

*Tolstoy's The Death of Ivan Il'ich. A Critical Companion.* Edited by Gary R. Jahn. Northwestern/AATSEEL Critical Companions to Russian Literature. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999. Pp. 216, select bibliography.

The Northwestern/AATSEEL Critical Companions to Russian Literature series published by Northwestern University Press are generally compiled with classroom applications in mind. Given the prevailing effort to assign shorter works of fiction in literature classes, the choice of *Death of Ivan Il'ich*—probably the most frequently taught of Tolstoy's shorter works—as the focus for a Critical Companion volume makes good sense. Gary Jahn has done an excellent job of commissioning new work and selecting from the existing body of published material to create a compact and vital anthology.

Jahn's admirably laconic introduction highlights the moment of composition and publication of *Death of Ivan Il'ich*, taking in both the pressing biographical issues of Tolstoy's post-conversion struggles and the frustrated expectations of his reading public. This literary and biographical moment plaits together the rather existential issues of faith, individual isolation, communication, and literary practice. Tolstoy's creation of a work of apparently flawless realism at a time of increasing literary experimentation is all the more striking in the work's invocation of the modernist, or at least, neo-Romantic, themes of death, despair, and transcendence. Jahn's characterization of *Death of Ivan Il'ich* as a "harbinger of symbolist art" is therefore less radical than it first appears.

As Jahn's survey of the critical response to the work demonstrates, ideological and psychological approaches to the work have tended to predominate, perhaps a result of the work's emergence from the turbulence of Tolstoy's post-conversion engagement with dogmatic theology and Christian faith. Critics have tended to explore the "psychology of death," celebrating Tolstoy's apparent clairvoyance in documenting

the stages of denial and acceptance in the process of dying. Alternately, the work is read in the great tradition of nineteenth-century realist prose as social critique. In this latter approach, such uncomfortable features as the intrusive, didactic narrator or the intensive working of inversions in the symbolism of darkness and light, light and death, wrench the work out of shape and suggest its alignment with other, similar experiments in modernist prose. Jahn's selection of essays for this volume judiciously taps these angles, while bringing some of the issues up to date.

Jahn, whose own work on *Death of Ivan Il'ich* (*The Death of Ivan Il'ich: An Interpretation* [New York: Twayne, 1993]) is both magisterial and incisive, generously cedes the task of interpretation in this volume to the authors he includes, introducing them in a witty and salient reflection on the uses of literary criticism, "Why Do People Write Such Studies, Anyway?" In the opening essay and one of the two pieces newly commissioned for this volume, C. J. G. Turner borrows Richard Gustafson's felicitous categories of "residency" and "estrangement" (*Leo Tolstoy: Resident and Stranger*, 1986) to explore the paradox of Ivan Il'ich's characterization as both completely typical, living "just as everyone is supposed to live," and miserably unique, "not Caius, not the man in the abstract." Drawing attention to the paucity of actual dialogue in the story, Turner analyses the actual number of characters who are referred to as friends or acquaintances to point the observation that it is not his illness that transforms "the sociable Ivan Il'ich, whom everyone liked" into a man "alone on the brink of destruction, without a single person who understood or pitied him"; rather, Turner suggests that the experiences of illness and death "expose an isolation that was already there" (51). In the other piece commissioned for this critical companion, Daniel Rancour-Laferrriere also analyses Tolstoy's characterization of his dying protagonist, but with the intention of sounding the depths of his psyche at the moment of conversion. Ivan Il'ich, in negating death and accepting pain ("There was no

fear because there was no death" and "Well, all right, let there be pain") exemplifies what Rancour-Laferriere here and elsewhere (*Tolstoy on the Couch: Misogyny, Masochism, and the Absent Mother* [1998] and *The Slave Soul of Russia: Moral Masochism and the Cult of Suffering* [1996]) terms "moral masochism." Rancour-Laferriere rejects the transcendent aperture opened by the text, arguing that we see, instead of a magnificent illumination, a monstrously enlarging, grandiose self: "Such," Rancour-Laferriere trenchantly declaims, "is Tolstoy's covert religious message. One becomes God upon dying, or rather, one becomes God instead of dying" (129).

The pieces reprinted here include George Gutsche's discussion of the problem of didacticism in his "Moral Fiction: Tolstoy's *Death of Ivan Il'ich*," Rimgaila Salys's study of Tolstoy's use of the road as metaphor for life in "Signs on the Road of Life: *The Death of Ivan Il'ich*" and Philip Roger's "Scrooge on the Neva: Dickens and Tolstoy's *Death of Ivan Il'ich*." The last piece is a classic of literary criticism on Tolstoy, one of the few articles exploring Tolstoy's relationship to Dickens, and a superb reading of the story, which well deserves to be reprinted and made widely available.

The collection is rounded off with an ample presentation of textual annotations and a select bibliography. The result is a critical companion that is bound to become a well-thumbed resource for those teaching or writing on *The Death of Ivan Il'ich*.

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**Vasily Staroi. *Pierre and Natasha. The Sequel to L. N. Tolstoy's Novel War and Peace*. Moscow: Vagrius Publishers, 1996. 2 vols.**

The publishers of Vasily Staroi's (the name is a pseudonym for an anonymous author or group

of authors) *Pierre and Natasha* describe the novel as "something along the lines of a sequel ... but more like a fantasy on the theme of *War and Peace*. Or perhaps a historical novel about the Decembrists where the heroes of Tolstoy's novel interact on the same level with real historical personages" (I:5). This hybrid work melds the aforementioned genres with heavy-handed literary parody to give us an alternatively entertaining and excruciating read.

Obviously conversant with Tolstoy scholarship, Staroi tells us the story of Pierre Bezukhov's involvement with the Decembrist uprising and his subsequent exile to Siberia, using the discarded plot developments from numerous drafts of *War and Peace*. He endeavours to match the epic sweep of Tolstoy's original with a variety of trivial story lines related to Nikolai Rostov, Princess Marie, and Sonia. At the conclusion of Tolstoy's epilogue, Pierre appears to belong to a proto-Decembrist group. The sequel begins with Pierre as the primary theoretician of the Decembrist movement, illustrating his progression from political theorist to reluctant actor in the Decembrist revolt. In the second volume, Staroi illustrates the aftereffects of the uprising on the lives of the Bezukhovs and Rostovs. Natasha attempts to exonerate her incarcerated husband by seeking an audience with Tsar Nicholas, who mercifully pardons him. However, Pierre believes that Natasha has compromised her honour in order to gain mercy and tries to kill Nicholas in revenge. He loses the clemency granted earlier, and Natasha reluctantly follows him into exile. Staroi obviously collapses the fictional and the historical in his combination of Pierre with the Decembrist Sergei Volkonskii (the great uncle of Leo Tolstoy) and in the melding of Natasha with Maria Volkonskaia (*née* Raevskaia). In this synthetic text, Staroi also blends the historical events with literary parody, mimicking some of the most famous moments in Russian literature. The scene of the Decembrists' uprising blatantly imitates *War and Peace's* Borodino battlefield scene, with an overlay of Blok's *The Twelve* and Pushkin's *The Bronze Horseman*.