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# The Departure and Death of Lev Tolstoy<sup>1</sup>

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Ninety years ago an event took place that shook the world and inspired a multitude of investigations, a whole literature in fact. What does Tolstoy's departure from Iasnaia Poliana mean? Was it a triumph, a defeat, or liberation? Was it the outburst of a titan freeing himself at last from his upperclass gentry existence? Was it the vain effort of a Tolstoyan to strengthen the influence of his teaching by means of a heroic feat? Or did Tolstoy hope to make peace with the Church and by that route find the liberation that he desired? New material continues to appear in print, everything—diaries, letters, memoirs of eyewitnesses—is known, it would seem, but as before the event itself remains a mystery.

I wrote about this long ago in 1952, in the introduction to Volume 57 of the Jubilee edition containing the diaries and notebooks of 1909. At that time, of course, my main focus was on protest: gentry conditions of life versus love for simplicity, for work, and for the people. Even then, however, I had to take note of Tolstoy's most important idea in his last years, his new word, namely, that "There are no guilty people in the world." In his diary he wrote that "One can say all, relieve oneself, without condemning anyone" (*PSS* 57:156). My own conclusion then was flawed, because if no one can be blamed, protest makes no sense.

And yet Tolstoy does protest, even against his own theories. In the late diaries there is an oft-sounded note of exhaustion, desperation, and doubt in the truth of the teaching, proclaimed for decades, of universal love and nonresistance to evil.

In a dream I saw rejection by God, and also His objection to my representation of the best, general construction of life as [being] a consequence of the rejection of struggle. (*PSS* 57: 194)

Where I have most erred has been in my contention that love is doing its work even now in Russia with its punishments, its hangings and so on. (*PSS* 57: 200)

If you believe in the inevitable triumph of your thought and the speedy coming of the Kingdom of Heaven, it is relatively easy to wait. When faith wavers, you want to act right away. In that state of mind only a desperate feat will do, and that feat was to leave home to die. As we shall see, there are diary entries that allude directly to this outcome.

It is well known that Tolstoy, far from fearing persecution, dreamt of suffering for his convictions, but that the government did not dare touch him. (The Church excommunicated him and soon regretted having done so.) It persecuted his followers instead, harassing and punishing them constantly. Agonizing over this, Tolstoy defended and helped them as much as possible, but there was little he could do. Ill-wishers as well as repentant Tolstoyans excoriated him for getting others into trouble. Tolstoy, a steadfast, kind man, agreed with them, but for the time being did nothing. By acting, he feared he would commit evil against many people, most especially his wife, whom he loved and pitied despite his quarrels with her.

The story of the village schoolmaster Evdokia Drozhzhin, dead at twenty eight because he resisted military conscription, is well known. In 1895, a year after Drozhzhin's death, a book by Evgenii Popov entitled *The Life and Death of E. N. Drozhzhin* appeared in Berlin with a preface by Tolstoy. (It would have been impossible to publish it in Russia.) Partly in response to it, on 25 December 1895 the German socialist writer Friedrich Spielhagen (1829-1911) published "An Open Letter to Count Leo Tolstoy" in the newspaper *Neues Wiener Tageblatt* (no. 354), and in the following year a Russian translation appeared in Petersburg in a brochure cited favourably by the conservative press. A copy of the brochure, entitled *Otkrytoe pis'mo*, is preserved in Tolstoy's library at Iasnaia Poliana. Having compared Dro-

zhzhin's death to that of Christ, Spielhagen added: "But I never heard that He sent someone else to Golgotha to suffer for His teachings." This was of course a reproach to Tolstoy, whom Eugen Heinrich Schmitt (1851-1916) defended in turn in 1896 in his journal *Religion des Geistes* (no. 1). In 1910, Tolstoy did ascend Golgotha. At the end of 1895, however, he recorded the "open letter in the papers from Spielhagen" without comment in his diary. Right next to this note is a very important entry on the drama *And The Light Shineth in Darkness* [*I svet vo t'me svetit*]: "I fantasized all last night about it" (*PSS* 53: 75). When, in the following February, 1896, the writer A. I. Ertel' published a polemical note on the article *Shame!*, Tolstoy, recalling Spielhagen, responded that "they are tearing into me." But there was "no time" for an answer, he wrote in his diary: he was working on his play (13 February 1896; *PSS* 53: 78).

Conceived earlier, in the 1880s, this play about himself, "my own drama," as he called it, was begun in January 1896 and soon roughed out.<sup>2</sup> The ending was in synopsis form. Already in 1894 Tolstoy had told the German theatre critic and playwright Oscar Blumenthal that "In this drama I want to lay out my own confession, my struggle, my religion and sufferings, in a word, everything close to my heart . . . But believe me, I will die not having finished the work that I so want to write" (69).

Blumenthal published this conversation in 1911, when the manuscript for Tolstoy's play had appeared in Russia with cuts imposed by the censor. The next year, the full text was published in Berlin in volume 2 of the *Posthumous Artistic Works*.<sup>3</sup> Although Tolstoy left behind so many unfinished works that the three-volume edition did not include all of them, no other unrealized idea troubled him as much as this play, and he periodically returned to it over the course of twenty years. He called it "a drama of Christian resurrection" (*PSS* 53: 170). It seems to me that Tolstoy's departure was directly connected to the fate of this unfinished manuscript.

It was Ivan Bunin, in my opinion, who found just the right word, profound and to the point, to

describe Tolstoy's life and death. He called it *osvobozhdenie*, "liberation." Bunin understood the philosophical and religious crux of the matter: Tolstoy desired liberation from time and space, "a return to God." This is of course too general in the sense that the death of every person is a liberation from time and space, a merging with eternity, with the Cosmos and God. And Bunin spoiled his brilliant narration with doubtful speculations that, because Tolstoy, after leaving home, went first to the Optina Monastery and then to the Sharmordino Convent, where his sister, Mar'ia L'vovna, was living, he wanted at the end to reconcile with the Church. This is not true. Every step, thought, and word during those last days is recorded in notes written by Tolstoy himself and others. The most reliable and objective of these chroniclers is Tolstoy's personal physician and close friend Dr. D. P. Makovitskii. Just before leaving home, Tolstoy told "dear" Dushan—and his daughter Sasha also recorded this in her diary of 26 October—that

I am going to Tania's [his daughter, T. L. Sukhotina.—DTO], I will write her [S. A. Tolstaia] that I have left for Tania's, and from there I will leave for Optina Monastery. I'll go to some elder and ask permission to live there. No doubt they will receive me, they'll be hoping to get me to return [to the Church]" (Aleksandra Tolstoy 511).

Tolstoy had no intention of repenting. A first variant of his farewell letter to his wife makes that clear: "Most people leave for a monastery and I would do so if I believed what they believe in monasteries. Not believing that, I'm leaving simply to be by myself. I have to be alone" (*PSS* 84: 405).

Nonetheless, Bunin is right: liberation is the issue. But for Tolstoy, who always was primarily and most profoundly a great writer, freedom was attainable only through creative work. Perhaps later, when I have brought the *Materials for a Biography* series up to 1910, I will see things differently, but as of now I am convinced of the following. At the end of his life, Tolstoy wanted to finish "his" drama, not with pen and paper, but in reality. *And The Light Shineth in Darkness*

would be played out in his own life. To stop him would have been impossible. He was only waiting for the proper moment to act, and unfortunately those around him provided him with one such moment after another.

In the years just before his departure, Tolstoy did not return to writing his drama, maybe because his whole life was moving more and more in coordination with it, and he no longer distinguished himself from his hero. Certain diary entries are striking in this regard. On 11 May 1909 he writes, for instance: "They bring a priest to the dying man. He pleads that they not force him on the threshold of death to condemn, to reveal the lies of the Church." In the same entry, he imagines a letter: "He writes to his wife: Forgive me. I have forgiven you, but I cannot not say from the grave what I could not say when I was alive" and so on (*PSS* 57: 62). Who is dying? Who is writing to his wife? The events imagined here will take place in life 18 months later, but they are narrated in the third person, like notes to a work of fiction. Although the notebook on the previous day entitles this section of the diary entry "A letter to S. [Sonia]," in Tolstoy's mind author and hero are one (*PSS* 57: 209).

*And The Light Shineth In Darkness* also contains an attempt to leave home, not with a doctor, it is true, but with a certain "ragged Alexander Petrovich."<sup>4</sup> (Everyone agrees that the prototype for this character is A. P. Ivanov, who worked for Tolstoy as a copyist.) In the play, Alexander Petrovich says, "Stay calm. We can make it to the Caucasus without a penny. And once there, you'll get settled" (*PSS* 31: 176). Along with Tolstoy's daughters Tat'iana and Mar'ia, A. P. Ivanov made copies of the play, which were corrected and changed several times by the author. In one version, the hero Sarantsev replies to Alexander Petrovich that "we'll ride to Tula, and there we'll start walking. So, everything's set" (*PSS* 31: 176-177). Sarantsev places the letter in the middle of the table and goes out, but meets his wife, who stops him (*PSS* 31: 177). In this episode as it is fleshed out in the final version of the play found in Tolstoy's papers, the hero is not said to be a writer. In other drafts,

however, even this difference between hero and author does not exist. Mar'ia Ivanovna says of her husband that "if he is attracted to something, he throws himself into it with a passion. It was that way with hunting, with local politics, with schools, with farming, then one time with his literary compositions" (*PSS* 31: 232).

Having read the unfinished play in *Posthumous Literary Works*, the Slovak Albert Škarvan, a fine and intelligent man who greatly loved Tolstoy, drew a direct connection between it and conversations at which he had been present.

I clearly recalled conversations, really arguments and polemics of Lev Nikolaevich on religious themes with people for whom the Christian spirit as Tolstoy understood it was foreign. In the first act of this drama there was the very same tone, the same words, the same form [as in those conversations]. Tolstoy wanted to influence people and direct them the right way with the help of rational arguments. Tolstoy's arguments were interesting and in the main correct. But I, in spite of all that, felt that all his words hit a brick wall, and I was surprised that such a wise man and connoisseur of the human soul could throw himself again and again against such a wall." (*Literaturnoe nasledstvo* 75.2: 156)

One ought not to forget that Tolstoy, like all geniuses, retained a certain childlike quality up to the end of his days. After the death of artist N. N. Ge, Tolstoy praised him as a "child-genius" (Brodskaia 331). In the last years of his own life, he wrote often about the wisdom of children—very young ones—in opposition to adults. But Tolstoy was not naive. The doubts expressed by Škarvan are present in *And The Light Shineth In Darkness*. In the fourth act the hero says: "Vasilii Nikanorovich came back ~~the priest took holy orders again~~, I destroyed Boris ~~who refused military service~~, Liuba ~~the daughter~~ gets married." And Sarantsev addresses God: "Can I have really gone wrong because I believe in You? No. Father, help me" (*PSS* 31: 183). At the end of act five, Sarantsev says of himself that "I constantly waver about whether I have done the right thing. I did nothing. I destroyed Boris, Vasilii Nikanorovich returned ~~to the Church~~. I am an example of weakness.

Evidently God does not want me to be His servant" (strikeouts by Tolstoy, PSS 31: 184). The finale of the play as it is sketched out is the death of the hero. He is killed by the mother of Boris, a youth who died as a result of refusing military service: "The princess explodes, murders him. Everyone runs in. He says that he did it by accident. He writes the Tsar for pardon. Vasili Nikanorovich comes in accompanied by some Doukhodors. He dies rejoicing that the lie of the Church has suffered damage, and that his life has come to make sense for him" (PSS 31: 184).

Using sacred language, Alexander Blok called Tolstoy's death a "Passing" [*uspenie*] (5:447). Andrei Bely wrote that "Tolstoy's swan song is not a word at all. It is a gesture of the highest grandeur to which a man can rise. The departure and death of Tolstoy is a brilliant word uttered by a great genius. The blessed word has overcome and replaced oppressive silence" (644).

Tolstoy's departure and death at Astapovo Station was a *creative act*: in his own life he finally completed the play that had been tormenting him for so many years. It was, of course, a heroic deed of the sort that one would expect from such a man and writer. We can investigate as much as we like how all the people involved comported themselves during the tragedy and in the years leading up to it. We are obliged to understand, however, that it could not have been otherwise, and each of the participants was, in his own way, both right and culpable at the same time. The deed was accomplished by only one person, Lev Tolstoy, and he suffered more than any of the others.

From my point of view as a historian of literature and Tolstoy's biographer, those closest to Tolstoy were more wrong than right, because each one, using Tolstoy's writings for his own ends, did not sufficiently value Tolstoy as a creative force. To cut short his labour was a crime, a disaster. Perhaps if Tolstoy had remained alive, he would have written more. In 1910 he felt the urge to write fiction. On 26 October he wrote in his diary that "I had a dream. Grushenka, a novel, maybe Nik. Nik Strakhov. Marvellous subject" (PSS 58:123). On the last page of his last note-

book, at Optina Monastery on 29 October, he jotted down four (!) ideas for fiction: "1) Feodorit and dead horse, 2) a priest returned to the Church by someone who has returned, 3) a novel about Strakhov and Grushenka the housekeeper, 4) a hunt; a duel and army draftees chosen first" (PSS 58: 235). All of this went into the grave with him. But it could not have been otherwise. The main thing in a tragedy, after all, is the finale, the catharsis, "liberation." It confirms that liberation is possible, albeit on Golgotha, and at the cost of life.

A shorter version of this essay was delivered at Iasnaia Poliana, August 2000. It is translated from the Russian by Donna Orwin.

## Notes

1. "Home-leaving" is Aylmer Maude's translation of "*ukhod*," a noun (comprised wholly of a verbal stem) that has a much broader semantic field than any comparable word in English. I have opted for "departure" as more idiomatic in English. — DTO

2. That is, from the mid-1880s until at least 1902 and possibly 1905. It is V. G. Chertkov who claims that Tolstoy started to think about the play in the 1880s. See *Posmertnye khudozhestvennye proizvedeniia* 2: 249.

3. In 1911, *Posmertnye khudozhestvennye proizvedeniia* L. N. Tolstogo was published in three volumes in Russia. In 1912, it was issued in Berlin (by "Svobodnoe slovo") without cuts imposed by the censor in the Russian edition.

4. The first version of the play was written over the course of a month, from 9 January to 13 February 1896 (PSS 31: 293), but, having sketched out all five acts, Tolstoy seems to have worked mostly on the first one. He then continued to work on the play intermittently up to as late as 1905 (PSS 31: 300).

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