“WHAT DID I WANT?":
THEATRICALITY AND THE CRISIS OF MODERN SUBJECTIVITY IN TOLSTOI’S KREUTZER SONATA

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Abstract
This article argues theatricality is at least as central to the dilemmas that preoccupy Tolstoi’s Kreutzer sonata (Kreutzer Sonata) as sex and lust. The novella is riddled with dissembling and play-acting. Tolstoi worries that constantly performing for audiences causes the modern subject to lose track of its true desires, which renders us incapable of authentic being, makes us effectively identical to one another and hence anonymous, interchangeable, and incapable of love, and dooms us to misery as we begin to act exclusively on role-played, rather than real, impulses. The aim of this article is to demonstrate that the hero and the text are unable to escape theatricality themselves. Such a reading has the virtue of being able to make sense of a number of puzzling twists in the plot that till now have been problematic or inexplicable.

Keywords: L.N. Tolstoi; Kreutzer Sonata; Theatricality; Subjectivity; Self & Other

He who begins to make himself a stranger to himself will not take long to completely forget himself. (Rousseau, Emile)
I. Introduction

This article offers an alternate interpretation of the preoccupations of Tolstoi’s Kreitserova sonata (Kreutzer Sonata). The novella may be concerned less with sex and lust, even though that was Tolstoi’s repeated and explicit claim, than with dissembling and role-playing. Such a reading has the virtue of being able to make sense of a number of puzzling twists in the plot that till now have been problematic or inexplicable.

The moment many readers remember best in Kreutzer Sonata is at the climax, when the hero, Pozdnyshev, who has carefully taken off his shoes so he can creep up and catch his wife in flagrante delicto, lets the musician Trukhachevskii get away, even though he wants to kill him, because “смешно бежать в чулках за любовником своей жены” (27: 73; “it is ridiculous to run after one’s wife’s lover in one’s socks”; 423). This weird moment of comedy in an otherwise oppressively humorless work underscores the story’s central but underappreciated obsession with theatricality or performance, actions carried out not because they achieve some real end, but merely because they look some way. For Tolstoi the crucial distinction between an authentic act and a theatrical one rests on its other-directedness. If I take a step because I really want to (even if unconsciously), if I would do the same thing even if I were alone, it is authentic. But if I do it or give it a particular form merely because an audience is present and I am thinking how they will perceive it, Tolstoi considers it fake, insincere. Tolstoi flatly refuses to admit a possibility that so absorbs someone like Dostoevskii, and with him many other thinkers, that desires to dissemble can be both truly meant and reliable pointers to the performer’s true personality. For Tolstoi this is simply not a possibility. Your truest personality is how you are when you are uninfluenced by others.

The question at the heart of Kreutzer Sonata’s plot is: What would happen if a man gradually became so obsessed with what others think that he forgot, literally forgot, how to want anything purely for himself? Tolstoi fears the modern psyche may be always inauthentic in this way and we simply have not noticed. Things like footwear matter to Pozdnyshev because “я помнил все время, какое впечатление я произвожу на других” (27: 74; “I was all the time aware of the impression I was producing on others”; 423) – this despite the fact that the jealous rage of the deceived spouse is supposed to be one of a human being’s rawest and most uncontrolled moments. For Kreutzer Sonata the universal human proclivity towards hyper-awareness of the other is a disruption threatening to the integrity of the self, an impurity, and – since in Tolstoyan thought the self is the indispensable core of identity, the source, among other things, of truest and deepest knowledge of the world, the locus of conscience, and even the site where God most fully emerges – threatening to essentially everything. When it becomes second nature to think of my
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