

Review Article: Tolstoy's Three Deaths: Fact, Fiction, and Film

Michael Katz
Middlebury College

***The Death of Tolstoy: Russia on the Eve, Astapovo Station, 1910.* William Nickell. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2010. 209 pages. Hardcover. ISBN: 978-0-8014-4834-84.**

***The Last Station: A Novel of Tolstoy's Final Year.* Jay Parini. New York: Henry Holt, 1990. 304 pages. ISBN: 978-03073861514.**

***The Last Station* (Film) Dir. Michael Hoffman. Sony Pictures, 2010.**

In the middle of the night of October 28, 1910, Lev Tolstoy closed the door to the room where his wife of forty-eight years was sleeping, packed his things and left his home, never to return. At the age of eighty-two, the most famous living Russian embarked on a final journey that would become one of the great legends of the twentieth century. (Nickell 1)

Twenty-five years ago Marcus Levitt (University of Southern California) conducted a comprehensive and provocative investigation of the famous Pushkin Celebration of 1880, during which the “great prophet” Fyodor Dostoevsky managed to hijack the event and depicted Pushkin in both Russian messianic as well as universalist terms. Now

another academic, William Nickell (University of Chicago) has published a scholarly study of the other “great prophet” in Russian literature, Lev Tolstoy, and the signal event that attracted as much attention and mythologizing as the Pushkin days, namely, Tolstoy's dramatic departure from Yasnaya Polyana and his subsequent death at Astapovo in 1910.

In 1990, eighty years after Tolstoy's death, the American poet and novelist Jay Parini, Professor of English at Middlebury College, wrote a work of historical fiction entitled *The Last Station: A Novel of Tolstoy's Last Year*, which was recently reissued and was also translated into Russian. The author demonstrates his scrupulous historical research and the true originality of his voice and perception, in spite of the fact that Parini lacked access to any Russian materials. And in 2009, almost a hundred years after Tolstoy's death, Parini's novel was made into a motion picture, directed by the American director, writer, and producer Michael Hoffman, starring the Canadian actor Christopher Plummer as Lev Tolstoy (for which performance he was nominated both for a Golden Globe and an Academy Award); the award-winning English actress Helen Mirren (whose father was descended from Russian nobility) as Sofya Andreyevna; and

the young Scottish actor James McAvoy as Tolstoy's private secretary, Valentin Bulgakov.

The title of this review article is "Tolstoy's Three Deaths: Fact, Fiction, and Film," with an obvious allusion to Tolstoy's early story "Three Deaths" (1859). It treats three accounts of the writer's death: Nickell's monograph, Parini's novel, and the Hollywood film, and it explores what these three works reveal about the man who died in Astapovo and the myths that still surround him and his famous "exit" after more than a hundred years.

William Nickell had access to an enormous amount of historical evidence: He perused voluminous material in archives, diaries, memoirs, and reports in journals and newspapers of the period; he provides an exhaustive account of these events, including 564 footnotes for a book of only 160 pages; it contains more information and discussion than anyone but the most devoted Tolstoyan disciple could possibly absorb.

The scholar argues convincingly that during these eventful days, Russia was the scene of the first modern world mass-media event. We know, in minute-by-minute detail, all the aspects of the writer's departure, illness, and demise. Six doctors attended Tolstoy during his last months, weeks, days, and minutes. Numerous and contentious family members came and went. Tolstoy's death bed was surrounded by a swarm of reporters and photographers. Representatives of the church (seeking a deathbed recantation) and state (police and secret agents) were in attendance. They all documented Tolstoy's death. We know practically everything Tolstoy did: What he ate and drank, how he moved, whom he met, what he said, how he felt, almost what he thought.

Yet, in spite of such a wealth of contradictory evidence, Nickell discerns unanticipated coherence in the events; he manages to sort through the chaos to clarify the complex motives, the elements of spontaneity, the cross-currents of family feeling, the sycophantic flattery, and the man's genuine

spiritual quest. He succeeds so well in large part because, as Nickell himself admits, he reads the historical events as a literary text, analyzing rhetorical structures, interpreting metaphors, and organizing symbolic structures.

His book portrays the family crisis as a public event and argues that Tolstoy's private life had been effaced by a morass of overgrown personae: The author was seen not merely as a prophet, but as a "tsar" and/or "patriarch" of a secular church. No fewer than eight people maintained diaries of Tolstoy's so-called "private life" at Yasnaya Polyana.

Nickell rigorously analyzes and contrasts the multiple narrative transformations of Tolstoy's departure and death: his depiction as a populist who rejected aristocratic wealth and comfort; a proto-Christian who took refuge in the desert; an author whose last gesture was seen as a final attempt to write; and a repentant sinner and excommunicate, even whose last gesture was seen as his futile attempt to make the sign of the cross.

Nickell describes at length the media circus that engulfed Yasnaya Polyana during those final weeks: the installation of telegraph equipment, the tent-camps of reporters, the railroads carrying people and supplies, the endless illustrations and photographs that were dispatched daily. Elvis and Graceland? Michael Jackson and Neverland? Such comparisons don't seem too far-fetched. Then he turns to the funeral rites that managed to exclude both church and state. The secret police had been monitoring Tolstoy's movements yet they failed utterly in their attempts to limit the crowd and control the press coverage; the church objected to the use of Orthodox ritual, since Tolstoy was a "non-believer"; nevertheless, the Orthodox hymn "Eternal Memory" (Вечная память) was sung during the service. Both institutions lost complete control of the event: The audience, the crowd, the "people" prevailed with their own heartfelt observance and celebrations. Finally Nickell depicts the aftermath of the momentous events as Tolstoy

continued to circulate in the cultural economy. Ironically, the prophet who had turned his back on modernity was subsequently subsumed into its discourse.

All in all, Nickell's book is a very worthwhile, extremely well written, and most welcome addition to the studies of Tolstoy, as well as of Russian cultural institutions. At a time when Tolstoy's death was once again in the headlines—at least in the Arts Section, if not on the front page—as a result of the release of recent films (*The Last Station* and *Anna Karenina*) and new translations of his classic novels (two new versions of *Anna Karenina* last year), it is both gratifying and timely to have a scholarly analysis of the events and an intelligent interpretation of the diverse and contradictory accounts of the Tolstoy's last year and his death.

In the author's "Afterword" to his book, Jay Parini clearly states that his novel, *The Last Station*, is a work of *fiction*, "though it bears some of the trappings and affects of literary scholarship." Parini read all the relevant materials he could find in English translation. The novel is narrated from several different points of view, namely, those of the six principle characters: Sofia Andreyevna; Tolstoy's private secretary, Valentin Fyodorovich Bulgakov; his friend, Doctor Dushan Petrovich Makovitsky; his daughter, Sasha; his disciple, Vladimir Grigorevich Chertkov; and, of course, Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy himself. Only Tolstoy's words are accurate and "real": That is, quoted directly from his letters, articles, and essays, or based on reported conversations. The words spoken or thought by all the other characters are "fictional" or invented: Parini acknowledges that he "freely imagined what might have, could have, or should have been said." The result is what he himself calls a "kaleidoscope," one that displays the continually changing, symmetrical forms of life at Yasnaya Polyana at the time.

Sofya Andreyevna occupies many pages. She is clearly the most complicated character in the novel:

a loving wife and mother, a neurotic and manipulative woman, a desperate—and at times suicidal—harpy. Her perceptions of her husband seem true-to-life: Tolstoy is shown as intense, brilliant, often childlike, at times, seemingly insane, and at others, as a sexual predator. Meanwhile, Sofia Andreyevna suffers from deep-seated jealousy, and suspects her husband of harboring a homoerotic attachment to his disciple Chertkov:

The bare truth is that my husband, the greatest Russian author since Pushkin, has developed a ludicrous, senile crush on a plump, middle-aged flatterer. As a boy, even as a young man, he was drawn to men. He liked nothing better than his hunting trips. I have talked about this openly, but it makes him indignant. He does not see how foolish it is to love another man. Not only is it foolish, it is sinful in the eyes of God. (Parini 152)¹

This belief of hers grows in intensity, and comes to invade her subconscious. In one dream, Tolstoy's homoerotic attachment to Chertkov is explicitly homosexual:

That night, in bed, I dreamt that my husband and Vladimir Grigorevich were lying on the wet forest floor of Zaseyka, naked, writhing in the dead leaves: an old man, white haired, with a beard of snow, engaged with his fat-faced, oily disciple in an act of monstrous intercourse. They wriggled in the mud like worms. (Parini 162)²

Chertkov himself is depicted in less detail: He is a sincere, devoted disciple, but manipulative and underhanded. He, too is jealous of Tolstoy's residual affection and undying loyalty to his wife and family, to his aristocratic origins, and to his beloved estate. Chertkov tries to do everything he can to get control of the prophet's last will and testament.

Sasha is shown as involved in her own homoerotic, possibly homosexual relationship with

her “companion” Varvara Mikhailovna. Tolstoy’s daughter even draws a parallel between her own attachment and her father’s:

After a long massage, she [Varvara Mikhailovna] would collapse beside me and pull the red-and-green patchwork quilt over our heads. We would fall asleep in a short time—a dreamless, wordless sleep in a bed so large it might have been an arctic snowfield (except for the fire between us).... Papa had returned before from Kochety, where he’d met with Chertkov. He is always buoyant when he has seen or is about to see Chertkov. He loves Vladimir Grigorevich as I love Varvara Mikhailovna. I would never begrudge him this. (Parini 140)

The other intriguing character in Parini’s novel is Bulgakov. He is a devoted follower who worships his idol and comes to Yasnaya Polyana to serve the great man. He describes himself as “hungry for God,” eager to discuss ideas, and aspiring to perfect his soul. But then he meets Masha, a straightforward, progressive, young woman who recently joined the devout band of Tolstoyans who live and work at Chertkov’s house. He forms an intimate bond with her and, as Chertkov himself had predicted, finds it difficult, even impossible, to preserve his chastity. Their affair is consummated and their friendship grows into genuine love.

In the center of Parini’s novel and in the midst of this swarm of activity, conflicting ideas, and feelings, stands Lev Nikolayevich: the writer, the thinker, the genius, the prophet, the senile old man, the madman, the spoiled brat. As each character speaks to the reader directly in his or her own voice, a portrait of the writer emerges from this rich kaleidoscope of images. The novelist attempts to fashion an objective, balanced view, but doesn’t ignore or disguise the conflicts and contradictions, the pain and suffering that finally result in his decision to leave home. Parini distributes his sympathy among several characters. No single one

emerges as the villain or the hero of the piece; each has his strengths, weaknesses, and faults.

When one compares Parini’s novel with Nickell’s monograph, two aspects are striking. First, there is considerable agreement between them about the emergence of Tolstoy as the star of the first great media circus of the modern period. The memoirists, diarists, letter-writers, newspaper reporters, photographers, etc., are all there, recording every moment for a hungry public and for posterity.

Where Parini diverges from Nickell’s historical record and, as he admits, turns to his own imagination and intuition, is his depiction of the highly sexualized Tolstoyan household at Yasnaya Polyana. In our post-Freudian age, Parini has drawn what he thinks are the logical conclusions. Tolstoy’s own sexual appetites are legendary. His diaries and letters reveal his strong attachments and attraction for men as well as women. As a modern reader and a scholar of Russian literature and culture, I find Parini’s interpretation entirely plausible, I daresay, almost inevitable. This subject may still be taboo among some Tolstoy scholars, particularly those of a conservative disposition who frequent international Tolstoy Conferences at Yasnaya Polyana; there may even be some documents in the archive yet to be published which might provide additional evidence for Parini’s extrapolations.

Both the media aspect of the event and the intense sexuality of the household strike me as evidence of modernity. Tolstoy’s death occurred in the first decade of the twentieth century during which mass media developed to such a bizarre extreme and human sexuality emerged as a major preoccupation in our culture. Both Nickell and Parini have identified and depicted early manifestations of both themes in the saga of Tolstoy’s departure and death.

Finally we turn from the relatively middlebrow culture of Parini’s novel to the realm of American popular culture, Hollywood in fact, where twenty

years after the novel was published, a film, many years in negotiation and production, was finally released.

It cost some eighteen million dollars to make, funds provided by a combination of German and Russian sources. Filming took place not at Yasnaya Polyana, but in Saxony-Anhalt, as well as in the states of Brandenburg and Thuringia, in the city of Leipzig, and at some historical locations in Russia. The station of the small German town of Pretzsch stood in for Astapovo.

Like any typical Hollywood film, *The Last Station* is a love story. In fact, it contains two love stories. One is the profound, frenzied, and unpredictable love between Lev Nikolayevich and his wife of almost fifty years; the other is the fictional love affair of Tolstoy's earnest young secretary Bulgakov and a pretty, progressive young acolyte Masha. Much of the film contrasts the extraordinary chaos and struggle of the long-suffering married couple with the poignant vicissitudes of the young couple's burgeoning romance.

Critical reaction to the film was mixed. One reviewer singled out the "dramatically useful inventions," including the character of Masha, as well as the more shocking scene of Sofya Andreyevna's summons to her dying husband's bedside in the last moments of the film. Another praised the "Chekhovian" combination of high melodrama followed by broad, almost slapstick humor. The critic for *The New York Times* decried the confusion of life and art, described the movie as "overdone" and "exaggerated," filled with "bombast and grandiosity." The reviewer concluded with a witty judgment: "This is the kind of movie that gives literature a bad name." *The New Yorker* thought the film was "vibrantly alive," but concluded that some scenes were "closer to Dostoevsky's hyperthyroid manner than to Tolstoy's firmer, calmer tone."

I myself, though certainly no film critic, found that some scenes were highly effective, while others

were clearly "over the top." I thought Christopher Plummer's portrayal of Tolstoy extremely convincing; he looked and acted as I imagine the man himself must have looked and acted. On the other hand, I found Helen Mirren's Sofya Andreyevna close to unbelievable. Her ridiculous fall from the balcony onto the library floor, the portrayal of her melodramatic attempts to drown herself, the juvenile games and sexual overtures to her increasingly frail husband, and the hysterical fits of smashing crockery at dinner: These scenes seemed overblown and unrealistic for a late-nineteenth century Russian aristocratic household. Paul Giamatti's Chertkov was reasonably convincing as the villain of the piece, and I thought the performance of the young James McAvoy the best part of the film. His Bulgakov was touching, earnest, compelling, and sympathetic... in a word, beautifully and intelligently acted.

Another aspect the film successfully managed to convey was the extraordinary media circus that surrounded Tolstoy's every move during his last weeks and days. The reporters, photographers, telegrams, newspapers, medical briefings, tent cities of curious onlookers—all this was painfully familiar to those who tune in to any sensational story that occurs in our interconnected world.

As for the sexuality that Parini emphasizes, there the film has some surprises. It would appear that only Sofya Andreyevna fantasizes about the possibility of a homoerotic attachment between her husband and his disciple Chertkov. As far as I could tell, there is no indication of that in the film, and Giamatti's Chertkov was not a very attractive figure. And since Sasha's companion Varvara Mikhailovna was totally absent, there was no hint of any amorous relationship between the two women. On the other hand, there was a very amusing, though highly improbable scene of Sofya Andreyevna's playful "seduction" of her beloved Lev Nikolayevich; furthermore there is no doubt that the one scene of passionate lovemaking between Bulgakov and Masha resulted in the

movie's R-rating (Restricted), "For a scene of sexuality/nudity."

There is a saying that was long thought to have originated with Mark Twain's classic novel *Huckleberry Finn* (1884): "You pays your money and you takes your choice" (147).³ In other words, the right of choice is left to the purchaser. This mercantile phrase encapsulates my own view of the matter: Some prefer their stories as fact, others as fiction, and still others, as film. I value all three of these versions of Tolstoy's death. I try to appreciate each for what it contributes to this fascinating tale: telling it (more or less) as it was, imagining how it might have been, and showing us what it might have looked like. It is hard to find a Russian equivalent for that Anglo-American saying. "На вкус и цвет, товарища нет"? Or better perhaps, given the sexualized nature of contemporary culture, "Кто любит попа, а кто попадью."

Notes

An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the International Tolstoy Conference at Yasnaya Polyana in August 2010. I am grateful to the colleagues who were present for their valuable suggestions and vociferous objections.

1. Sofia Andreyevna's diary from August 3, 1910 gives full vent to her suspicions and refers to Tolstoy's own diary for corroborating evidence (536, see fn. 4).

2. See Tolstoy's candid confession of his "love for men" in his diary from November 29, 1851. The version in Tolstoy's twenty-volume *Collected Works (Собрание сочинений)* (v. 19, p. 76) is badly bowdlerized. The English translation (1: 39) contains the complete text. Daniel Rancour-Lafierriere has written an exhaustive and imaginative Freudian study of Tolstoy's sexuality.

3. The phrase has been traced back to a caption for a political cartoon in the English humor magazine *Punch* (1846).

Works Cited

- Levitt, Marcus. *Russian Literary Politics and the Pushkin Celebration of 1880*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1989.
- Rancour-Lafierriere, Daniel. *Tolstoy on the Couch: Misogyny, Masochism and the Absent Mother*. New York: New York UP, 1998.
- Толстой, Л. Н. *Собрание сочинений в 22 томах*. Москва: Художественная Литература, 1978–1985.
- Tolstoy, Leo. *Tolstoy's Diaries*. Ed. and Trans. R. F. Christian. 2 vols. New York: Scribner's, 1985.
- Tolstaia, S. A. *The Diaries of Sofia Tolstoy*. Trans. Cathy Porter. New York: Random House, 1985.
- Twain, Mark. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. New York: Dover Publications, 1994.