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LEO TOLSTOY'S AND JOSEPH CONRAD'S RELATION TO MUSIC

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Abstract: It is important to stress that Tolstoy's and Conrad's texts are to be understood to include not only literary, and thus verbal, texts but also elements of other media, such as music, theatre and visual arts. It should be noted that for Conrad music was also one of the arts that he greatly appreciated. Though Conrad's main concern was to make us "*see*," he was also concerned with making us "hear." The use of music to accompany sexual desire, frustration and violence is a technique often used by the writer. Likewise, music had an enormous influence on Tolstoy. He was fascinated with its power, just as with the power of sexuality, beauty and war. His favourite composer was Chopin, but he also appreciated Mozart, Haydn, Weber, and Beethoven. In *The Kreutzer Sonata and Other Stories* Tolstoy expresses his complex and controversial views on marriage and sexuality, focussing on his protagonist Pozdnyshev and his wife, who performs Beethoven's *Kreutzer Sonata* with a spirited violinist Trukhachevskii. The obsessive nature of Pozdnyshev's jealousy is nowhere more obvious than in the sexual power he ascribes to music, and particularly to the initial part of the *presto* of Beethoven's sonata.

Keywords: Joseph Conrad, Leo Tolstoy, Beethoven, *The Kreutzer Sonata*, sexual desire, frustration, jealousy, violence

As for Conrad's complex relation to Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910), it needs to be pointed out that although the Russian writer was considered by Conrad "perhaps […] worthy"[1] of Constance Garnett's translation, he was also treated by Conrad with reserve and suspicion as being too mystical for his own taste.[2] In a letter to John Galsworthy Conrad wrote:

> I don't believe that it will ever lead you into the gratuitous atrocity, of, say, Ivan Illyitch [*sic*] or the monstrous stupidity of such thing as the *Kreutzer Sonata*, for instance; where an obvious degenerate not worth looking at twice, totally unfitted not only for married life but for any sort

[1] J. Conrad, *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, vol. 5, eds. F. Karl, L. Davies, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996, p. 71.

[2] *The Death of Ivan Ilyitch and Other Stori*es was translated by Constance Garnett in 1902.

> of life is presented as a sympathetic victim of some sort of sacred truth that is supposed to live within him.[3]

Clearly, Conrad feels that—with Tolstoy's works he cites—the Russian writer is moralizing. Conrad, an artist, who wanted to arrive at his meanings immediately through the sensuous renderings of passionate experience, and not merely to define meanings in abstraction as does didacticism, or moralizing, was suspicious about Tolstoy—a humanitarian moralist.

In a letter to Edward Garnett of 23 February 1914 Conrad sums up his view on the Russian novelist:

> *Dislike* as definition of my attitude to Tols: is but a rough and approximate term. I judge him not—for this reason that his anti-sensualism is suspect to me. In that matter (which is not worth the fuss which is made about it) the pros and the antis seem to me tarred with the same brush.[4]

Having criticised Tolstoy's "anti-sensualism" which is an important aspect of *The Kreutzer Sonata*, Conrad elaborates on what he finds particularly odious about the Russian writer:

> [T]he base from which he starts—Christianity—is distasteful to me. I am not blind to its services but the absurd oriental fable from which it starts irritates me. Great, improving, softening, compassionate it may be but it has lent itself with amazing facility to cruel distortion and is the only religion which, with its impossible standards, has brought an infinity of anguish to innumerable souls—on this earth.[5]

It is important to stress that Tolstoy's and Conrad's texts are to be understood to include not only literary, or verbal, texts but also elements of the other media, such as music, theatre and visual arts. Alexandra Tolstoy writes: "Music had an enormous influence on Tolstoy. […] Music penetrated the deepest recesses of his soul, it stirred his whole being, it released in him embryonic thoughts and emotions of which he himself was not cognizant. Waves of delight, joy, fear of losing these seconds of almost divine uplift, flooded him, suffocated him."[6]

Leo Tolstoy is also the author of *Waltz in F*, his only known musical composition. According to Edward Crankshaw, Tolstoy's love for music was "a patchy, incoherent passion, but a genuine one all the same. Compositions and performers who caught his attention were *ipso facto* important and great."[7] Caryl Emerson adds that the Russian novelist was fascinated "by the *force* of music, just as he was by the force of sexuality, beauty and war." By "force Tolstoy did not mean violence or disruption, but the power to organize, suddenly and irresistibly, all our scattered actions and feelings

[3] Letter to John Galsworthy, 2-3 September 1908 [in:] *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, vol. 4, eds. F. Karl, L. Davies, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991, p. 116.

[4] Letter to Edward Garnett, 23 February 1914 [in:] *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, vol. 5, *op. cit.*, p. 358.

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] A. Tolstoy, "Tolstoy and Music," *The Russian Review* 1958, vol. 17(4), p. 258.

[7] E. Crankshaw, *Tolstoy: The Making of a Novelist*, London: Papermac, 1986, p. 104.

into a coherent meaningful whole."[8] His favourite composer was Chopin, but he also liked Mozart, Haydn, and Weber. Compositions and performers whom he did not know, simply did not exist for him. For example, he was deeply moved by a certain Beethoven trio; but it seems not to have occurred to him to find out more about the composer, or to explore his other compositions. When he spoke or wrote about Beethoven, his response was often negative, considering that with Beethoven began the decline of musical art.

Tolstoy's attitude to certain composers and types of music seemed to be influenced by the performances he witnessed, or by the artists who visited him. Among the Russian musicians who visited Tolstoy and played for him were: Anton Rubinstein, Sergei Taneyev, Alexander Scriabin, Sergei Rachmaninoff and Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov. One of Tolstoy's achievements was to help found the Moscow Musical Society, which, under Rubinstein, grew into the Moscow Conservatoire.[9]

The initial idea for Tolstoy's *Kreutzer Sonata* may date back to the late 1860s, the time between his conclusion of *War and Peace* and the beginning of *Anna Karenina*. It developed into the complex work we know today in approximately 1887, when the subject of a wife-murderer was given the context of Tolstoy's views on sexuality, music, and other issues pertaining to nineteenth-century life, with which the story is invested. Upon his visit to Yasnaya Polyana in June 1887, Tolstoy is thought to have heard from an actor Andreev-Burlak about a passenger on a train who spoke about his murder of his wife. If that provided the basic plot, Tolstoy's concern with marriage, sexuality, and procreation at the time, heightened by his poor relations with his own wife, led to his writing the Afterword to *The Kreutzer Sonata*. As for the association with Beethoven, a performance of the latter's *Kreutzer Sonata* at Tolstoy's Moscow home in the spring of 1888, reinforced the writer's feeling that music could be dangerously seductive. These and other issues, which were part of Tolstoy's Christian anarchism and his belief in the divine origin of things, appear to have been an obsession that consumed Tolstoy during the protracted composition of his story. That it finally did appear in volume XIII of his collected works in 1891 was largely due to his wife's efforts to persuade Tsar Alexander III to allow its publication after she had herself bowdlerized some aspects of the text. In his *Kreutzer Sonata*, Tolstoy expresses his complex if controversial views on marriage and sexuality, focussing on his protagonist Pozdnyshev and his wife, who plays Beethoven's *Kreutzer Sonata* with a spirited violinist Trukhachevskii. Crankshaw claims that in "the life-destroying horror *The Kreutzer Sonata*"[10] Tolstoy uses all his marvellous skills "to produce a piece of fiction that is manifestly evil, because deliberately rejecting life."[11] It is a tale of almost pathological morbidity, about a man who, driven insane by jealousy, murders his wife; it is an actual diatribe against sexual love, in general, and the conventions of marriage, in particular, as well as an exposure of the nature of Tolstoy's

[8] C. Emerson, "Tolstoy and Music" [in:] *Anniversary Essays on Tolstoy*, ed. D. Tussing Orwin, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010, p. 8.

[9] E. Crankshaw, *op. cit*., p. 105.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 169.

[11] *Ibid*., p. 177.

own most secret and intimate relations with his own wife.[12] Despite his earlier celebration of the joys of biological fecundity in his great novels, by 1890 Tolstoy had come to a conclusion that there was no such thing as "good" sex. As the Afterword to *The Kreutzer Sonata* explains, the procreative sex of marriage is the least offensive kind, but even that distracts people form selfless service to God and man. It is thus better to live together in sexless "purity," as brothers and sisters.[13]

Tolstoy's Pozdnyshev is a man incapable of having a normal relationship with a woman, and thus particularly contemptuous of fictional romances for their failing to tell the truth about sexual relations. As he insists, no 'higher feelings' exist; all a man wants is a woman's body, and she, in turn, endeavours to make herself physically attractive to him. The cynicism of such a view is elaborated into the absurdity of asserting that sex in marriage is a male-induced vice, and the human race might very well come to an end since the true aims of humanity—such as welfare, virtue, love, universal brotherhood, the beating of swords into ploughshares—are always menaced by human passions, of which carnal love is the strongest. Pozdnyshev's own honeymoon proves a failure. His hatred of his wife, leading to murderous jealousy, gestates over many years of marriage through his own enslavement to her physical allure, her resultant power over him, and, with the arrival of children, her escape from the duty of breast-feeding on the advice of her doctors. His jealousy is fuelled by the arrival of a young musician Trukhachevskii, to whom his wife feels attracted. As a mature woman, fully aware of her sexuality, she realizes that she has reached the point when she can enjoy love without child-bearing. And it is music, "the most exquisite voluptuousness of the senses," that becomes "a link between them."[14] In "What is Art?" (1897) Tolstoy argues that the effect of art is in a sense of unity. A real work of art destroys in the consciousness of the perceiver the separation between himself and the artist, but also between himself and all whose minds are involved.

The obsessive nature of Pozdnyshev's jealousy is nowhere more obvious than in the power he ascribes to music, particularly to the initial part of the *presto* of Beethoven's sonata. Music, in Pozdnyshev's judgement, is the most 'infectious' of all arts. It is inherently obsessive, and "terrifying" as "[i]t has neither an exalting nor a debasing effect but an agitating one."[15] As Pozdnyshev admits in describing his reaction to his wife and Trukhachevskii's performance of the sonata: "Music makes me forget myself, my true condition, it carries me off into another state of being, one that isn't my own: under the influence of music I have the illusion of feeling things I don't really feel, of understanding things I don't understand, being able to do things I'm not

[12] A father of ten children, with his greatest work behind him, showered with fame and honours, financially more than secure, but increasingly obsessed with his own spiritual salvation, the writer suddenly discovered that the ideal to be aimed at in marriage was for husband and wife to live as brother and sister. This new revelation of his was pursued and elaborated on with a hysteria of violence in *The Kreutzer Sonata*.

[13] L. Tolstoy, *The Kreutzer Sonata and Other Stories*, transl. with an introduction by D. McDuff, New York: Penguin Books, 1985, p. 176.

[14] *Ibid*., p. 147.

[15] *Ibid*., p. 144.

able to do."[16] So strong is this obsessive, drugging effect of music that it has been placed under government control in China, remarks Pozdnyshev, in an obvious justification of his case.

Yet here, Tolstoy has pinpointed a flaw in human nature that posed as real a threat to morality and good conduct in the nineteenth century as it does in the twenty-first. His argument presupposes that the influence of music, like that of drugs, or female sexuality, is pathologically akin to an addiction, or vice. In Pozdnyshev's case, it incites his suspicions and jealousy to the point of murderous rage. Likewise, ironically, music has a deafening effect, which makes it impossible for Pozdnyshev to overhear a conversation between his wife and Trukhachevskii: "The door to the dancing-room is shut but I hear the sound of a rhythmic arpeggio and his and her voices. I listen, but cannot make out anything. Evidently the sound of the piano is purposely made to drown the sound of their voices, their kisses … perhaps."[17]

However, when in a belief that his suspicions concerning his wife's relationship with Trukhachevskii are unfounded, Pozdnyshev leaves for the provinces, where he receives a letter from his wife, which arouses his worst suspicions. On his way home by train (featuring in his confession) his jealousy intensifies and his doubts increase. Minutely described, the actions and thoughts accompanying him in the process as well as the confrontation with his wife and Trukhachevskii constitute one of the most sustained and psychologically compelling passages in all Tolstoy's fiction. It climaxes in a murder, for Pozdnyshev stabs his wife to death.

For Conrad, music was also one of the arts which he appreciated most highly. Though his main concern was to make us "*see*," he was also concerned with making us "hear." In the Preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* Conrad, like Schopenhauer, gives "the magic suggestiveness of music–which is the art of arts"[18] the supreme status among all arts. It should be noted, however, that despite Conrad's description of music as the "art of arts" in the Preface, the role of music itself is a minor one in Conrad's correspondence. Only a couple of composers are named by him, including two passing references to Wagner and one appreciative mention of Meyerbeer. About the latter Conrad wrote: "I suppose that I am now the only human being in these Isles who thinks Meyerbeer a great composer: and I am an alien at that and not to be wholly trusted."[19] Jakob Meyerbeer, a German composer, was an important figure of the French opera from 1831 till his death in 1864; Wagner, of course, also composed operas. Otherwise, Conrad briefly mentions Ravel, but only because he met the composer once or twice himself, on one of which occasions he confessed: "[w]e got rather thick together last time he was there."[20] There is nothing about Ravel's music in Conrad's

[16] *Ibid*.

[17] *Ibid*., p. 138.

[18] J. Conrad, "Preface" to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* [in:] *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus.' Typhoon and Other Stories*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986, p. 12.

[19] Letter to Galsworthy, 18 June 1910 [in:] *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, vol. 4, *op. cit*., p. 338.

[20] Letter to Eric Pinker, 9 April 1923 [in:] G. Jean-Aubry, *Joseph Conrad: Life and Letters*, vol. 2, London: Heinemann, 1927, p. 303.

comment, though. However, these letters suggest Conrad's interest in the opera, which he seems to confirm when writing to Sir Hugh Clifford about the latter's *Downfall of the Gods*:

> What a tremendous subject for a great, a really great opera! And pray don't think it mean praise. No great poem for music has been written yet; subjects of course are lying about. What I mean to say is that here is a subject, the subject of *the* Great Oriental Opera, worked out. Absolutely done![21]

Indeed, most of Conrad's references to music revolve around operatic compostions. After finishing *Almayer's Folly*, for instance, he wrote to Marguerite Poradowska: "I shall soon send you the last chapter. It begins with a *trio*—Nina, Dain, Almayer—and it ends with a *solo* for Almayer which is almost as long as the solo in Wagner's *Tristan*."[22] *Almayer's Folly* also ends with the death of young lovers. It is likewise the opera that so impresses Lingard in *The Rescue*. While in Melbourne, Lingard

> went to a show […]. It was a story acted to music. All the people went singing through it right to the very end. […] But that story with music I am telling you of, Mrs. Travers, was not a tale for children. I assure you that of the few shows I have seen that one was the most real to me. More real than anything in life.[23]

Music is functional for Babalatchi in *An Outcast from the Islands*, where his song ensures that Aïssa and Willems will not doze off while the blind and murderous Omar is about: "It could hardly be called a song; it was more in the nature of a recitative without any rhythm, delivered rapidly but distinctly in a croaking and unsteady voice; and if Babalatchi considered it a song, then it was a song with a purpose and, perhaps for that reason, artistically defective."[24]

For the talented and enthusiastic pianist of Freya, the heroine of Conrad's short story *Freya of the Seven Isles*, a piano was a means of proclaiming her passion for Jasper Allen:

> Freya would sit down to the piano and play fierce Wagner music in the flicker of blinding flashes, with thunderbolts falling all round, enough to make your hair stand on end; and Jasper would remain stock still on the verandah, adoring the back view of her supple, swaying figure, the miraculous sheen of her fair head, the rapid hands on the keys, the white nape of her neck.[25]

Music also serves her as a means of defence in the story against the unwelcome attentions of Heemskirk, "a gentleman ready to worship at [Freya's] feet":

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[21] Letter to Sir Hugh Clifford, 22 June 1911 [in:] *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, vol. 4, *op. cit*., p. 451.

[22] Letter to Marguerite Poradowska, 2 May 1894 [in:] *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, vol. 1, eds. F. Karl, L. Davies, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983, p. 156.

[23] J. Conrad, *The Works of Joseph Conrad: The Rescue*, vol. 17, London: Heinemann, 1921, pp. 376-377.

[24] J. Conrad, *An Outcast of the Islands*, London: Eveleigh Nash & Grayson, 2012, p. 81.

[25] J. Conrad, *The Works of Joseph Conrad: 'Twixt Land and Sea*, vol. 12, London: Heinemann, 1921, p. 187.

> Freya did not turn her head. Her face went stiff with horror and indignation. This adventure was altogether beyond her conception of what was possible. It was not in her character to jump up and run away. […] It was best to ignore—to ignore. She went on playing loudly and correctly, as though she were alone, as if Heemskirk did not exist. That proceeding irritated him.[26]

Thus music becomes an instrument of dismissal for the Lieutenant, putting on his way when, in confusion, he takes a hasty leave.

Music sometimes serves as a cover-up of reality in Conrad's work. The salesman from Baltimore in *The Rescue* considers musical instruments to be a suitable label for a box full of firearms: "Mexican war rifles—good as new—six in a case—my people in Baltimore—that's so. Hundred and twenty rounds thrown in for each specimen—marked to suit your requirements. Suppose—musical instruments, this side up with care—how's that for your taste?"[27]

Generally speaking, in Conrad's texts 'mechanical' music sometimes functions as a disruptive force. For example, the piano's mechanical out-of-tune jauntiness in *The Secret Agent*, apparent on each of its appearances, obliterates conversation by intruding upon it. Impertinent and dominating, the piano produces a "deafening din" in place of music, which interrupts, and thus takes precedence over, human communication, foreshadowing a revelation of destructive secrets in the scene below:

> An upright semi-grand piano near the door, flanked by two palms in pots, executed suddenly all by itself a false tune with aggressive virtuosity. The din it raised was deafening. When it ceased, as abruptly as it had started, the bespectacled, dingy little man who faced Ossipon behind a heavy glass mug full of beer emitted calmly what had the sound of a general proposition.[28]

Thus, 'mechanical' music acts as an encroachment upon rather than an accompaniment to human life. In *Nostromo* there are reminders that music is often used to incite, or accompany, violence. A military band "plays sometimes in the evenings before the revolutions"[29]; the band also sends the Sulaco garrison off to war. Decoud himself directly connects music and the sound of trumpets with violence: "But to return to my noises; there used to be in the old days the sound of trumpets outside that gate. War trumpets!"[30] On the other hand, in *Nostromo* music also plays a defiant role, a positive force in the midst of suffering, still capable of rallying people, or at least taking their minds of their current woes, at least momentarily:

> In the patio littered with straw, a practicante, one of Dr. Monygham's native assistants, sat on the ground with his back against the rim of the fountain, fingering a guitar discreetly, while two girls of the lower class, standing up before him, shuffled their feet a little and waved their arms, humming a popular dance tune. Most of the wounded during the two days of rioting had been taken away already by their friends and relations, but several figures could be seen sitting up balancing their bandaged heads in time to the music.[31]

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[26] *Ibid*., p. 241.

[27] *Ibid*., p. 122.

[28] J. Conrad, *The Secret Agent*, Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2000, p. 53.

[29] J. Conrad, *Nostromo*, Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2000, p. 10.

[30] *Ibid.*, p. 118.

[31] *Ibid*., p. 244.

Lastly, there seems to be an echo of the tonic *sol-fa* about the names Doramin in *Lord Jim* and Sofala in *The End of the Tether*, which suggests that Conrad appreciated music and used its attributes in his fiction.

To conclude, both Conrad and Tolstoy were sensitive to music to a considerable degree. Tolstoy was musical by nature and was even thinking of becoming a musician. There are many references in both writers' works to music and composers, especially in the context of sexual desire, frustration, or violence.

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