scrutiny but in doing so only entangling themselves further. Nabokov's monologue, like Tolstoy's novella, argues that such hermeneutic exercises are futile. Neither author exonerates his Pozdnyshv, and neither liberates him. Tolstoy leaves him in the dark cell of his train compartment, immersed in his theories. Nabokov cheerfully reports to Véra that his own audience voted to convict him: "now I am already writing from jail" (Letter [13 July 1926] 142).

### Infection and Agitation: Tolstoy's Ideal Artwork

*The Kreutzer Sonata* stimulates our suspicion in order to exhaust it, to underscore its

pointlessness and perniciousness. The novella recommends trust to us by dramatizing the moral failures that result from its absence. The artwork offers a warning. But if suspicion is as engrained in us as these authors thought, then we need more than a warning to wean ourselves from it—and indeed Tolstoy believed that art could do more. Art that resists our attempts to assimilate it into our own thoughts and concerns can bring us into contact with the thoughts and concerns of another person, namely the artist. With the musical piece that gives his story its name, Tolstoy models this effect of his ideal artwork.

Tolstoy never allows Pozdnyshv to escape his entrapment, but he does grant him one brief reprieve from it, during the performance by his wife and Trukhachevsky of Beethoven's "Kreutzer" sonata. In this episode, which stands at the heart of his novella, Tolstoy suggests that a certain kind of aesthetic encounter is capable of liberating one from the strictures of one's own mind. As he listened to the sonata, Pozdnyshv recalls, he was moved to "забывать себя, мое истинное положение" ("forget myself, my real position"; Крейцерова соната 61; *Kreutzer Sonata* 410). He explains that "Она, музыка, сразу, непосредственно переносит меня в то душевное состояние, в котором находился тот, кто писал музыку. Я сливаюсь с ним душою и вместе с ним переносюсь из одного состояния в другое" ("Music carries me immediately and directly into the mental condition in which the man was who composed it. My soul merges with his and together with him I pass from one condition into another"; 61; 411). Pozdnyshv describes precisely the "заражения чувствами другого" ("infection with another's feeling") that Tolstoy considered "сущность искусства" ("the very essence of art") and the grounds for its singular capacity to help us overcome our alienation from each other ("Что такое искусство?" 147; *What Is Art?* 138).

Aesthetic experiences connect characters throughout Tolstoy's fiction, but *The Kreutzer*

*Sonata* illustrates the effect most vividly. In his aesthetic treatise *What Is Art?* (1897) Tolstoy describes how art dispels hostility and unites its appreciators: "Бывает, что люди, находясь вместе, если не враждебны, то чужды друг другу по своим настроениям и чувствам, и вдруг или рассказ, или представление, или картина, даже здание и чаще всего музыка, как электрической искрой, соединяет всех этих людей, и все эти люди, вместо прежней разрозненности, часто даже враждебности, чувствуют единение и любовь друг к другу" ("Sometimes people who are together are, if not hostile to one another, at least estranged in mood and feeling, till perchance a story, a performance, a picture, even a building, but most often of all music, unites them all as by an electric flash, and in place of their former isolation or even enmity they are all conscious of union and mutual love"; 158; 150). Through music, Pozdnyshev transcends his profound distrust and isolation, experiencing, if momentarily, a feeling of fellowship with others. He marvels at what is, for him, a novel experience: "Что такое было то новое, что я узнал, я не мог себе дать отчета, но сознание этого нового состояния было очень радостно. Все те же лица, и в том числе и жена и он, представлялись совсем в другом свете" ("What this new thing was that had been revealed to me I could not explain to myself, but the consciousness of this new condition was very joyous. All those same people, including my wife and him [Trukhachevsky], appeared in a new light"; Крейцерова соната 62; *Kreutzer Sonata* 412). The new feeling Pozdnyshev describes is a more charitable relation to others. Where before Pozdnyshev had seen mere reflections of himself, shadows of his own desires, he now recognizes real human faces.

On the night of the performance Pozdnyshev revels in the feeling of fellowship, but on reflection he insists "Страшная вещь эта соната . . . вообще страшная вещь музыка"

("it is a terrible thing, that sonata. . . . [I]n general music is a dreadful thing!"; 61; 410). It is tempting to overlook the exalting effect of the sonata as it is played and take Pozdnyshev's retrospective judgment at face value.<sup>6</sup> After all, in *What Is Art?* Tolstoy echoes Pozdnyshev's hysterical complaints against Beethoven's music. But one cannot simply read Tolstoy's later opinion of Beethoven into the story. For one thing, that opinion was complicated and inconsistent. Tolstoy denounced Beethoven's late period but praised the genius of his earlier works, possibly counting the middle-period "Kreutzer" sonata among these ("Что такое искусство?" 134; *What Is Art?* 144). An 1876 performance of the sonata partly inspired the novella, and Sofia Andreevna Tolstaya attested to her husband's initial enthusiasm for the music: "Everyone was thrown into ecstasy, beginning with Lev Nikolayevich" (224). Moreover, according to her, a second performance, by their son Sergei, facilitated precisely the kind of familial closeness that Pozdnyshev experiences in the novella (522). I mention these biographical facts not to confirm Tolstoy's approval of the sonata but only to challenge arguments that, informed by his late polemics, assume that Tolstoy simply endorsed Pozdnyshev's views.

A more compelling argument against the transformative power of the sonata rests on a fundamental tension in Tolstoy's aesthetics between his concept of amoral infectiousness and his notion that art promotes mutual love. Henry Pickford identifies this tension and suggests that in *The Kreutzer Sonata* Tolstoy grapples with its ramifications. Implicit in Tolstoy's theory of infection, Pickford argues, is the Schopenhauerian idea that art, and especially music, "conveys affective contents . . . without the normatively structured motives that would be appropriate for them" (90). The spectator's feelings are excited but are not directed toward any particular object or activity. As a result, the spectator's agitation seems liable to be channeled in moral or immoral directions



depending on the spectator's own disposition. Pickford concludes that Pozdnyshev is right to say the sonata had a "terrible effect" on him, not because it is itself immoral but because Pozdnyshev's evil disposition can only channel its excitement toward destructive ends (97).

I agree with the first part of Pickford's claim: the sonata frustrates Pozdnyshev because it excites his mental powers—he is keenly attentive to it—but gives them no outlet, other than continuing to attend to it. Pozdnyshev complains, "сыграли плясовую, я проплясал, музыка дошла; ну, пропели мессу, я причастился, тоже музыка дошла, а то только раздражение, а того, что надо делать в этом раздражении,—нет" ("A dance is played, I dance and the music has achieved its object. Mass has been sung, I receive Communion, and that music too has reached a conclusion. Otherwise it is only agitating, and what ought to be done in that agitation is lacking"; Крейцерова соната 61; *Kreutzer Sonata* 411). Unlike a dance, unlike Mass, the sonata inhibits him from acting. In Pickford's reading of Tolstoy's thought, this inhibition is part of the danger of art that conveys affect without conveying any normative content. Frustration provokes Pozdnyshev to commit murder, so the sonata that inspired his frustration is complicit in his sin. Here I depart from Pickford. The fact that the sonata resists being easily absorbed into Pozdnyshev's thoughts and theories makes it an exemplary artwork, and furnishes Pozdnyshev with a momentary reprieve from his mental torment. That it is only momentary—that he lapses back into torment and later commits murder—is evidence not of the sonata's complicity in his sin but of the limitations of the therapy it offers.

Consider the contrast between Beethoven's sonata and the inferior piece of music played just after it. His wife's performance pacifies his jealousy for a time; Pozdnyshev leaves on a business trip in excellent spirits. But after receiving a letter from her, he re-

calls the performance in a different light. He now remembers not the sonata but a different piece—"страстную вещицу" ("an impassioned little piece"; 414; 64)—by a composer whose name he cannot recall. The fact that Pozdnyshev forgets the composer's name discredits the work. Throughout his fiction, Tolstoy assigns what he considers false or bad artworks to anonymous authors. And Pozdnyshev's murky recollection of the piece suggests that it did not elicit the keen attentiveness compelled by the sonata. Most important, this piece does not, as the sonata did, arrest Pozdnyshev's mental powers but rather gives them free rein. Pozdnyshev's suspicious imagination runs amok. Since Pozdnyshev sees habitually through the prism of sexual desire, he starts to decode the musical performance as evidence of an affair that had already taken place: "Разве не ясно было, что между ними всё совершилось в этот вечер?" ("Was it not clear that everything had happened between them that evening?"; 64; 414). Pozdnyshev begins to spin his own narrative of adultery and murder. An artwork that is not perceived as the expressive gesture of anyone in particular fails, Tolstoy suggests, to loosen the grip of our solipsism and may in fact tighten it.

I see the salutary (if short-lived) effect of the sonata as Tolstoy's way of partially resolving the aforementioned paradox of his aesthetics—the contradiction between his idea that art infects regardless of its moral content and his wish that art cultivate morality. It is true that the sonata does not convey moral content. All it seems to do is divert Pozdnyshev from his familiar obsessions and suspicions, from his usual frame of mind. For Tolstoy, though, that is not nothing. It is an effect few things are capable of achieving—not a game of backgammon, and not an artwork that we experience as a purely passive object. What is needed is an artwork that resists us the way people resist us, that subjects us to its will no less than we subject it to

ours, that expresses an outlook different from our own. The sonata confronts Pozdnyshev as something created by someone else for purposes other than his own and thus awakens him (as long as he hears it) to a reality not of his own making, inhabited by autonomous subjects who live alongside him in a shared world. For the first time, he sees them, in Kant's formulation, not as means but as ends in themselves. The sonata may be amoral in content, but the fact that Pozdnyshev "felt [it] as made by someone"—to borrow a phrase from Cavell (198)—has for him a profound moral consequence.

Pozdnyshev's own story has a similar effect on its captive and captivated audience, Tolstoy's frame narrator. Though he acquires from the murderer no moral knowledge and conspicuously refrains from affirming any of Pozdnyshev's ideas, the narrator at the end of Pozdnyshev's tale sees its teller's face clearly for the first time: "[он] чуть улыбнулся, но так жалобно, что мне захотелось плакать" ("[he] smiled slightly, but so piteously that I felt ready to weep"; Крейцерова соната 78; *Kreutzer Sonata* 428)—another recognition of another's subjectivity. Echoing Kant, whose moral philosophy he admired, Tolstoy suggests that even art that does not impart moral content has a role to play in preparing us for moral action. Even if it has nothing to teach us, aesthetic experience primes us for the ethical treatment of others merely by freeing us momentarily from our own thoughts and interests. Tolstoy's novella might be said to produce the moral effect it dramatizes by alerting us to our own suspicious impulse and compelling us, temporarily, to transcend it.

Tolstoy was ultimately unsatisfied with the moral capacity of art as he conceived it in the novella. Perhaps it seemed to him too weak and too fleeting. After all, as Pozdnyshev's fate demonstrates, even an exemplary aesthetic experience is not enough to teach people right from wrong or to prevent bad people from doing bad things. Later, in his essays on art, Tol-

stoy would argue that art should not only be aesthetically compelling (infectious) but also convey explicitly moral content.

The explanatory afterword Tolstoy appended to the novella has often been taken as an example of such straightforward moral instruction. Though he refers neither to his novella's plot nor to its protagonist, Tolstoy does seem to echo in his own voice Pozdnyshev's praise of chastity. This has puzzled scholars. J. M. Coetzee wonders why "this incompetent diagnostician," a character we are compelled to disbelieve, "is given explicit support by Tolstoy as author in his 'Afterword'" (199). In fact, though Tolstoy lauds chastity as a virtue, he does not endorse Pozdnyshev's morality here any more than he does in the story. The afterword is not as straightforward as it appears. Tolstoy writes: "Целомудрие не есть правило или предписание, а идеал . . ." ("Chastity is neither rule nor injunction, but an ideal . . ."; Послесловие 84; Afterword 168). The church gives us rules, Tolstoy says, but Christ gave us an unattainable moral example. By adhering to a set of precepts one might become self-satisfied, but in striving toward Christ's example one always possesses "сознание степени несоответствия с идеальным совершенством" ("an awareness of the degree of incongruousness one's behavior has in relation to ideal perfection"; 85; 170). One is moved to "идти за собой" ("go beyond [one]self"; 85; 170). Pozdnyshev follows the rule-based morality of the church, which in Tolstoy's view distorted Christ's teachings. Even in the afterword we are not meant to accept Pozdnyshev's precepts, which are at best a formalistic distortion of the ideal.

Tolstoy's afterword ends with the assertion that all rules of conduct recede in importance before "отречение от себя для служения Богу и ближнему" ("the renunciation of self and service for God and one's neighbor"; 87; 172). Above all, one must try to transcend oneself in order to be receptive to others. And that is just what Tolstoy's infec-

tious artwork—even when he feared it could teach us, in its content, nothing at all—is designed to help us do.

### Pleasurable Torments, Lovingly Prepared: Nabokov's Variation

Nabokov, no less than Tolstoy, feared that our skepticism and the generative activity of our own minds could impede our apprehension of the world. A character on his deathbed in *The Gift* suspects there is no afterlife: “Ничего нет. Это так же ясно, как то, что идет дождь” (“There is nothing. It is as clear as the fact that it is raining”; *Дар* 323; *The Gift* 312). Nabokov points up the hubris of his doubt: “А между тем за окном играло на черепицах крыш весеннее солнце, небо было задумчиво и безоблачно, и верхняя квартирантка поливала цветы по краю своего балкона, и вода с журчанием стекла вниз” (“And meanwhile outside the spring sun was playing on the roof tiles, the sky was dreamy and cloudless, the tenant upstairs was watering the flowers on the edge of her balcony, and the water trickled down with a drumming sound”; 323; 312). Further on, the author offers an extended tutorial in good reading, which includes a warning against letting one's interpretive impulse run wild. The narrator recalls a piece of advice from his father, a famous naturalist:

При наблюдении происшествий в природе надобно остерегаться того, чтобы в процессе наблюдения, пускай наивнимательнейшего, наш рассудок, этот болтливый, вперед забегающий драгоман, не подсказал объяснения, незаметно начинающего влиять на самый ход наблюдения и искажающего его: так на истину ложится тень инструмента. (343)

When closely—no matter how closely—observing events in nature we must, in the very process of observation, beware of letting our reason—that garrulous dragoman who

always runs ahead—prompt us with explanations which then begin imperceptibly to influence the very course of observation and distort it: thus the shadow of the instrument falls upon the truth. (330)

The careful observer must try to restrain the dragoman—reason, the professional interpreter—in order not to distort the objects observed. The mind is an inveterate storyteller, weaving all sorts of plots and preventing us from seeing what is really there. By linking skepticism as well as our hypertrophied interpretive faculties with obfuscation, Nabokov echoes Tolstoy and anticipates contemporary critiques of suspicious reading.

But the younger author was more attuned than his predecessor to the pleasures of suspicion. Tolstoy saw our skeptical inclination primarily as a vice and a danger. His own struggle against skepticism is reflected in extraliterary works like *Confession* (1882) as well as in many of his literary masterpieces, including *Anna Karenina* (1878) and *The Kreutzer Sonata*. It is true that in *What Is Art?*, his late treatise on aesthetics, that struggle seems to have been won. Here Tolstoy renounced his own great works, which acknowledge the thrall of skepticism, in favor of works that exemplified the sort of unspoiled faith he attributed to Russian peasants. The philosopher Lev Shestov noted bitterly that Tolstoy's aesthetic denouncements did little good for the peasants and were disastrous for those intellectuals who could not discard their doubts as readily as Tolstoy seemed to. What these intellectuals needed were artworks that commiserated with them by acknowledging their doubts: “Им, конечно, это нужно—и как еще нужно! Но гр. Толстой этого не желает” (“They, of course, need this and oh how they need it! But Count Tolstoy does not want it”; 63). Shestov speculates that Tolstoy's late aesthetics were part of the author's effort to disguise from his followers the persistence of his own doubts. But whether

he had solved for himself the problem of skepticism, was merely avoiding it, or, as he had done earlier, was confronting it head-on, skepticism for Tolstoy was always a problem.

Nabokov, in contrast, recognized the suspicious disposition—our tendency to decode and decipher—not merely as an inescapable compulsion but also as something we might welcome for the pleasures it can provide. In *Speak, Memory* he elaborates on these pleasures in an extended comparison between the composition of a novel and that of a chess problem. "A great part of a problem's value," Nabokov explains "is due to the number of 'tries'—delusive opening moves, false scents, specious lines of play, astutely and lovingly prepared to lead the would-be solver astray" (290). In her critique of suspicion, Felski notes similar pleasures: "a sense of prowess in the exercise of ingenious interpretation, the striking elegance and economy of its explanatory schemes" (110). But in urging us to forego suspicion, she suggests that there are greater pleasures to be had from a trusting relation to the text. Nabokov rejects this dichotomy and insists that a good artwork offers both sorts of pleasures at once. A reader who tries to short-circuit the process of gradual unveiling and arrive at a chess problem's (or a novel's) "fairly simple, 'thetic' solution without having passed through the pleasurable torments" of false solutions, misses the point (*Speak, Memory* 291). It is the "simple key move" discovered by the "roundabout route" prepared by the author that gives the reader the most "poignant artistic delight" (292, 291, 292).

Nabokov's Pozdnyshev performs for us an exercise in suspicious hermeneutics that far outstrips Tolstoy's. Tolstoy's Pozdnyshev had only one theory of his crime; Nabokov's has at least three. First, he offers the story of his crime as Tolstoy's character had told it: he suspects that the conventions of his class have led him astray. But hastily he turns his skeptical eye on himself, declaring, "Я не могу продолжать в таком духе. Я сейчас солгал"

("I cannot go on in this manner. I lied just now"; "Речь Позднышева" N38a). He then proceeds with a second account. Perhaps it was his false theories about women and sex that led him to stifle his affection for his wife, treat her roughly on their wedding night, and destroy their marriage. Nabokov's Pozdnyshev reverses himself twice more before resting his case. A third explanation suggests that the murder was due not to a failure to express his passion but to that passion itself: "Может быть убийство, которое я совершил было по-своему самым естественным поступком всей моей жизни . . . потому, что я впервые дал полную волю своей страсти" ("Perhaps the murder I committed was in its own way the most natural act of my entire life . . . because for the first time I gave full rein to my passion"; N38h). Yet again he retracts his theory, calling this third account "оправдание" ("an excuse"). Reversing himself a final time, he insists that the second explanation had to be the right one: he killed his wife by depriving her of affection and tenderness, "нежности без которой женщина не может жить" ("tenderness without which a woman cannot live"; N38g). But after so many reversals, so many rival explanations, we come to doubt all of them. We sense that there is no end to the revisions and reinterpretations, no ground beneath them.

In "Pozdnyshev's Address," Nabokov creates in miniature the interpretive hall of mirrors that shimmers so dizzyingly in later works like *Pale Fire*. He displays in embryonic form an engagement with problems of interpretation that becomes a hallmark of his fiction. Here, as elsewhere in his works, Nabokov allots a modicum of self-awareness to his character but reserves the lion's share of it for the author and reader. Pozdnyshev can interpret his story and then interpret it again, but only from the higher perspective we share with the author can we glimpse the potentially endless vista of reinterpretations. The reader delights in Pozdnyshev's herme-



neutic virtuosity but (ideally) comes to realize that this delight distracts us, and the narrator himself, from his ethical failures. Nabokov's monologue thus prefigures not only a central Nabokovian narrative strategy but also an essential thematic opposition that appears again and again in his fiction: the tension between creative (including interpretive) virtuosity and the ethical treatment of others. Richard Rorty observed this tension at work in *Pale Fire* and *Lolita*, noting, for example, that in *Pale Fire* Kinbote's superior powers of suspicious imagination blind him to Shade's tragedy (his daughter's suicide). Shade, as the lesser talent, is more capable of seeing beyond his own inventions to the real suffering of other people.

So it is that Nabokov's Pozdnyshev grasps his wife's suffering only when he ceases to relentlessly suspect and decipher. Toward the end of his monologue, Pozdnyshev is seized by the recollection of his wife's battered face: "[Я] забыл себя, свои права, свою гордость, в первый раз увидал в ней человека. . . . Я понял что я, я убил ее, что от меня сделалось то, что она была живая, движущаяся, теплая, а теперь лежит неподвижная, восковая, холодная и что поправить этого никогда, нигде, ничем, нельзя" ("I forgot myself, my rights, my pride, and for the first time saw a human being in her. . . . I realized that I, I had killed her; that it was my doing that she, living, moving, warm, now lay motionless, waxen, cold, and that this could never, anywhere, or by any means be remedied"; N38f). Significantly, these are the only sentences Nabokov quotes in toto from Tolstoy's story.<sup>7</sup> Their intertextuality endows these words with a stability denied to Pozdnyshev's shifting explanations, bolstering their claim to truth. By contrast with the unreliable accounts of the character, the words we recognize as those of the author (who else could have borrowed them from Tolstoy's text?) appear trustworthy. In the end, Nabokov, like Tolstoy, suggests that

complex epistemological puzzles recede in importance before our ethical imperatives. He concludes the monologue with Pozdnyshev's entreaty of the audience "не подыскивайте каких-нибудь особенно глубоких причин, для моего поступка" ("not to search out some kind of especially deep reasons for [his] act"; N38g). "Дело было проще ("Things were simpler than all that"), Pozdnyshev declares: "Я убил человека" ("I killed a person"; N38h).

Nabokov rejected the absolute quiescence of our skepticism and interpretive desires that Tolstoy urged in *What Is Art?* and other late essays on aesthetics. He deemed it not only impossible but undesirable, since there are pleasures associated with suspicious hermeneutics, he thought, along with the pitfalls. Nabokov disdained Tolstoy's late efforts to deny our readerly pleasures by writing what Tolstoy called "простые истории" ("simple stories") whose meaning ostensibly lay at the surface and required no interpretation ("Что такое искусство?" 184; *What Is Art?* 179). The imperative to simplify, as Nabokov saw it, pilfers tools from the artist's tool kit, dishonors the artist's medium, and betrays the artist's talent. Those who laud simplicity, Nabokov proclaimed, are "traitors, not teachers" (*Lectures on Russian Literature* 238). Such disagreements have led critics to counterpose the two authors. But the precepts Tolstoy put forward toward the end of his life are not reflected in most of his art—not even his late art. Nabokov praised Tolstoy's faithlessness to his own stated principles in late masterpieces like *The Death of Ivan Ilych* (238). Nabokov's monologue and Tolstoy's novella on which it is based illustrate the two authors' aesthetic rapport. Each work compels us to simulate Pozdnyshev's suspicious reading—its madness, its cruelty—in order to indicate its dangers and help us transcend it. Nabokov, as Naiman has observed, cultivates "hermeneutic anxieties" in his readers by confounding their capacity to determine whether they are reading well or overinterpreting (117). I agree,

but I make the further claim that Nabokov does this not only to prompt self-scrutiny but also to offer us a reprieve from it.

The reader's suspicion of the fictive world is converted in the end into an appreciation of the artist's feat in evoking it. A "wise" reader, Nabokov suggests, pays attention not only to the conjured illusions but also, and most important, to the ingenuity of the artist in conjuring them: "watch[ing] the artist build his castle of cards and watch[ing] the castle of cards become a castle of beautiful steel and glass" (*Lectures on Literature* 6). A trustful encounter between reader and author—each peering at rather than behind the other—is at the core of both aesthetic and moral experience in Nabokov, as it is in Tolstoy.

One could, of course, imagine self-interested reasons why these authors might have stressed the limitations of suspicious interpretation. After all, when we read suspiciously we deny the author's monopoly on meaning and claim it for ourselves. But this essay has argued that Tolstoy and Nabokov also had aesthetic and ethical motives for attempting to curtail our readerly freedom. Both worried that texts that offer free rein to our suspicious impulses and invite endless construals confine us to our established conceptual schemes, our intellectual habits. In the extreme case—Pozdnyshev's case—the mastery obtained over such passive texts verges, they feared, on solipsism. In creating works that seek to impose on us another's subjectivity, they hoped to free us from our own.

### The Art of Persuasion

Our present debates about reading proceed from the assumption that it is not hard to get swept up by texts. The presiding metaphor seems to be Plato's comparison of art to a magnet. In his analogy, the spectator is the last in a chain of iron rings pulled by the magnetism of the poet, who is in turn possessed by the muse. We are captivated, deprived of

reason, drawn in by the charisma of the artist as if according to a natural law. If we do nothing, we will succumb to that charisma. By suspecting, by critiquing, we attempt to resist this fate, to preserve our intellectual autonomy. Critics of suspicious reading tend not to challenge this picture. They endorse rather than fear the poet's charisma but still tacitly affirm that our natural fate is to be drawn toward it. For them, receptivity to art is more effortless, more elemental, than suspicion: it is merely a matter of letting go of bad habits.

Tolstoy and Nabokov help us see that receptivity might not be so simple, or so automatic. Far from being possessed by others, we spend much of our lives inattentive to them and distrustful of them. We cannot, these authors suggest, take for granted our ability to be receptive to other people, much less to become immersed in their art. Nabokov mocks the "student [who] explains that when reading a novel he likes to skip passages 'so as to get his own idea about the book and not be influenced by the author'" (*Strong Opinions* 30). Approaching the text with suspicion is easy; trusting it is hard. It might in fact be so hard that we cannot summon a trustful attitude at will, as hopeful proponents of alternatives to suspicious hermeneutics encourage us to do. Nor, perhaps, can we formalize the way to read trustfully. For Tolstoy and Nabokov, trust is something enacted in each particular instance of reading, with great effort not only by the reader but also by the author, whose work must be designed to withstand our impulse to doubt it.

In elucidating the arduousness and evanescence of trust, I do not mean to disparage the project of exploring alternatives to suspicious hermeneutics. On the contrary, I am profoundly sympathetic to that endeavor. I do want to suggest, however, that the problem of suspicion cannot be addressed only on the readerly side of things. We might need the assistance of certain texts capable of securing our trust and inhibiting our impulse to exert

hermeneutical mastery over them. Felski acknowledges that the text “help[s] make things happen,” that it is a “coactor” in the making of meaning (168), but a full acknowledgment of the agency of texts obliges us to recognize that not all texts are equal coactors, that some make more happen than others. Our ability to read unsuspiciously depends not only on us but on texts that cultivate our trust through content and form. Instead of swapping one relation to the text for another—a project that overestimates our powers as readers and leaves us shuttling frictionlessly between suspicious and restorative hermeneutics—we might set ourselves the task of investigating how particular texts shape these relations.

## NOTES

1. See, for example, Tolstoy’s “К читателям” (“To Readers”) and “К тем Господам критикам которые захотят принять её на свой счет” (“To Those Gentlemen Critics Who Wish to Take This into Account”), draft chapters from *Childhood* (1852).

2. Some critics do attend to the limits of our readerly agency. Rooney, for example, observes that all reading, not just the suspicious variety, is the result of “‘training’ of some sort or another” (123). The way we read is inevitably informed by our circumstances—cultural, linguistic, historical. Rooney defends suspicious, or “symptomatic,” reading on the grounds that it is more honest about “the trace of a force never entirely in the control of either reader or writer” (116). But in holding us responsible for reading honestly, Rooney reinstates (at least in part) the control she began by challenging.

3. Following Ricoeur, who warned against conflating skepticism and suspicion, Felski distinguishes between the two, arguing that the first “implies a world view” while the second is an “affective orientation . . . that does not always terminate in the grand abyss of radical doubt” (36). But defining suspicion as a mere attitude, as well as cleaving from it the metaphysical concerns that might animate it, seems to me to defang suspicion, to disarm it of its most vexing elements. I try to consider suspicion in its most compelling form, so, like Tolstoy and Nabokov, I draw no hard-and-fast line between it and skepticism.

4. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

5. Extracts from “Rech Pozdnysheva,” by Vladimir Nabokov. © Vladimir Nabokov, used by permission of the Wylie Agency, LLC.

6. Even critics who dismiss much of Pozdnyshev’s monologue as madness tend to trust him on the sonata and dispute its salutary effect (e.g., Gustafson; Herman). But I agree with Emerson that notwithstanding Tolstoy’s late aesthetics, we should “remember that during the actual performance of the sonata in the Pozdnyshev’s drawing room, the outraged husband is moved, satisfied, ennobled” (442).

7. Nabokov is quoting verbatim from Tolstoy’s text. The English translation here is from Tolstoy, *Kreutzer Sonata* 427–28.

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