

Art in Doubt: Tolstoy, Nabokov, and the Problem of Other Minds. By Tatiana Gershkovich. Studies in Russian Literature and Theory. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2022. ix, 225pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$100.00, hard bound; \$32.00, paper.
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Vladimir Nabokov elicits a cleared throat for us Lev Tolstoi specialists. The two Russian writers seem incompatible, the ultimate ends of an argument about literature. Nabokov is an aesthete *par excellence*, someone who smugly trumpeted that art is a pleasurable but tricky game for the select. Tolstoi's aesthetics, at least those of what Steve Hickey calls "the Second Tolstoy," reject snobbery and proclaim that the boys from the village are better readers. Aestheticism is fit for the washed masses.

However, we quickly add after the expectionation, Nabokov considered Tolstoy "the greatest Russian writer." In fact, at one point in his lectures on literature, Nabokov has a sadomasochistic break and fantasizes about shackling Tolstoi in a room and making him write, literally the plot of a horror novel. Tatyana Gershkovich's *Art in Doubt* offers a conciliatory explanation, a way to unite Tolstoi's aesthetics with Nabokov's: the two writers investigate the predicament of skepticism in order to formulate artistic strategies that might temporarily keep it at bay.

Our field, so goes her convincing argument, has won the battles but lost the war. We teach reading ("interpretation") that exalts decoding "the secret meaning." This approach to reading is simply Cartesian philosophical skepticism applied to "literature." Doubting everything must lead to certainty.

Ironically, as countless critics of René Descartes have pointed out, this technique instead inevitably eventuates in solipsism. We are left lonely and sad, in Stanley Cavell's words unable to feel the other's pain, unable to overcome our experience of separation. Can we not get back to our prelapsarian experience of the text?

Gershkovitch is far from the first to point out the pitfalls of the suspicious mode. But she insightfully points out that we, as critics, naturally assume that we can fix the situation (this is a profoundly Tolstoian moment!) and overlook the possibility that two brilliant writers, the very ones we have been taught to distrust, might themselves be concerned with the problem; might themselves be alarmed at the wreck of solipsism; might themselves have some balm: "My aim will be to demonstrate that the temptation and torments of skepticism, and Tolstoy's and Nabokov's attempts to think and write their way out of it, shaped their fiction in fundamental ways" (4).

In Chap. 1, the author examines Tolstoi's *Anna Karenina* alongside Ludwig Wittgenstein and Cavell's ideas on solipsism and skepticism. She suggests that Tolstoi's novel is not only a tale of society but also a philosophical drama about the "uncertain artist," someone who cannot be sure that their art has any significance beyond their own experience. Chap. 2 turns to Nabokov's *The Gift*, a novel that tells the story of an artist protagonist who yearns for a spectator who can fully understand and appreciate his perspective. Gershkovitch argues that beneath the surface of this tale of artistic triumph lies a deep anxiety about the unbridgeable gap between author and reader, and offers a new perspective on Nabokov's recurring theme of doubles.

In Chap. 3, the author presents a revisionary reading of Tolstoi's *What Is Art?* on aesthetic unresponsiveness. By placing Tolstoy's ideas in dialogue with David Hume's, Gershkovich reconstructs a broader discourse that views aesthetic receptivity as an achievement to be labored over rather than a given predisposition. The chapter suggests that Tolstoi diagnosed the atrophy of receptivity in himself and his peers, and offers insights into the nature of aesthetic experience. Chap. 4 centers

on the works of Tolstoi and Nabokov—*Kreutzer Sonata*, *Pale Fire*, “Pozdyshev’s Address”—that probe the limitations of the skeptical disposition and its impact on our ability to engage with the world beyond ourselves. The author argues that by reflecting on our own skepticism, we may actually deepen our engagement with it (for better or worse).

What sets this book apart is its clarity and accessibility. Gershkovich presents complex ideas in a way that is easy to follow and engaging. As a Tolstoi specialist, I wonder that Gershkovich did not explore Tolstoi’s hermeneutics of translation for the Gospels, or his reaction to the peasant children reading in “Who Should Learn Writing from Whom . . .” Both these works address directly how to overcome “skeptical” reading. That said, the book is very well-researched and thoughtfully written, making it an excellent choice for both scholars and general readers interested in the intersection of art and philosophy.

MICHAEL DENNER
Stetson University

Tolstoy in Context. Ed. Anna A. Berman. Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 2022. xxxiv, 357 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Chronology. Index. Photographs. \$105.00, hard bound.
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Part of the Cambridge University Press series “Literature in Context,” this excellent volume offers thirty-nine concise but highly informative essays by leading scholars of Russian literature and history that place Lev Tolstoi into a variety of contexts, from Russia’s class and estate systems to artistic representations of Tolstoi himself, both in his time and after his death. The volume is divided into six larger sections: “The Man” (introducing the writer’s biographical background); “The Russian Social and Political Contexts”; “Literature, the Arts, and Intellectual Life”; “Science and Technology” (including Tolstoi’s relationship to the natural world); “Beyond Russia” (examining Tolstoi’s international connections, such as his reception in India and his engagement with American thinkers and political activists); and “Tolstoi’s Afterlife” (focusing on adaptations of Tolstoi’s works in various arts, their English translations, the writer’s biographies, and complete works editions).

The main strength of the volume, in my opinion, consists not only in the useful background information that each essay offers but also in the strong conceptual underpinning of the contributions. Tolstoi was a deeply conflicted artist and thinker, and most authors productively engage with his contradictions and paradoxes. His life, as Andrei Zorin points out in his chapter, was modeled on the Romantic myth of lost unity, even as Tolstoi himself often countered Romantic ideals and aesthetics in his works. Often portrayed as a lone “giant,” towering over the rest of Russian literary figures, Tolstoi, in fact, was embedded in the literary context of his time, shared many preoccupations of his generation, and conducted an intense dialogue with his predecessors and contemporaries (Ilya Vinitsky). A future pacifist, he enlisted in military service and glorified (albeit with ambivalence) the Russian army’s military successes in *War and Peace* and, moreover, paradoxically used the language of war to advance his anti-war agenda (Donna Tussing Orwin). While deeply sympathizing with and at times idealizing the peasantry (and trying to imitate it in his dress and lifestyle), Tolstoi was painfully aware of his privileged noble status (Sibelan Forrester) and downplayed the brutality of serfdom in his works (Anne Hruska). Suspicious of industrial progress, he was nonetheless fascinated by the technological inventions