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## The Life of Tolstoy

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### M. A. Voloshin's *The Destiny of Lev Tolstoy\**

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There are of course many in Russia today for whom the death of Lev Tolstoy evokes all the bitterness of a personal loss. For them, the canonical splendor of graveside orations as well as the outpouring of national grief are precious. But for millions of others the earthly death of a great writer does not represent any break, ending, or irretrievable loss. For those who knew Tolstoy through his words, his death cannot be a loss. For them he remains as alive and close as when he lived, and even closer. Far from depriving us of something, the death of an artist enriches us by striking that final, ultimate blow of the stone cutter which completes his image and gives it a tragic unity.

There are no coincidences in the destiny of a human being. What we call coincidences could be compared to involuntary, unself-conscious gestures which, arising as they do outside of the will, display with greater clarity a man's hidden nature. Gradually, from various circumstances of life, from various external streams pouring into the circle of existence, there appears, first vaguely, then more definitely, the figure of a man's destiny. This figure is the man writ large. It is like our eternal, great "I". But it is death that strikes the finishing blow that imparts life and completeness to the vague figure of a man's destiny. As the image of the living person expires, the image of the person's destiny suddenly lights up. When the earthly, restless, and willful body is dying, then not the person, but the person's destiny is beginning its existence. This happens so imperceptibly that most people, not understanding the meaning of the change, say: how he has grown since his death!

This is the lot of all those—artists—who, living, have striven to reveal and define the image of their destiny. This explains the meaning of Balzac's doleful words: "We all die unknown. Glory is the sun of dead men."<sup>1</sup> Could Balzac have been complaining about his obscurity? These words become meaningful only when we understand them as lamenting the impossibility of glancing into the face of one's own destiny, which is covered by a veil that falls only at the moment of death.

If nothing in life is chance, then the least coincidental event of all is death. Recall for yourself the defining features that it lays upon a person: recall Lermontov dying in the mountains during a thunderstorm, and Beethoven dying in an abandoned room to the peal of thunder, and Pushkin's three suffering days after the duel, and the wedding ceremony of the dying Villiers de L'Isle-Adam and his words: "Look, my body is ripe for the grave."<sup>2</sup> All of these are blazing features in the presence of which the temporal aspect of a man fades but the eternal one rises up. Death makes sense of a man's whole life. When we read the affecting lines of a living poet, how often it happens that the fact that he is still alive makes his words less convincing. The reader desires a tragic unity in the artist's life and work. He is able to apprehend this, however, only after the artist's death.

In the present moment, despite all the recognition accorded Lev Tolstoy during his life, his words have already started to resonate differently because they are spoken not by somebody who lives among us, but by somebody who has already passed through the baptism of death. The death of Tolstoy and the circumstances preceding it have finished the image of his destiny with tragic fullness. Without this last week his life would not be complete. This completeness, however, lies not in the reconciliation of the basic contradictions of his life, but, on the contrary, in the imperious and

intransigent opposition of his stubborn will to the inexorable will of his destiny. When a person's will and his destiny struggle up to the last moment and death does not reconcile, but covers them over with itself, that becomes the essence of tragedy.

Tolstoy's conscious will wanted a dissolution into the people, self-denial and sacrifice till the end. His destiny led him, in spite of all, to a comfortable life, to quiet well-being, prosperity and contentment. What strange, what terrible Ananke appearing in the form of world-wide Glory and a fullness of earthly happiness! What a mysterious impossibility of doom in Tolstoy's destiny! Sorting through all the images of the tragic that have appeared in mankind up until now, we cannot find anything similar. King Candaules and King Polykrates, laden with happiness, find their doom prepared for them by envious Ananke.<sup>3</sup> What is shocking about Tolstoy's tragedy is the impossibility of death despite his thirst to sacrifice himself. This is something as yet unheard of on earth. Tolstoy's death inscribed a new sign into the tragic destinies of mankind.

But there is something already familiar in this sign, something foretold long ago. Recall the third temptation of Christ: "He led him to Jerusalem, and set him on a pinnacle of the temple, and said unto him, 'If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down from here, for it is written, "He will give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee;" and, in their hands they shall bear thee up, Lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone.' Jesus answering, said unto him, 'It is said, "Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God".'"<sup>4</sup> Recall how Dostoevsky interprets the same lines (and this interpretation is very typical of destinies in the Russian spirit): "A mighty and intelligent Spirit set you on top of the temple and said: if you want to know whether you are the Son of God, cast yourself down; because it is said of Him, that angels will lift Him up and carry Him and He will not fall and be injured, and then you will know whether you are the Son of God and you will prove your faith in your Father. . ."<sup>5</sup>

Was Tolstoy's whole life that miracle which Christ renounced? Deeply believing that he was a son of God, Tolstoy many times cast himself

down from the top of the temple and each time angels supported him, not allowing him to touch the ground, and again set him on the very top of the temple where he stood in full view of all humanity. All his life was an unquenched and unquenchable thirst to touch the ground, to be dissolved into the ground, even by smashing into it, and every time angels caught him up: "he shall not dash his foot against a stone."

And how extraordinary are the forms—sometimes seductive, sometimes diabolic—that these angels assume when they appear in his life. Let Tolstoy want to be with common people and join them in their exhausting labour. Ploughing, wood chopping, stove building, all change against his will into hygienic exercises useful for his mental activity. Let him want to give his estate to the people. A compromise is worked out with countless Sof'ia Andreevna, and he not only cannot achieve the indigent life he so longs for, but, on the contrary, having sloughed off his workaday efforts to make a living, he ends up surrounded by refined comfort. Let him decide to stop eating meat, and he is served a delicate vegetarian menu. He does not want to pay any attention to food, but several breakfasts, one after one, awaiting his call for food, are cooked for him in the kitchen.

The deepest tragedy lies hidden in this stubborn resistance of Tolstoy's destiny to the most sincere impulses of his heart. A ring of prosperity and security surrounds him on all sides and there is no bursting out of it. With that naked frankness peculiar only to him, let Tolstoy write of the death penalty that he wants someone to tie a noose around his aged neck; during his jubilee celebration let him declare that the greatest reward for him would be prison and persecution; let him do these things, but security hangs heavily over him. His followers are persecuted, his close friends arrested and sent into exile, but he is untouchable. He can say anything he wants, he can write revolutionary words against the government, and not a single strand of hair falls from his head. Angels taking on the most real, everyday forms do not allow him to dash his foot against a stone.

Finally he makes a last attempt to break through the ring of security. During the night he

secretly abandons his house to disappear, to leave forever. One last time he casts himself down from a pinnacle of the temple. Hearts sinking, all Russia follows the outcome of this last bold gambit. Everyone is thinking that perhaps this time he will succeed in crashing to the ground. Nobody doubts that he is leaving to die and that he will die now within a matter of days. And everyone is hoping that maybe, although it would be hard, there might be a miracle, and Lev Tolstoy will really disappear and dissolve into the ocean of the simple folk. Of course, he is known by everybody, but he has such a typical peasant face which could merge with thousands of similar elderly peasant faces. He would hide his name and he would not be found. He would die before they could find him and, nobody would ever know where he brought his body to die, like Moses, in an unknown place.<sup>6</sup> But Guardian-Angels appear immediately and, unseen by him, but watching, hover over him on all sides in the sky.

As soon as the rumour about count Tolstoy's departure from home reached the Minister of Interior, he solicitously telegraphed that Tolstoy should not be asked about his passport if he did not have it with him. Correspondents of all Russian and European newspapers and volunteer detectives in crowds galloped after him to Optina Monastery and Astapovo. Within one day his whole family, from whom he had fled, had already gathered in Astapovo. Near the house where Tolstoy lay ill, the governor of Riazan stationed police constables as guards and the telegraph wire was worn out sending bulletins about his health all around the world. Meanwhile the dying Tolstoy thought that he had finally escaped the world and nobody knew where he was.

One of his last words before death sounded a gentle reproach: "Why are you worrying about me when there are millions of people you should be worrying about?" But who would have the spirit to blame the people surrounding Tolstoy and his relatives for this blasphemous mockery of the dying man? In the sum total of the circumstances that accompanied the death of Tolstoy, there is too much of that unavoidable destiny that had hung over him all through his life. The face of his

destiny is too clearly illuminated by this episode for us to see the cause of these last inexorable strokes in chance happenings and the misunderstanding of other people, rather than in Tolstoy himself.

What is there about his life that could bring about such a complicated reckoning with his destiny? Though in the coming centuries there will be many volumes written about this of course, the real solution of the mystery will only become clear at the Last Judgement. But Tolstoy lived among us, and we do not have the right to close our eyes to the enigma of his destiny as it presents itself to us. We do not have the right not to define for ourselves the primary source of the tragic opposition within him of a happy destiny and the will to sacrifice himself. The circumstances of Tolstoy's death yield some clues to help us find this: the fact that the ring of security was not broken for Tolstoy even by his own death means that the cause of this not only was within him, but that it resided there.

It lay in his attitude to the mystery of Evil on earth. And this attitude is expressed in Tolstoy's teaching about non-resistance. Tolstoy understood evil extremely simply, and believed that there existed a single solution to every evil. As soon as people all agree to apply this solution, evil will disappear. The formula for a world-wide remedy against evil was simple: do not resist evil and evil will not touch you. Tolstoy followed this idea consistently until the end of his life. And the horror consists in the fact that everything came to pass just as he said it would. As soon as he ceased to resist evil, a ring of prosperity and security closed around him. Immediately all the sharp points of evil directed against him went dull. A kind of security formed like the unbearable painlessness of a paralyzed limb, when the patient cries from joy at the first sensation of pain.

How can we explain this effect, not Christian, but merely magical, which so resembles the third temptation of Christ, and which appears immediately after Tolstoy's direct application of the Evangelical text? It seems to me that the cause lies in Tolstoy's one-sided understanding of the words: "Resist not evil." If I stop resisting evil

outside of myself, I create safety from external evil only for myself, and at the same time I enclose myself in egoistic self perfectivization. I deprive myself of the experience of earthly life, the possibility of unavoidable weaknesses and falls, which teach us forgiveness, understanding and acceptance of the world.

“He that preserveth his soul shall lose it; he that loseth his soul for my sake will preserve it.”<sup>7</sup> Not resisting evil, I somehow surgically separate evil from myself and by this I destroy the deepest truth revealed by Christ: we are here on earth not to reject evil, but to transform, sanctify and save evil. We can save and sanctify the evil, however, only after having taken it inside ourselves and inside ourselves having sanctified it.

Tolstoy did not understand the meaning of evil on earth and he could not solve its mystery. Because of this it happened to him according to the word of the Holy Writ: “He shall give His Angels charge over thee, to keep thee.”<sup>8</sup>

## Notes

\*The translation of Voloshin is based on the text in *Maksimilian Voloshin. Liki tvorchestva* (528-532). The article and Davydov’s commentary and notes have been translated by Larysa Iarovenko and Donna Orwin.

1. According to A. V. Lavrov, Voloshin took this phrase “in very altered form from Balzac’s novel *La recherche de l’Absolu* (1834): ‘La gloire est le soleil des morts; de ton vivant, tu seras malheureux comme tout ce qui fut grand, et tu ruineras tes enfants’ [Glory is the sun of dead men. During your life you will be unhappy as all great men are, and you will leave your children bankrupt] (*Maksimilian Voloshin. Liki tvorchestva* 761). Compare this reference to Balzac with the beginning of another article by Voloshin from 1910 entitled “*I. F. Annenkov-lirik*” [I. F. Annenskii as lyricist]. “‘All of us die unknown’ . . . Balzac’s words appeared to be true also for Innokentii Fedorovich Annenskii.” In 1924, the poet L. V. Gornung wrote down a story by Voloshin about Annenskii, in which the following phrase occurs. “When I recall his image—I always feel a certain resentment and I think of the words said of Balzac: ‘La gloire c’est le soleil des morts, nous mourrons tous inconnus’” (*Pamiatnik*

*kul’tury. Novye otkrytiia. Ezhegodnik* [1981]: 69).

2. Compare this with the end of Voloshin’s article “Apotheosis of a dream (the tragedy of Villiers de L’Isle-Adam “Aksel” and the tragedy of his own life)” [*tragediia Vil’e de Lil’ Adana “Aksel” i tragediia ego sobstvennoi zhizni*]: “Several hours before death, gazing at his hands as they lay on the blanket and unable to move them, he said to one of his friends—‘Look, my body is already ripe for the grave’.” These are the final words in the tragedy of Aksel, who selected, not the divine release of death, but the long and human way of life (*Maksimilian Voloshin. Liki Tvorchestva* 33).

3. *Candaules*, a Lydian king, considered a descendant of Heracles, was madly in love with his wife and thought that he possessed the most beautiful woman in the world. Bragging about her beauty, he decided to show her naked to his bodyguard Gyges. His wife could not endure this humiliation and conspired with Gyges to kill Candaules. (Herodotus, *History*, 1, 7 - 12). *Polycrates*—a tyrant of the island of Samos. In order to avert an evil end predicted for him, he sacrificed his favourite emerald seal ring to the sea. But the seal ring, found in the stomach of a fish, was returned to Polycrates, who subsequently died a shameful death (Herodotus, *History*, 111, 39-45, 121-125). The best known literary exposition of this story is by F. Schiller, “Seal-ring of Polikrat” (translated into Russian by V. A. Zhukovsky and M. L. Lozinsky). In ancient Greek culture, *Ananke* was the name given to necessity, the inexorable force that rules over people and Gods.

4. Luke 4.9-12. All translations of the Bible are from the King James version. This one is slightly altered to make Voloshin’s point more clearly.

5. The quotation from *The Brothers Karamazov* (The Legend about the Grand Inquisitor) is inexact.

6. Said about death of Moses—“No man knoweth of his sepulchre until this day” (Deutoronomy 34.6).

7. Matthew 10.39. Compare Mark 8.35; Luke 9.24.

8. Luke 4.10; Psalms 90.11.



## Maksimilian Voloshin on Lev Tolstoy: Commentary

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Published for the first time in English, "The Destiny of Lev Tolstoy," by Russian poet, artist, and literary and art critic Maksimilian Aleksandrovich Voloshin (1877-1932) was devoted to the death of the great writer and first appeared in the journal *Russkaia mysl'* (12, part 2 [1910]:133-138). Many other articles and memoirs devoted to Lev Tolstoy and written by other prominent figures of Russian culture, such as poets Valerii Brusov and Zinaida Gippius, writers Dmitrii Filosofov and Petr Struve, and philosophers Semen Frank and Sergei Bulgakov, appeared in the same issue.

Tolstoy's death on 7 November 1910 elicited a huge number of responses among which the one by Voloshin went almost unnoticed. Voloshin's article was different from most of the obituaries. Hardly touching upon the unquestionable greatness of Tolstoy's art, Voloshin concerned himself with his personal destiny.<sup>1</sup>

According to Voloshin, death is the totalizing and peak event in life. For the wise man and truth-seeker who has consciously created his own life, death cannot be accidental. At the same time it is impossible to look into the face of one's destiny, which seems to be covered with a veil that falls only at the moment of death. Death makes sense of a man's entire life. Reflecting on Tolstoy's contradictions and his tragic destiny, Voloshin tries to solve the mystery of his life's journey. He emphasizes the contradiction between his everyday life at Iasnaia Poliana and the aspirations of the soul and will of the great writer, who frees himself from captivity in order to triumph and to die. He emphasizes the irresolvable contradictions between Tolstoy's seemingly successful life and his unsatisfied thirst for a heroic feat. (Kupchenko 1988: 578)

Throughout his life Maksimilian Voloshin was fascinated by Tolstoy. His polemical tracts and the novel *Resurrection* impressed the young poet during his youth. When he was fifteen, he planned to write "a novel similar to Lev Tolstoy's *Childhood, Adolescence, Youth* as soon as he graduated from gymnasium."<sup>2</sup> As a mature writer, he compared the genius of Tolstoy to that of Dostoevsky, Balzac, and Stendal.

In his critical articles, Voloshin mostly wrote on contemporary subjects rather than the classics, which he nevertheless knew very well. "The Destiny of Tolstoy" as well as an earlier article devoted to Nekrasov and several articles on performances of Griboedov's, Dostoevsky's, and Pushkin's works are rare exceptions.<sup>3</sup> In Voloshin's articles about contemporary literature and theatre, however, Tolstoy is frequently mentioned.

In his article "Klodel' v Kitae" [Clodel in China], Voloshin compares Gogen's departure from Europe to Okeaniia "in search of simplification" with "an irresistible feeling, which at its core resembled the feeling that sent Lev Tolstoy to the 'muzhik'." The only difference was that "Gogen was searching for aesthetic, not moral fundamental principles; and Tolstoy could just go through the gates in his garden in Iasnaia Poliana and he would find the fundamental principle of wisdom in the soul of a muzhik, while to find his muzhik, Gogen had to travel to the other hemisphere to the antipodes of Paris" (52).

In another article devoted to French and Russian theatre, having established the failure of French stagings of Tolstoy's play *The Power of Darkness*, Voloshin proves that behind these failures "one could feel not a coincidental mistake in approach, but a rooted historical impossibility." ("Frantsuzskii i russkii teatr" 119).

Parisians do not go to the theatre, as we do, to see the complex, terrible, naked human face, all woven over with fine grey cobwebs of life. They go to see, to study, and to chose new masks. And furthermore nowhere else does the theatre so correspond to the demands of the public and nowhere does it so merge with the public, than in Paris (...) Therefore French plays are inseparable from their Parisian viewers and from the shouts of the boule-

vards which bustle noisily outside the doors of the theatres (...) Among sixty theatres of Paris there is not one that could adapt Tolstoy ...[and]... these northern, tough plays which shamelessly take the mask off the human face and uncover its horror (...) A Russian organically cannot understand that it is not at all shameful to bare one's body on the stage, but it is insurmountably shameful to bare one's soul. And the Russian manner of acting one's guts out on the stage, baring every last bit of psyche, would strike a French viewer as barbaric shamelessness. ("Frantsuzskii i russkii teatr" 123-124)<sup>4</sup>

In an article devoted to the work of the Russian sculptor A. Golubkina, Voloshin says that she belongs "to artists of Dostoevsky's and Tolstoy's type . . . whom one cannot approach with predetermined criteria of art" and "who have to be accepted wholly as human beings; only then can one completely accept their work as well." Voloshin characterizes Tolstoy's genius as "the fire of conscience, not of fantasy. He is exceptionally moral. From this flows his special Russian realism, which is not like the realism of other nations. From this comes his dislike, typical of Russian art, of rhetoric and pathos" ("A. S. Golubkina" 8).<sup>5</sup>

Voloshin's characterization of Tolstoy in "Russian Tragedy comes from Dostoevsky" [*Russkaia tragediia vzniknet iz Dostoevskogo*] has a prophetic ring in the light of subsequent Russian history. "Alongside Dostoevsky stands Lev Tolstoy, another representative of the tragedy. Tolstoy, perhaps not so much by his works as by his own destiny, by the collision between his art and his moral feat, his approach to the mystery of evil, Tolstoy is the symbolic prototype of the coming Russian tragedy" (364).<sup>6</sup>

"The Destiny of Lev Tolstoy" was not the first response of Maksimilian Voloshin to the death of Tolstoy. At the end of the November (the month of Tolstoy's death), in the newspaper *Utro Rossii*, Voloshin published an article entitled "What kind of Monument should Tolstoy Have?" [*Kakim dolzhen byt' pamiatnik Tolstomu*]. In this article he took part in the debate, which started right after Tolstoy's death, about the erection of a fitting monument to him.<sup>7</sup>

"The Destiny of Tolstoy" left its mark on Voloshin's only poem from the fall of 1910. In "Bending down, covered by darkness of the blue" [*Skloniaias' nits, oveian nochi sin'iu*], Voloshin celebrates his own paradoxical acceptance and battle with evil. It may be understood as a poetic justification of the central idea of his article on Tolstoy, his rejection of Tolstoy's non-resistance to evil. In the article he presents this idea this way: "Not resisting evil, I somehow surgically separate evil from myself and by this I destroy the deepest truth revealed by Christ: we are here on earth not to reject evil, but to transform, sanctify and save evil. We can save and sanctify evil, however, only after having taken it inside ourselves and inside ourselves having sanctified it."<sup>8</sup>

### Notes

1. On the various responses to Tolstoy's death, see B. Meilakh, *Ukhod i smert' L'va Tolstogo* [The departure and death of Lev Tolstoy] (Moscow, Leningrad, 1960). In a letter to writer Petr Struve, Valerii Briusov called Voloshin's essay "extremely paradoxical" (Kupchenko 1999: 139).
2. Diary record from 12.X.1892 (quoted in *Maksimilian Voloshin. Liki tvorcherstva* 562).
3. See "Gore ot uma na stsene Moskovskogo Khudozhestvennogo teatra"—*Oko* 30 (7 Oktober 1906): 3; "Boris Godunov' na stsene Moskovskogo Khudozhestvennogo teatra" — *Rus'* 332 (11 December 1907): 3; "Brat'ia Karamazovy' v postanovke Moskovskogo Khudozhestvennogo teatra" — *Ezhegodnik imperatorskikh teatrov* 7 (1910): 153-165; "Imel li Khudozhestvennyi teatr pravo instsenirovat' 'Brat'ev Karamazovykh'? — Imel"— *Utro Rossii* 280 (22 October 1910): 4.
4. Voloshin is referring to André Antoine's staging of *The Power of Darkness* at the Théâtre-Libre in 1888, and at Théâtre-Antoine in 1904.
5. "A. S. Golubkina" was first published in the journal *Apollon* (6 [1911]:5-12, from which I quote).
6. "Russkaia tragediia vzniknet iz Dostoevskogo" was first published in the newspaper *Russkaia molva* (93

[March 1913]:3). I quote from the text in *Maksimilian Voloshin. Liki tvorcherstva*, 364.

7. For more about this article, see the commentary of A. V. Lavrov in *Maksimilian Voloshin. Liki tvorchestva*, 765.

8. Here is the complete poem written by Voloshin on the day of Lev Tolstoy's death:

Склоняясь ниц, овеян ночи синью,  
Доверчиво ищю губами я  
Сосцы твои, натертые полынью,  
О, мать — земля!

Я не просил иной судьбы у неба,  
Чем путь певца: бродить среди людей  
И растрять в руках колосья хлеба  
Чужих полей.

Мне не отказано ни в заблужденьях,  
Ни в слабостях — и много раз  
Я угасал в тоске и в наслажденьях,  
Но не погас.

Судьба дала мне в жизни слишком много;  
Я ж расточал что было мне дано:  
Я только гроб, в котором тело Бога  
Погребено.

Добра и зла не зная верных граней,  
Бескрылая изнемогла мечта...  
Вином тоски и хлебом испытаний  
Душа сыта.

Благодарю за неотступность боли  
Путеводительной: я в ней сгорю.  
За горечь трав земных, за едкость соли —  
Благодарю!

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