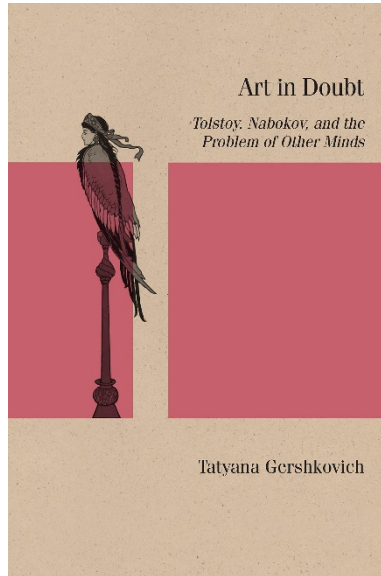


***Art in Doubt: Tolstoy, Nabokov, and the Problem of Other Minds*, by Tatyana Gershkovich.**  
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Bibliography. Index. 225 pp.



It is common within critical studies of Russian-born writers Leo Tolstoy and Vladimir Nabokov to place their mature works at diametric ends of the stylistic spectrum. Tolstoy’s late work prioritizes genuine communication in unadorned, straightforward prose. Nabokov, on the other hand, created literary works which are labyrinthine in their structures and feature finely wrought prose which must often be labored over by his readers. The former’s writing is candid and forthright; the latter’s is baroque and puzzling. In *Art in Doubt*, Tatyana Gershkovich places the works of these two great writers into conversation, claiming that they are both searching for a solution to the same problem: the problem of other minds and whether it is truly possible to know or be known by another (3-4). Specifically, she contends that through their fundamentally divergent styles, the “celebrated fiction and often bizarre aesthetic theorizing of these two authors” can be reconceived “as coherent, career-long attempts to reckon with skeptical despair” (3).

Using her own close readings of their celebrated fictions and aesthetic treatises, Gershkovich illustrates that both writers are working through their own propensity toward radical doubt and the accompanying existential solipsistic dread “that we are sealed within ourselves, confined by our subjective perspective on the world” (13). Gershkovich augments her argument by sketching out the philosophical tradition of skeptical doubt for her readers, returning most often to the thoughts of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Stanley Cavell, especially regarding the problem of pain—the inability of one person to feel the pain of another (8). She successfully presents and deploys this tradition without ever deviating from her main

argument. Indeed, the book is propulsive, inexorably building toward its conclusion. Throughout, Gershkovich's own writing style is erudite yet approachable—she weaves together philosophy and her close readings of Tolstoy and Nabokov in prose which is at once clear and accessible. Structurally, the book is divided into an introduction and four body chapters, two focusing primarily on Tolstoy and two on Nabokov, as well as a summative afterword.

In her discussions of Tolstoy, Gershkovich draws upon the author's private writings as well as many of his major works, including both literary and critical, to argue that Tolstoy was searching for a means of creating a common—i.e., shared—experience through art which could dispel the radical doubts from which he suffered. In the first chapter, for instance, titled "Tolstoy's Uncertain Artist" (24-59), Gershkovich focuses most primarily on *Anna Karenina*, which she states, "demonstrates the existential stakes of Tolstoy's encounter with aesthetic skepticism and his vehement, lifelong attempt to reject it" (29). She examines the problem of other minds in the novel as she moves through discussions of many of its characters, including Constantine Levin, Kitty Shcherbatsky, Alexei Vronsky, the artist Mikhailov, and the eponymous Anna herself. Furthering her overall argument, Gershkovich claims that each of these characters is searching for a way to connect with others, sometimes failing to do so. Her argument surrounding Levin is illustrative of her larger aims in the chapter: Levin, whose tendency to peer out at the world from within the "private and unshareable" internal world of his own mind and experience his own experiences, is continually plagued by radical doubt (32). How can he hope to share these hyper-individualized sensations with others? How can another possibly feel as he does? According to Gershkovich's interpretation of the text, Levin's solution is a "work cure" (38). He finds relief from his solipsistic doubts by experiencing the everyday world with and alongside other people in the daily activities of his farm (38). These shared experiences are key to Gershkovich's larger argument about what Tolstoy and Nabokov are doing through their art. Each, in his separate way, is attempting to create a shared experience for the artist and reader to dispel their own doubt.

However, Tolstoy's doubts, according to Gershkovich, were harder to quell. She presents compelling evidence in her third chapter, "Atrophied Aesthetic Sense" (90-124), to suggest that while Tolstoy avowed art's ability to create these shared aesthetic experiences, his discursive works on the subject, especially *What Is Art?*, show his inability to experience them himself. She demonstrates that in this critical work, Tolstoy is not truly describing good and bad art; instead, he is confessing his own "failure to be possessed" by art (100). Using additional examples from the novella *Hadji Murat*, Gershkovich outlines the problem and its solution. The protagonist, unlike the other two major characters, Nicholas I and Shamil, can quiet his own internal monologue and appreciate true art, thus sharing an experience with the artist. This allows him to act altruistically, literally for others outside of himself, whereas the other two characters

remain trapped within their own thinking (104-114). Unlike Tolstoy, who as Gershkovich observes, continually interjects his own thoughts into his *The Circle of Reading*, Hadji Murat is aesthetically receptive, which Gershkovich repeatedly points out is much more difficult than most critics believe.

Nabokov deals with uncertainty and radical doubt in a manner opposite to Tolstoy. Both authors, according to Gershkovich's interpretation, are seeking methods of knowing the mind of another, thus alleviating their solipsistic impulses. Instead of quieting these doubts as does Tolstoy, Nabokov seeks to amplify them. Gershkovich uses Fyodor in *The Gift* as a prototypical example of Nabokov's desire to be fully understood in the book's second chapter, "Nabokov's Moderate Multiplication of the Self" (60-89). However, as it does in *The Gift*, this desire creates a paradox: if an author is to be fully understood, the reader must needs become the author—there is no way for a person who is other (i.e., not the author) to comprehend the multitude of personal connections, allusions, and experiences the author is drawing upon while writing (60-62). Just as no one can feel another's pain, no one can ever truly know the author's mind. Gershkovich suggests that for Nabokov, the answer must lie in the liminal state which gives the chapter its title, a "moderate multiplication" of the author's mind (89). The reader cannot become the author, but the reader can attempt—can make the effort—to approximate the author's intention. She goes on to connect this effort with Nabokov's famously strict demands of readers, including his own readings of other authors. To further complicate this relationship between reader and writer, Gershkovich examines *Pale Fire*, with its fraught reader-writer interrelationship in the fourth chapter, "Suspicion on Trial" (125-154). Activating the reader's tendencies toward suspicion is a tool for Nabokov, she argues (136). It allows a reader to glimpse the mind of the artist through the maze of suspicion. She contends that Nabokov's works, like Tolstoy's, feature characters who are initially "keenly attentive to [their] own impressions" but who can learn "at last to recognize another's pain—or else, calamitously" fail, allowing the reader to recognize the dangers of this failure (155). In this way, the reader also views the author's will (139). The reader who does so is able to make a meaningful connection with the mind of another.

Ultimately, Gershkovich argues that both authors are seeking to alleviate their own doubts and the doubts of their readers through the creation of a shared aesthetic experience. Tolstoy aims to do so by using straightforward sentiment to dispel readerly suspicion, "to strip away anything that might induce us to doubt" (23); Nabokov by using intricate prose which activates that self-same suspicion, "to induce our doubts in order to exhaust them" (23). Using these authors' disparate approaches to aesthetic style, Gershkovich further situates her own work within the larger scholarly conversation of post-critique reading, "challeng[ing] a key presumption of our contemporary reading debates" (16): that reading non-suspiciously comes easy. Gershkovich does an excellent job of returning to this idea throughout the book, and her choice of authors to argue this point works exceptionally well. Tolstoy tried to read non-suspiciously, she states,

but as outlined above, often failed to silence his own suspicious tendencies. Nabokov, on the other hand, read in favor of suspicion, pursuing even the most minute detail in the hopes of reaching another's mind.

*Art in Doubt* is extremely well-researched and the justification for connecting these two authors despite their opposing styles is clear and well-supported throughout. The examples Gershkovich cites are well-chosen and thoroughly explained such that a reader who is unfamiliar with Tolstoy's *The Circle of Reading* or Nabokov's *The Gift*, which are discussed alongside more widely read works like *Anna Karenina* and *Pale Fire*, will have no difficulty following her larger argument. The bibliography is expansive, and the detailed notes section provides additional commentary as well as Russian-language originals when Gershkovich has written her own English translations in the main body of the work. While the balance of the book inclines slightly more toward Tolstoy than Nabokov, both authors and their works are well-represented throughout. Gershkovich does an excellent job of bringing these two authors together. Her book, therefore, is ideal for those readers interested in the stylistics of Tolstoy or Nabokov (taken separately or together), those interested in examining scholarly assumptions about suspicious reading, and those interested in exploring how radical skepticism seeps into artistic creation. Tatyana Gershkovich raises existential questions about art's ability to "bridge the metaphysical divide between oneself and another" (71). In *Art in Doubt*, she offers the answers that she finds in the works of Tolstoy and Nabokov, illustrating their differing methods of alleviating the solipsistic urge in writer and reader alike.

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