Vasia and the Light in *The Death of Ivan Il'ich*

Nathan Rosen

University of Rochester, Emeritus

I

The most famous line in this story introduces the chronicle of Ivan Il'ich's past life, which "had been most simple and ordinary and most terrible." What was so terrible about it? Gerasim, Ivan's servant, had also led a simple and ordinary life and was highly praised by Tolstoy for doing so. But Gerasim was a peasant, spontaneous and earthy, whereas Ivan Il'ich represented the false, dehumanizing values of upper-class society. Hence the simple, ordinary, terrible life refers only to the life of the upper classes.[1]

If the drawn-out dying of Ivan Il'ich seems to us cruelly excessive, it can be partly explained by the need to cut through the very thick crust of Ivan's false values in order to find the true self within him. Two people, Gerasim and Vasia (Ivan Il'ich's son), help Ivan Il'ich find this. They alone "understood and pitied him."

It is significant that it is not Gerasim, who in his impersonality reminds us of Platon Katataev in *War and Peace*, but Vasia who instinctively shows or suggests to Ivan Il'ich the meaning of the light at the end of the black hole. (We do not even know whether Gerasim is in Ivan Il'ich's bedroom during the final scene.) In contrast to the idealized portrait of the peasant Gerasim, Vasia is individualized and certain traits of his are repeated and emphasized in the three scenes in which he appears.

In the opening scene of the story Peter Ivanovich, a colleague of Ivan Il'ich, is about to climb the staircase leading to Ivan Il'ich's bedroom when he meets Vasia, who emerges from under the staircase. We see Vasia from the point of view of Peter Ivanovich as the *figurka gimnazistika-syna* [the figure of the schoolboy-son]. In Russian, the words "figure" and "schoolboy" have diminutive endings, suggesting that Vasia is physically puny. The suffix *ik* in *gimnazistik* may also indicate a slight scorn for Vasia (Bratus 18-20). The fact that he is seen emerging from under the staircase (while Peter Ivanovich is about to ascend it) also suggests a feeling of inferiority, of stooping and social unease even in his own house (Salys 106). Peter Ivanovich is struck by Vasia's "remarkably resembling Ivan Il'ich"—not the Ivan Il'ich who had died but the little Ivan Il'ich that he had known when they studied law together.[2] And Vasia's face also troubled Peter Ivanovich:

> [Vasia's] tear-stained eyes had in them the look that is seen in the eyes of boys of thirteen or fourteen who are not pure-minded. When the boy saw Peter Ivanovich he began to scowl sternly and shamefacedly.[3] Peter Ivanovich nodded to him and entered the death-chamber. (129)

Tolstoy picks up the theme of Vasia's unclean thoughts again when the family visits Ivan Il'ich before going to the theatre. The elegant, absurdly overdressed fiancé of Ivan's daughter enters the room, followed by Vasia. This time we see Vasia from the point of view of Ivan Il'ich:

> The schoolboy crept in unnoticed, in a new uniform, poor little fellow [*bedniazhka*], wearing gloves, and with terribly dark rings under his eyes, the meaning of which Ivan Il'ich knew well. He had always felt sorry for his son,[4] and now it was dreadful to see the boy's frightened look of pity. It seemed to Ivan Il'ich that Vasia was the only one besides Gerasim who understood and pitied him. (159)

In the last scene of the story Vasia "softly crept" to his father's bedside, kissed Ivan's hand, and burst out crying. This led to Ivan Il'ich's moment of revelation, which we shall discuss later.

We now need to examine what these three scenes have in common—what Tolstoy wanted to emphasize about Vasia. The schoolboy is always described as "creeping" into a room, unnoticed by anyone: he has difficulty establishing social ties. He may well be puny. He seems to be unloved as well as unnoticed. His father calls him *bedniazhka* ("poor little fellow") but never speaks to him.

Second, much emphasis is placed on the dark rings (*sineva*) under Vasia's eyes, the meaning of which both Peter Ivanovich and Ivan Il'ich knew. This has generally been taken to refer to masturbation, and Vasia is ashamed of it. Masturbation probably would not result in the dark rings under the eyes; more likely that is due to inner troubles and lack of sleep. However, in the sexual folklore of the Nineteenth Century masturbation was thought to be very harmful as well as sinful; Tolstoy himself was horrified by puberty, the appearance of dreaded sexuality.[5] So we have Vasia as a teenager, thirteen or fourteen years old, with a characteristic insecurity about his identity, aware of physical changes within himself, of his troubled relations with others, and with a conviction that he is sinful.

More generally, adolescence has been aptly described as "a moment in life when there's a child within you rushing to grow up as quickly as possible, and also an adult inside, desperately holding onto childhood as fiercely as possible" (Cutler 30). But why is this aspect of Vasia so important for Ivan Il'ich? James Olney writes:

> When, later, Ivan Il'ich thinks back over his own life, the only part of it which seems to him at all valuable or meaningful or real is the period up to the age of his son. In Vasia the dying man is reunited with his own childhood, "that wonderful period [as Tolstoy describes it in *Recollections*] of innocent, joyful, poetic childhood up to fourteen." At the time of Ivan Il'ich's death, the boy has significantly reached the limit of this "joyful, poetic childhood"; he has reached the age of puberty, of the individual fall from innocence and out of union into the world of experience. (Olney 110)

Ivan Il'ich recognizes in Vasia a double of himself at the age of thirteen or fourteen—as already noted, the age when Ivan was attending law school. From this time he dates his own fall from childhood innocence to corrupt adulthood (161). Vasia may be doomed to repeat his father's experience, but George J. Gutsche thinks that there is still hope for Vasia due to "the force of Ivan's example and the boy's yet untainted sincerity and compassion" (98, fn. 23). The only bit of positive evidence in the story occurs in the opening chapter, after the death of Ivan Il'ich; all the characters there are harshly satirized except for Vasia. And Vasia is depicted sympathetically in his isolation, traumatic grief and sensitivity. Yet these may not be enough to protect him from the corruption of adulthood for the rest of his life.

In the draft materials for *The Death of Ivan Il'ich* there is a passage in which "Ivan Il'ich felt a little sorry for the boy because, sooner or later, he would come to that same despair and that same death" (PSS 26:526).[6] From this one might conclude that even the traumatic experience of identifying with his father's suffering cannot save Vasia from having to reenact what his father went through. However, Tolstoy chose not to include this grim passage in its entirety in the final version of the story. There is only a possible trace of it when Ivan Il'ich reflects that "he had always felt sorry for his son" (159).[7] The reasons for feeling sorry are not given.

II

Ivan Il'ich's dying is connected with a black sack or hole into which he imagines he is being pushed. The sack makes a preview appearance in chapter nine. Ivan has taken opium to deaden his pain and "it seemed to him" that

> he and his pain were being thrust into a narrow, deep black sack, and though they were being pushed further and further in they could not be pushed to the bottom. And this, terrible enough in itself, was accompanied by further suffering. He was frightened, yet wanted to fall through the sack; he struggled yet co-operated. Suddenly he broke through, fell, and regained consciousnesss. Gerasim was sitting at the foot of the bed...(160)

There is no explanation as yet of why Ivan Il'ich struggles to get into the bag, who or what is pushing him into it, what the bag means, and—we should note— no light is mentioned at the bottom of the bag. Ivan does regain consciousness to find Gerasim close by. Gerasim, we must assume, takes the place of the light. After he leaves, Ivan has his first debate with "the voice of his soul"

and insists that he wants to live as before. Then he plunges into memories of his past—a journey that parallels his fall into the black sack—and finds that only his childhood was joyous. He has some flashes of misgiving about his life since then but he brushes them aside, insisting that he had lived properly.

The metaphor of the black bag becomes more complex, detailed and dramatic in the last chapter. Ivan Il'ich's pain has become more dreadful; he screams incessantly the last three days of his life and tries to get into the black bag of his death; the black bag no longer "seems" to exist but has become reality for him. He is prevented from getting into the bag, says Tolstoy, by his conviction that his life had been a good one.

Ivan Il'ich's pain was so intense, however, that he finally admitted his life had been "not right" [*ne to*]. And at that moment he "fell into the hole and there, at the bottom of the hole, something lit up [*zasvetilos' chto-to*]." The Maude-Katz translation of this phrase is "there at the bottom was a light"(166). The light, if this translation is accepted, would seem to be a steady glow— the light of truth which not only illuminated Ivan Il'ich's last moments but also dictated his last actions. However, this is ambiguous. The light could be "the voice of his soul," his conscience, the voice of his "rational consciousness" (*razumnoe soznanie*—a term used by Tolstoy in his religious tract *On Life*, which I shall discuss later), or simply a *signal* which had lit up for him—and Ivan Il'ich is free to interpret it as he wishes. This last interpretation would make the climax more meaningful.

If we take it to be a signal, it tells him to proceed to his next action: since he had admitted that his past life was not good, what could he now do to make up for it? "'What is the right thing?' he asked himself, and suddenly grew quiet." At this moment his son crept into the room and came up to the bedside. Ivan Il'ich, whose eyes were closed, had been screaming and waving his arms in despair. One hand fell by chance on the head of the schoolboy. "The schoolboy caught [the hand], pressed it to his lips, and began to cry." Since Ivan Il'ich's eyes were closed, he did not realize it was his son who was kissing him. At the very moment that Ivan Il'ich sensed that his hand was being kissed he fell through the black hole and "caught sight of the light" (*uvidal svet*). This was presumably the same light that had lit up before, and again it served as a signal to Ivan, with the same message: "He grew still, listening." Having suppressed his anger and his ego, he was now ready, for the first time, to listen and see in a selfless way. He opened his eyes. What he saw, what he could now absorb, was the anguish and pity of his son and wife. Realizing the suffering he had caused them, he decided to act by willing his own death so as to stop hurting them.

In this action there is one point which seems to me to be very significant. If the light were not a signal but some kind of divine imperative, it would have flashed upon Ivan's soul and commanded him to ask forgiveness from his family and die. Instead, the light signals him to listen quietly and to open his eyes when he feels that his hand is being kissed. He then recognizes his wife and son, is moved by their grief—and asks for forgiveness and dies. The driving force in his action is not a religious commandment from within but the love he sees in the eyes of his wife and son. And I should add, unlike the ethereal love for everyone that Prince Andrei Bolkonsky [in *War and Peace*] feels when dying, Ivan Il'ich's death-bed love is for particular individuals. Psychology prevails over religious motivation.

III

In the discussion of chapter twelve in the previous section the reader may have been puzzled by what seems to be two occasions when Ivan Il'ich falls into the black hole. (This episode should not be confused with the fall into the black sack in chapter nine.) Yet the phrases that describe these two falls are exactly the same, so that one must conclude that there was just one fall into the black hole. I would like to demonstrate that there is only one fall in chapter twelve, and then consider why Tolstoy would have created such a confusing situation.

At the risk of repeating myself, I shall cite the passage in question. Identical phrases will be capitalized.

> Suddenly some force struck him in the chest and side . . . and he fell through the hole and there at the bottom something lighted up. What had happened to him was like the sensation one sometimes experiences in a railway carriage when one thinks one is going forward while one is really going backwards and suddenly becomes aware of the real direction. "Yes, it was all not the right thing," he said to himself. But that's no matter. It can be done. BUT WHAT IS THE RIGHT THING?" HE ASKED HIMSELF, AND SUDDENLY GREW QUIET [*zatikh*].
>
> This occurred at the end of the third day, two hours before his death. AT THAT VERY MOMENT his schoolboy son had crept softly in and gone up to the bedside. The dying man was still screaming desperately and waving his arms. His hand fell on the boy's head, and the boy caught it, pressed it to his lips, and began to cry.
>
> AT THAT VERY MOMENT Ivan Il'ich fell through and caught sight of the light, and it was revealed to him that though his life had not been what it should have been, this could still be rectified. HE ASKED HIMSELF, "WHAT IS THE RIGHT THING?" AND GREW QUIET, LISTENING [*zatikh, prishlushivaias'*].Then he felt that someone was kissing his hand. He opened his eyes, looked at his son, and felt sorry for him.(166)

Two falls into the black hole have been described. After seeing the mysterious light, the signal, at the bottom of the hole, Ivan Il'ich is prompted to ask himself the one crucial question: if the past is bad, how can he make up for it now? What is the right thing to do? Each time he grows quiet and waits for an answer. And each time the answer is initiated by his son "at that very moment."[8] Vasia goes up to the bed of his father, kisses his father's hand and cries. At that very moment Ivan Il'ich falls through and asks again "what is the right thing?" He feels someone kissing his hand, opens his eyes, recognizes his son, and feels sorry for him.

Why did Tolstoy feel that Ivan's one fall had to be split into two falls? The answer is suggested by the fact that the first fall is described by an omniscient narrator, and the second is seen from the point of view of Ivan Il'ich himself. The first fall results from Ivan's recognition that his past life was not good. The narrator then tells us that Vasia has come up to the bed, kisses his father and cries. This action leads to the second fall: Ivan Il'ich can open his eyes and recognize that it is Vasia who is kissing his hand and crying. Hence the two falls are necessary because Vasia has to enter the scene and act in it, and his action, his love for his father, in turn inspires Ivan to love his family and to relieve its grief by his death. Tolstoy could have chosen to use the light at the bottom of the black hole to provide the message for Ivan. Instead, it is Vasia who provides that message by his action. Ivan's selfless decision, inspired by Vasia's love, is the true climax of *The Death of Ivan Il'ich.*

IV

Tolstoy was not content with this climax. He provided a sequel, perhaps because he felt the need to make the ending more powerful or more illuminating in accordance with his new religion. Ivan Il'ich is offered a revelation of the afterlife: His dreadful pain vanished, his fear of death vanished, and "in place of death there was light." "'What joy!' he exclaimed." His agony continued for two more hours, and then there is the comment: "'It is finished!' said someone *over* him" (my italics). The Maude-Katz translators "improved" the text to make it more understandable: "'It is finished!' said someone *near* him" (167). Why did Tolstoy choose to say "someone *over* him" and not "someone *near* him"? The phrase *nad nim* (over him) has two possible meanings: either someone in the room bent down over the dead man or some celestial being—perhaps Tolstoy's favourite "rational consciousness"—hovered over Ivan. I think the ambiguity is intentional and should have been preserved in the translation.

There is undeniably a sharp break, as Käte Hamburger says, between the "empirical" narrative ("This is the most powerful story about death that has ever been written") and the unexpected symbolic revelation at the end, which is based on

beliefs that cannot be confirmed (67, 71). This revelation is paralleled by some of the main points in Tolstoy's philosophical tract *On Life* [*o zhizni*], written in 1886-87, immediately after *The Death of Ivan Il'ich.* Tolstoy tries to prove through a rational process of thinking and some long, marvelously apt similes that death can be overcome. Man possesses an "animal personality" which fears death and lives in space and time, and is unhappy. But within each of us are the germs of a higher self, the "rational consciousness" [*razumnoe soznanie*], which does not fear death because it lives forever, outside space and time. Proof of its existence is the love that children feel for all mankind, our joy in doing good for others, and our sense of immortality when the good we do is remembered by and influences later generations.

There is a peculiarly abstract quality about the discussion of "rational consciousness" since God and immortality are missing from it. One is reminded of that same abstract quality in Ivan Il'ich's death-bed revelation, for which Tolstoy was so strongly criticized. Both the story and the religious tract are symbolic prayers for a new religion that includes the Gospel of Jesus but excludes anything transcendental.[9]

I would like to conclude by commenting on two points in *On Life* that bear directly on *The Death of Ivan Il'ich.* First, Tolstoy concedes in *On Life* that he cannot describe the world of the higher self: "What this centre is like, what that life is in itself, I cannot know"; he absolutely refuses to make any "obscure and arbitrary conjectures" about it (133). Nevertheless that is just what he does in his vivid conjecture about Ivan Il'ich's last moments. (Of course there is the possibility that Ivan Il'ich's joy in dying may be merely the relief he feels that his sufferings have come to an end. But we are told that "in place of death there was light.")

Second, Tolstoy tries to prove in *On Life* that immortality exists because those who have renounced their animal personalities and helped mankind are never forgotten; the memory of them serves to raise the consciousness of present and future generations. "In the light of that knowledge the absurd and terrible superstition of death can never again trouble me" (133).

Let us apply this to Ivan Il'ich.[10] He undoubtedly fits the classification of an animal personality. At the end his higher self has asserted itself, and his true life, according to Tolstoy, consists precisely in the movement from the lower plane to the higher. But what memory, what influence does he leave to later generations? His wife, as we know from the first chapter, remains unchanged. His son Vasia, tormented by his own problems, can feel for Ivan but knows nothing about what his father is experiencing. Who then will profit from Ivan's dreadful physical torments, the realization of mistaken values, his terrible loneliness, and the insight he has gained at the end? Only one person has learned the truth from Ivan's life and death: that person, dear reader, is you.

Notes

1. Tolstoy had written that Ivan Il'ich's life "had been most simple and ordinary and most terrible." [Istoriia zhizni Ivana Il'icha byla samaia prostaia i obyknovennaia i samaia uzhasnaia.] The authoritative Louise and Aylmer Maude translation "improves" Tolstoy's sentence by adding "therefore": "Ivan Il'ich's life had been most simple and ordinary and *therefore* [my italics] most terrible." Since the sentence refers to the upper-class society represented by Ivan Il'ich, the adverb "therefore" is superfluous. The Maudes had no reason to add "therefore" to Tolstoy's sentence. The error is perpetuated by Michael R. Katz in his slightly revised translation of Maude (*Tolstoy's Short Fiction* 129).

Henceforth page numbers in parentheses refer to the Maude-Katz translation of *The Death of Ivan Il'ich* in *Tolstoy's Short Fiction*, translated and edited by Michael R. Katz. I have corrected the text where necessary.

Incidentally, the Maude-Katz translation weakens the power of the first chapter of *The Death of Ivan Il'ich* by not preserving Tolstoy's deliberate repetition of the word *mertvets*. After Peter Ivanovich got through his dilemma of crossing himself he "stopped and began to look at the corpse" [*mertvets*]. Tolstoy continues: "The dead man [*mertvets*] lay as dead men [*mertvetsy*] always lie. . .*po mertvetski*. . ." This goes on to five repetitions of the word *mertvets* in eight lines. There is a sixth repetition in the last word of the preceding paragraph, cited above. The Maude-Katz translation

whittles the repetitions down from six to four, and replaces "dead man" by "corpse" in the preceding paragraph.

2. Ivan Il'ich entered the School of Law at the age of 13 or 14. This information can be found in a convenient chronology of all important dates in the life of Ivan Il'ich (*PSS* 26: 686).

3. "The boy began to scowl sternly and shamefacedly" is an accurate translation of the odd sentence: "Mal'chik, uvidav Petra Ivanovicha, stal surovo i stydlivo morshchit'sia." It is hard to imagine how Vasia could scowl both sternly and shamefacedly at the same time. All translators have tried to make sense of this passage by substituting "morosely" for "sternly": "He began to scowl morosely and shamefacedly." This makes sense, of course, but "morosely" contributes no additional meaning to "scowling" and is a mistranslation. Most likely Tolstoy wanted to suggest that the sternness is meant to cover up Vasia's feeling of shame.

4. The Maude-Katz translation for the sentence "syn vsegda zhalok byl emu" is: "His son had always seemed pathetic to him" (159). Carl Proffer translates the sentence differently: "He had always felt sorry for his son" (273). I think this is a better translation than Maude's because it includes both meanings: the son is pathetic because of what he is as an individual and because of what he is as a human being, that is, he will have to suffer and reenact what his father had suffered.

5. I am indebted to my anonymous referees for this information.

6. I am indebted to James Rice for calling my attention to this passage.

7. See Note 4.

8. Tolstoy repeats "at that very moment" [*v eto samoe vremia*] to emphasize an identity of two events. The reader of the Maude-Katz translation will miss this identity because the first mention of "v eto samoe vremia" is translated as "just then" and the second mention is "at that very moment."

9. It is interesting to record the reaction of a sensitive, neutral reader to Tolstoy's description of Ivan Il'ich's "religious" awakening at the end. What follows is the comment of Lionel Trilling, a distinguished American literary critic: "If we search it for religious doctrine, we find none. Nor can we even discover in it any significant religious emotion. Although it is true that the conclusion, the moment of Ivan Il'ich's escape from pain into peace and even into 'light,' is charged with feelings and described in metaphors that are part of the Christian tradition, the passage can scarcely be taken as a genuinely religious affirmation or as effectually controverting the thoughts that the dying man has had about 'the cruelty of God, and the absence of God'" (526).

10. Gary R. Jahn believes that *On Life* can be used as an "index and gloss to a variety of themes in the novel." But he warns us to be wary of applying to *The Death of Ivan Il'ich* the "sometimes grossly oversimplified explanations that are to be found in *On Life*" (Jahn, *The Death of Ivan Il'ich: An Interpretation*" 102). Chapter 10 of this valuable commentary on Tolstoy's story discusses *On Life*. Jahn has also published an interesting article on "The Role of the Ending in Lev Tolstoi's *The Death of Ivan Il'ich*." He shows how formal aspects of the story foreshadow the ending, but it seems to me that nothing in the story foreshadows the *content* of that ending.

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