

- (3) What prayers?
- (4) How does he take the Eucharist himself?
- (5) Who in the monastery serves with him instead of a deacon?
- (6) What do they sing?
- (7) Did he himself drink and when?

3. A typewritten copy of the preceding manuscript, 7 pages in quarto, printed on one side only. At the end of the text there is a note by Tolstoy's daughter: "Written in the middle of January, 1909." The copy has mistakes. Instead of Ilidor the name of the priest-monk was copied as Isidor (the story was first published with this name). There are a few corrections by Tolstoy.

Notes (from *Complete Collected Works*)

- 1. Tolstoy's ellipsis.
- 2. Indentation by the editor.
- 3. Misprint in original 1509.
- 4. The first was "Who are the Murderers! Pavel Kudriash."

Works Cited

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Interview with Jay Parini

Editor's note: Jay Parini's 1990 novel Last Station, set in the Tolstoy household of 1910 and based on diaries and letters, has been released (December 2009) as a motion picture directed by Michael Hoffman. William Nickell is the Licker Research Chair at Cowell College, University of California Santa Cruz, where he lectures on Russian language and literature. He is the author of The Death of Tolstoy: Russia on the Eve, Astapovo Station, 1910, forthcoming from Cornell University Press. Parini is D. E. Axinn Professor of English and Creative Writing at Middlebury College.

William Nickell: At the outset I should say that I knew of your book from the very beginning of working on my own project that treats Tolstoy's final days and death, but wouldn't allow myself to read it because I didn't want to be influenced by a work of fiction when I was working with historical sources. But now I have finally read it and thoroughly enjoyed it.

Jay Parini: Well I'm glad, and I'll do my best to answer any questions you have about it.

WN: I know that it's been a long time since you wrote the book.

JP: Yes. I haven't been focused on this material for over twenty years.

WN: Your novel has an interesting format, structured around diary entries and letters written by people living in Tolstoy's household. In the afterword you describe why you chose that approach, and it makes a lot of sense. So my first question regards how you went back and forth between what was recounted in the historical records and what you were doing with the novelization. Where were you fictionalizing, or expanding upon, what was there in the records?

JP: From the start I realized that to try and do an objective account would be hopeless—that was one of my very first instincts about this. My editor suggested that I do a non-fiction account of the last year of Tolstoy's life. And I had that in mind for a little bit as I started working but quickly realized that I wanted to do it as a novel and have the option of being way more subjective and really going inside character's minds and hearts and trying to figure out what was going on. I could make a novel like the film *Rashomon*, which would be a layering of subjective viewpoints—sometimes the same scene observed by various eyes and ears—and to try and dig in at the realities that underlay Tolstoy's last year in that way.

I also wanted to use Tolstoy's last year as a kind of lens through which I could view the whole of his career. As people reflected in their own minds they could go back to their early days with Tolstoy, such

as in the beginning where Sofia Andreevna thinks about working on their editions of *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* and remembers her early relationship. So I was able to really move freely in time and I was able to be free from objective reality (because you are always stuck in some subjective, claustrophobic consciousness). This was a very liberating form to work in for me. It presupposes that I know a certain amount about Tolstoy, but I'm not an expert. I'm hardly a scholar of this kind of material, so it gave me lots of options for moving around freely.

WN: As someone who has spent a lot of time reading these accounts, particularly the diaries in the household, I have to say that if you are not an expert then you had a very good intuition. The characters come off true to what I imagine as well.

JP: I'm glad to hear that. I certainly immersed myself in all of these diaries and got a sense of their world and the way they worked, and I realized that diaries were the currency of the Tolstoy marriage. That's how they communicated with each other, through diaries. Sofia's diaries were one of my main sources and they are a rich literary source—endlessly interesting.

WN: Do you happen to remember which version of the diaries you were using?

JP: I don't remember. Whatever was the major book in print about 25 years ago, that would have been the one that I would have worked from. I do know that I was working from my old friend Reg Christian's versions of Tolstoy's letters and diaries. Reg was the major advisor to the project. He was my squash and tennis partner at St. Andrews.

WN: That's great—you could learn a lot by osmosis from him.

JP: While I played tennis I picked up a lot.

WN: One of the reasons I was asking is that there are Russian and English versions of the diaries that were out at that time, and though the Russian edition is in two volumes, the single volume of diaries in English is just the 1910 diary and has a lot of material that is left out of the Soviet edition.

JP: Yes, that's probably the edition I would have used. Interestingly just yesterday I got a new volume of her diaries that is just coming out in England. It has an introduction by Doris Lessing—it's not even out yet.

WN: There is more material coming out, but they are very careful about letting some things out into the open. I have repeatedly been refused access to the diaries of Varvara Feokritova at the Tolstoy Museum because they feel that she sensationalizes things and isn't objective. You refer quite a bit to her character, so I was curious to know if you had had any access to her diaries or if this was all from other sources. There are bits and pieces of her diaries in the Jubilee edition and some of the other accounts.

JP: Yes, I just got bits and pieces about her. Someone once asked Rudyard Kipling, "How did you get to know so much about the Indian army—you have their voices down perfectly, you understand the details." And he said, "Once I was passing a barracks in India and I stopped for a while and listened for a few minutes, and I passed on." And I think a novelist knows how to do that; you pick up little shards of details, and then you imagine the whole mosaic together in your head and you're able to intuit. You know you can intuit the whole from little parts, and I was able to do that with Varvara. I was able to look at fragments and imagine what the whole might look like.

WN: In the novel you describe the extremes to which Sofia Andreevna at times went to try to maintain control over her household in the summer of 1910. She sees herself at war with the Tolstoyans and resorts to some extreme, and sometimes dishonest, tactics. Feokritova and Aleksandra both decided to keep diaries specifically to document this behavior, and their accounts are both very spy-like in tone. I had the feeling that you didn't know all of this, but at the same time, reading your novel, you give us the sense that that is how they're relating to Sofia Andreevna.

JP: Just a writer's intuition, I guess. Just lucky.

WN: You also focus on the personal relationship between Aleksandra and Varvara Feokritova. You depict emotional, but also a certain degree of physical, intimacy. I spoke with Anne Edwards a number of years ago and she had learned some things about this when she interviewed Aleksandra during the writing of her biography of Sofia Andreevna. Did you have any conversations with her about this?

JP: No, I never did, though I'm sure I read her book. It was in the air. In many different places I intuited the relationship between these two women, and I guessed that it was a sort of homoerotic relationship. That was obviously beyond fun to just run with that and let it roll. Whether it was true or untrue, I just decided to go with it—but it seemed true enough to me from what I could tell.

WN: Your reader can't tell exactly how far this all went. It's almost a kind of Tolstoyan, Platonic, sublimated eroticism, all touches and closeness, but not necessarily a fully sexual relationship.

JP: Well, who knows? Who can tell? But Tolstoy's own sexual life was pretty wild, that seems obvious.

WN: Well that relates to another question. One of the main areas in which you expand upon the historical record in your novel is in the discussion of the body and sexuality—not just with Aleksandra and Feokritova, but with the whole household.

JP: I could tell from all the diaries that it was a very sexualized household, that there was a lot of undercurrent there. From what we know of Russian life in those days there was certainly no holding back. Certainly Russian aristocrats of that era had a tremendously active sexual life. The use of prostitutes was commonplace. Tolstoy himself had relationships with gypsy girls and all sorts of peasant women and from early on was obsessed with this sort of thing. He went to Moscow and said, "I'm going to get myself some work and find myself a wife." Well, he did neither; he got so obsessed with his relations with various gypsy and peasant girls that he could hardly focus. That was before he went off to the Crimea.

WN: There's that beautiful battle in the early diaries between "the rules" and "the gypsies." He's making all kinds of rules for himself and then taking account of his moral performance at the end of the day. And there's one beautiful entry that concludes: "Tomorrow the rules... or the gypsies."

JP: Yes, that's great. The Russians have never been able to face up to Tolstoy's physical self. That's really quite hilarious to me. My novel is coming out this year in Russian. I'm very keen to see the reaction—I think it will be quite furious.

WN: And you're not concerned about that.

JP: I don't care in the slightest. I'm twenty years beyond worrying about anything like that.

WN: Maybe I'll write an article about the reaction to your book.

JP: I think that would be an interesting thing to write about.

WN: The same would hold true of Aleksandra's story. She apparently loved women, and it is too bad that some people think there is something to be ashamed of in that. It could be looked at in a completely different way.

JP: Yes.

WN: Tolstoy's comments on his own homosexual impulses play an important role in your novel in the scene where Sofia Andreevna pulls out his early diaries and shows people a passage where Tolstoy describes his sexualized feelings for men. She does so to suggest that there is some kind of homoerotic interest, at the least, between Tolstoy and Chertkov. And you took this directly from the diaries—the scene you describe is recounted by several members of this household.

JP: That gets into the film too—there is a vivid point where she accuses Tolstoy of having essentially a gay relationship with Chertkov. People might be surprised to see that; the general audience knows virtually nothing about Tolstoy. I think my portrayal of his sexuality in the novel is close to the historical record.

WN: I would agree. But elsewhere, in an interview on Australian radio, you say that Tolstoy had homosexual relationships throughout his life.

JP: Was it just early on?

WN: More likely never. There is just that early reference to his desire in his diary. I have not seen any record of his having sex with a man. I don't know if you had access to some record that I haven't seen.

JP: I was probably just extrapolating from diary entries and assuming that he must have done something. In fiction sometimes you veer away from reality, because one can't know—who can know what Tolstoy really did? So it's in the province of fiction to take it whichever way you like, whereas it's not in the provenance of scholarship to go places where there is no historical record. And I am probably more circumspect in the novel than I was in the interview. Sometimes when I'm doing an interview with someone I'm a bit more speculative.

WN: In the novel Sofia Andreevna reads directly from Tolstoy's early diary regarding his homosexual attractions:

I copied this from a diary of 29 November 1851, and it is quite revealing. 'I have never been in love with a woman, but I have very often fallen in love with a man.' She stopped to wait for the weight of this to sink in. "Can you believe it? Now listen to this: 'For me the main indication of love is fear of offending the beloved. I fell in love with a man even before I realized what pederasty was; yet even when I found out what it was the thought of it never crossed my mind.

You have Makovitskii say: "See, there it is, he explains himself." But Sofia Andreevna continues:

Beauty has always been a huge factor in my attraction to people... There is Dyakov, for instance. How could I ever forget the night we left Pirogovo together, when wrapped in my blanket, I felt as though I could devour him in kisses and weep for joy? Lust was not absent, yet it

was impossible to say exactly what part it played in my feelings, for my mind never tempted me with depraved images.

Tolstoy gets up disgusted and leaves the room. All of this is accurate, right out of the diaries. And then you follow a bit further on with comments from Valentin Bulgakov:

The idea of Lev Nikolaevich lying with another man was upsetting. I realize that I too find men attractive in a way that could easily be misconstrued. I love to see young men haying in the field with their shirts off or bathing in the Voronka without their clothes. Indeed I cannot help staring at the boy who grooms the horses at Telyatniki without something akin to lust in my heart. I understood exactly what Lev Nikolaevich meant in his diaries, and once again his directness and boldness startled me. I would never have risked putting such bold feelings into words.

WN: Tolstoy's custodians would probably be comfortable with Bulgakov's interpretation. But Sofia Andreevna was provoking people to wonder if Tolstoy's relationship with Chertkov is Platonic or if there is a hint of this former homoerotic attraction, or even something more.

JP: Well I think that's nonsense. I'm not suggesting anything explicit between Tolstoy and Chertkov. I think it's just Sofia's fantasy, that's all I'm portraying in the novel. She did make those accusations.

WN: Sometimes you wonder if she's even serious or if she is just trying to provoke him.

JP: Yes, and you'll see how Helen Mirren does that really beautifully in the film. I think she's going to be nominated for best actress—which will draw a lot of people to the whole subject of Tolstoy's life and thought. It could have a good effect in getting people interested in Tolstoy

WN: In the novel, when these moments occur where the mythology of Tolstoy is dissolving into the scandalous story of what's going on his house-

hold, you return to Tolstoy's voice. You use passages from *The Death of Ivan Ilich* and *What Then Must We Do?* to re-center the text in that balance between Tolstoy as body on one side, and as moralist on the other. Again it's kind of the rules and the gypsies—very much body on the one side, and moralist and ascetic on the other.

JP: Yes, that's right.

WN: Since we've begun talking about the film, let's continue along that line. I understand that you got started on the idea of the film with Anthony Quinn. How did that come about?

JP: After the book came out in 1990 it was only a few months later that I got a call from Anthony Quinn calling me from New York saying that he had read the book and that he wanted to work on a script with me and he wanted to play Tolstoy. He said he was a great lover of Tolstoy. He had a photograph of Tolstoy on his desk, so he was deeply intrigued by Tolstoy. So for years I would go to New York on weekends or he would come to Vermont and we would work on this script. We worked on it off and on for about ten years. Tony was trying to raise the money through various sources to make the film. And then of course Tony got ill and then he died in 2000 and left the whole project in tatters. From the beginning I had worked with Bonnie Arnold, who been the producer of *Dances with Wolves*. Bonnie and I stayed in close touch, and she was able to then pull other people into play, such as the film company in London. Chris Curling has a film company called Zephyr Films. He came on board, and Michael Hoffman came on board as director and he wanted very much to rewrite the script, and I wanted him to do this because what I had written with Anthony Quinn was not really working out very well. It was too Zorba-like.

WN: That's what I had wanted to ask—if he saw Tolstoy as a Zorba the Greek figure.

JP: That was one of the problems. He saw too much of that thing. We had worked on it for ten years very much creating a Tolstoy who was Zorba—

because that's what Anthony Quinn knew, and that's what he liked to do. So Michael took it right back to the novel, which is what he should have done. I read every version of it and discussed every scene with him. At the end of the day we wound up with much more verisimilitude. It looks more like the Tolstoy of my novel and more like the Tolstoy of history than the version that Anthony Quinn would have put forward.

WN: Although that would have been interesting too, in a different way. How did Andrei Konchalovsky get involved?

JP: He got involved because of the connection with Egoli Tossell films in Berlin. There's a great producer called Jens Meurer, who was one of the three producers of the film—he was a friend of Andrei's, and that's how that happened.

WN: Was he a hands-off producer?

JP: He was basically just a money guy. Chris Curling and Bonnie Arnold were both intellectually involved. Chris Curling in particular, in London. He's a very brilliant man and he was involved on a shaping level.

WN: Have you seen the final version of the film?

JP: Oh yes, many times. I saw the film coming together and was actually on the set when they were shooting the film in Saxon.

WN: How did the shooting go?

JP: Michael Hoffman was always trying to maintain the tension between Tolstoy and his wife, and to keep the film focused on the marriage. That's really what the film is about, more than my novel, which sweeps rather wildly from the beginning to the end of Tolstoy's life. The film is about the complications of love, and it's not just focused on Tolstoy but also on the whole relationship between Valentin Bulgakov and Masha. There I was playing off of *Anna Karenina*. I was doing an under-story. The over-story would have been Tolstoy and Sofia Andreevna, and the under-story, or counter story, was Bulgakov and Masha. That's purely a piece of fiction, but you can see how it mirrors *Anna Karenina*.

WN: People always questioned whether Tolstoy had begun to practice and preach celibacy only because he had grown old, so to bring in the relationship of Bulgakov with Masha is a nice counter-balance. Your Bulgakov understands Tolstoy better than most of the other people around him.

JP: Certainly from reading the diary of Bulgakov I felt that he did have a kind of intuitive grasp of the issues in Tolstoy's life and a deep sympathy for both sides in the marriage, which makes him an ideal narrator. I think of him as the main figure not only in my novel, but also in the film. He's the centering presence in the film.

WN: He's sent to the household by Chertkov, but he doesn't really like this commission. He feels as if he is being asked to be a spy for Chertkov. His diaries are more objective, more centered, than a lot of the others.

JP: I knew that I had a novel when I figured out

that Bulgakov was at the center of all of this. It really gave me a narrative center.

WN: You've written other historical novels. Did you find anything different when working on this one? You do "red-letter" Tolstoy's words—you say in the afterword that you don't modify anything that he says.

JP: Yes, anytime Tolstoy speaks in the novel it is something that was recorded somewhere, so I'm not making up dialogue for Tolstoy. I didn't dare write in Tolstoy's voice. I didn't do him as one of my narrators. So when Tolstoy steps in, as in the excerpts from his essays and fiction, he steps in as himself. You can see why I wouldn't want to make up Tolstoy. It would be ridiculous. I didn't hesitate so much when I did, say, Walter Benjamin. I felt that he's not the sort of figure where it would be holy writ, so I didn't worry about it.

WN: Is there something particular about Tolstoy's

DREAM of Two Dark-Complected DAMES

by Daniil Kharms

(best read with a Philadelphia accent)

So there're these two dizzy dames snoozing.
 Actually no, they're not snoozing.
 Actually no, they are snoozing, and they have a dream,
 Like this: Ivan walks in the door
 And right behind him the super too
 Holding a volume of Tolstoy,
War and Peace Part 2...
 Actually no, that's not it at all
 It's Tolstoy who walks in and takes off his coat
 Takes off his galoshes takes off his boots
 And shouts: Yo Vanka! Help!
 Then Vanka grabs an ax
 And whacks Tolstoy real good on the head.
 Tolstoy drops like a load. Jesus!
 There goes all of Russian literature right down the toilet!

August 19, 1936

(Translated by Tom Newlin)