

The Confession as Subtext in The Death of Ivan Il'ich

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In the late 1870's, Leo Tolstoy experienced a dramatic spiritual transformation as a result of which he devoted himself almost exclusively to the writing of such religious treatises as *The Confession*, *An Investigation of Dogmatic Theology*, and *A Union and Translation of the Four Gospels*. Although his faith and the works that stemmed from it gave him great joy and satisfaction, they created considerable dissension in the Tolstoy household. His wife Sof'ia Andreevna, frequently complained that her husband's scholarly pursuits were ruining his health, introducing an alien and unwanted element into their domestic life, and incurring the wrath of the authorities both ecclesiastic and civil. Against this background of protest Tolstoy completed *The Death of Ivan Il'ich* in 1886. As a work of fiction and consequently a radical break with his theological preoccupations, it was meant to be a concession to his long-suffering wife. Sof'ia Andreevna was quite pleased.¹ Yet she failed to notice that *The Death of Ivan Il'ich* is thematically and even stylistically a fictional recasting of *The Confession*, the first of Tolstoy's major statements on the subject of religion.² The parallels are not always exact, but they are sufficiently numerous and close to suggest an organic link between the two works. While it is true that Tolstoy never abandoned art, it is also true that he never renounced his interest in religion. *The Death of Ivan Il'ich* may indeed be a concession to Sof'ia Andreevna and others, who longed for Tolstoy to write "in the former spirit" once more, but it is far from a complete capitulation. It is, instead, a restatement of the fundamental dilemma so brilliantly outlined in *The Confession* and a ratification of the resolution Tolstoy found to his agonizing spiritual malaise.

Written in the first person, *The Confession* purports to be a history of Tolstoy's religious quest and ultimate conversion. It begins with three autobiographical chapters which chronicle the successive stages of his spiritual evolution from early childhood to middle age. We learn of his conventional piety as a child and his equally conventional impiety as a young man. He speaks of the "ambition, love of power, greed, sensuality, pride, anger, and vindictiveness" which came to dominate his personality and recalls the advice given to him by one of his aunts: "Rien ne forme un jeune homme comme une liaison avec une femme comme il faut."³ In *The*

¹She was also pleased with the changed in her husband's disposition and clearly associated it with his new interest: "Levochka is in a good mood. I think he's begun to write in the former spirit. But he doesn't like it when I ask him about it or speak of it." Quoted in N. N. Gusev, *Letopis' zhizni i tvorchestva L'va Nikolaevicha Tolstogo, 1828-1890* (Moscow: GIKhL, 1958), p. 554.

²A recent study does not even mention the connection between the two works. See Edward Wasiolek, *Tolstoy's Major Fiction* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1978). Other critics note the similarity but mention it only in passing. See, for example, Mikhail Borisovich Khrapchenko, *Lev Tolstoy kak khudozhnik*, 4th ed. (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1978), p. 239; T.G.S. Cain, *Tolstoy* (London: Paul Elek, 1977), p. 139. G. W. Spence makes the following observations on the two works: "The inner resemblance between *The Death of Ivan Ilych* and the *Confession* consists not only in the similarity of the awareness of the approach of death and the concomitant bitterness and despair, and not only in the fact that Gerasim, as a representation of the peasants, is a sane and vital man, not daunted by the thought of death, but also in the importance in both works of the recognition of guilt and of the consequent asceticism." See *Tolstoy the Ascetic* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1967), p. 66.

³Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, ed. V. G. Chertkov et al., 90 vols. (Moscow: GIKhL, 1928-1958), XXIII, 4. All subsequent references to this volume will be given parenthetically in the text. All translations are mine.

Death of Ivan Il'ich only one chapter, Chapter 2, is devoted to the protagonist's early life. Although it tells us little of his moral upbringing, we can infer from numerous details that he regards religion with the same aloof respect as any of the other givens in his social milieu. He is a creature of other people's expectations, "*le phénix de la famille*" as a child and "*bon enfant*" as an ambitious young lawyer. His ascent in society and his sexual escapades along the way suggest that he has taken the advice of Tolstoy's aunt quite literally. On the early years of Ivan Il'ich, the narrator remarks: "All this came under the heading of the French saying: *il faut que jeunesse se passe*. Everything took place with clean hands, in clean shirts, with French words, and, what's most important, in the very highest society and consequently with the approval of people in high position."⁴ The adults and social superiors who nod their approval to Ivan Il'ich are equally prominent in *The Confession*. They join in the general ridicule of Tolstoy's pious younger brother, Dmitrii, and, according to the narrator, encourage and applaud every manifestation of evil. At one point Tolstoy laments: "With all my heart I wanted to be good. But I was young, I had passions, and I was alone, completely alone whenever I sought the good" (p. 4). He is the anguished and ultimately frustrated and defeated seeker; Ivan Il'ich is a moral drifter whose mediocrity enables him to make an easy adjustment to the social pressures around him. What unites them is the fact that both have fallen into a pernicious routine with the eager assistance of morally depraved adults.

Eventually two preoccupations give temporary form to the otherwise amorphous existence of each man. The first is a career—for Tolstoy in literature and for Ivan Il'ich in law. As a writer Tolstoy is immediately accepted by the most notable literary talents in St. Petersburg. In time, however, his restive nature rebels against the fatuous isolation of his ivory tower, and he remarks bitterly that his sole desire at that stage of his life was "to get as much money and praise as possible" (p. 7). The same can certainly be said of Ivan Il'ich. In fact, the biographical second chapter speaks of little else besides his determination to succeed in his career, to win the praise of his superiors and the admiration of his colleagues, and to earn the highest possible salary and live in the most comfortable circumstances.

So great in fact is Ivan Il'ich's devotion to his career that his second main preoccupation—his wife and family—is nothing more than an appendix to the first. He marries only because marriage is the thing to do and chooses the woman most likely to further his standing in both society and the legal profession. For Tolstoy marriage is a separate and higher stage of development. It comes into his life after his disillusionment with literature and represents a respite before the final crisis. In Chapter 3 he writes: "And even then I might have reached that despair which I reached at the age of 50 if it were not for one more aspect of life which I had not yet known and which promised me salvation: family life" (p. 9). Once married, he resumes his career as a writer but with a new goal and a new motivation: "I wrote, teaching what was for me the only truth: that a man should live so that he and his family might have it as good as possible" ("*chtoby samomu s sem'ei bylo kak mozhno lushche,*" p. 10). That, Tolstoy claims, is the creed he lived by for fifteen years. His writing has now been modified and adapted to his domestic philosophy. By contrast, Ivan Il'ich has subordinated his home life to his profession. Yet each man has combined family and career in such a way as to achieve the pinnacle of personal contentment and stability.

It is precisely at this moment in their lives that Tolstoy and Ivan Il'ich begin the descent which culminates in conversion. As we have already seen, Tolstoy experiences his crisis at the age of 50, an age he repeatedly refers to as "the middle of life." For him the "middle" is synonymous with the highest point of his personal

⁴Tolstoy, XXVI, 71. All subsequent references to this volume will be given parenthetically in the text.

and professional good fortune, as numerous details in *The Confession* indicate. In Chapter 4, for example, he recalls that "this happened to me at the very time when in every respect I had what is considered to be perfect happiness" (p. 12). Two paragraphs later he speaks of the time of crisis as the "summit of life" (p. 13). This very same imagery receives graphic illustration in *The Death of Ivan Il'ich*. In Chapter 3, the hero finally gets the prestigious position he has coveted so long with its salary of 5,000 rubles per year. He buys a house in Moscow and proceeds to decorate it himself. But while standing on a ladder in order to show an upholsterer how he wants the draperies to hang, he slips and falls against the window frame. His figurative fall from grace, from the "summit of life," thus begins with a *literal* fall. The resulting injury evolves into a prolonged illness, which brings him face to face with ultimate reality and ineluctable truth.

More than any other factor it is the senselessness of human existence in the presence of death which brings about the crises and conversions in *The Confession* and *The Death of Ivan Il'ich*. After a few brief chapters with largely dissimilar biographical details, the two works now draw much closer to each other. Despite superficial differences in their lives—and the narrator's perfunctory presentation of them only underscores their superficiality—Tolstoy and Ivan Il'ich are now confronted with the same dismal fate. Tolstoy even seems to anticipate *The Death of Ivan Il'ich* when he makes the comparison explicit in Chapter 3 of *The Confession*: "What happened to me was what happens to any man suffering from a fatal internal illness. First, insignificant symptoms of indisposition appear, to which the sick man pays no attention. Then these symptoms are repeated more and more often and fuse into a single suffering, undifferentiated in time. The suffering increases, and the sick man can hardly turn around before he realizes that what he took to be an indisposition is what is for him the most significant thing in the world—death" (p. 11).

The imagery used to characterize death and its horrors only fortifies the impression of kinship between the two works. In *The Confession* Tolstoy speaks of the "black spot" (p. 10) which emerges from his inability to answer the riddle of death. His desperation takes him so far that he contemplates suicide in order to free himself from the "terror of the darkness" (p. 15). In *The Death of Ivan Il'ich* the narrator refers to death as a "black bag" (p. 112) and a "black hole" (p. 112), from which Ivan Il'ich is struggling to escape.

The problem of death elicits various responses in the two works. Tolstoy, being more analytical than his fictional creation, observes the people around him and discovers that they deal with the selfsame problem in one of four ways. The first is based on ignorance and is the preferred method, Tolstoy claims, of women, the very young, and the very stupid. The second depends on "epicureanism," i.e., the endless quest for diversions. This, according to Tolstoy, is the choice of the majority of the members of his social class. Those in the third group choose suicide while those in the fourth go on living even though they understand the vacuousness of their existence. Ivan Il'ich does not investigate the matter so thoroughly. All his life he has belonged to the second group. Despite the Latin inscription, *Respice finem*, on his medallion he does everything *but* "look to the end." His life is filled with thoughts of professional advancement and salary increments, with social respectability, and with family and acquaintances. And the more persistently the pain of his fatal illness nags at him, the more earnestly he attempts to resume his earlier way of life: "He tried to return to his former thoughts, which once screened from him the thought of death. But, strange to tell, everything that once screened, concealed, and destroyed the awareness of death was now no longer able to produce that effect" (p. 93). Paradoxically, it is only in the last moments of his life that Ivan Il'ich finally overcomes the power of death.

In *The Confession* Tolstoy does more than observe. He also reads what the great thinkers of the past and the present have written about the dilemma that torments him. In general, he says, the philosophers have come to the same conclusion as he and are just as incapable of dealing effectively with the question of death. The natural scientists prove to be even less helpful since they do not trouble themselves with problems of ultimate meaning but provide answers to a myriad of questions in which a man like Tolstoy has not the slightest interest. And even if the scientist ventured to explain the meaning of life, Tolstoy asserts that he could think of no better answer than this: "In infinitely great space, in an infinitely long period of time, infinitely small particles change in infinite complexity. And when you understand the laws of these changes, you will understand why you are living" (p. 18). In *The Death of Ivan Il'ich* the hero is barely aware of the philosophers and does not turn to them for help. He does turn, however, to natural science—specifically, to medical science, and like Tolstoy in *The Confession*, he is cruelly disappointed. The doctor who treats him is from the narrator's point of view (and eventually also from the patient's) hopelessly enmeshed in irrelevancies, as the following passage indicates: "For Ivan Il'ich only one question was important: was his condition dangerous or not? But the doctor ignored this inappropriate question. From the doctor's point of view the question was idle and not subject to discussion. There was only the weighing of probabilities—a floating kidney, chronic catarrh, and a diseased caecum. There was no question of Ivan Il'ich's life, but an argument between a floating kidney and a caecum" (p. 84). It is not until the end of the story that Ivan Il'ich finally understands how vain it is to seek the help of learned men. Both he and Tolstoy conclude that assistance must be sought elsewhere.

In both cases progress begins to be made when each man realizes that his life up to that time has been wrong. A brutally honest self-evaluation is the necessary first step. Tolstoy, for example, decides that it is not life in general that is evil and senseless, but his own life as opposed, for example, to those of the peasant masses. Ivan Il'ich harbors a similar though less neatly articulated thought after contemplating his servant, the peasant Gerasim. The silliness of the lives of both men before the moment of crisis is underlined in each work by the repetition of certain key phrases. Thus, in *The Confession* Tolstoy concludes his catalogue of personal faults and transgressions by saying "Thus I lived for ten years" (p. 5). Next comes the early period of his literary career, which ends with the words "Thus I lived" (p. 8). The same words recur after a description of his married life and literary activity. A reference to that stage of his life when he emulated the ways of the peasantry is followed by the remark, "I lived like this for about two years" (p. 40). When he tries to assimilate the faith of the common people, his failure to do so elicits the comment, "I lived like that for about three years" (p. 53). Finally, at the end of the last chapter, Tolstoy looks back at his work on *The Confession* and notes, "This was written by me three years ago" (p. 57). Since nothing has changed in that time, the reader has the impression that the author's turbulent years have finally drawn to an end and that he has now reached a phase of permanent contentment. In *The Death of Ivan Il'ich* the phraseology is remarkably similar. The hero's early years on the job are summarized by the sentence, "Thus Ivan Il'ich served for five years" (p. 71). After the early period of his married life, we read, "Thus he lived another seven years" (p. 76). Chapter 3 opens with the words, "Thus went Ivan Il'ich's life for seventeen years from the time of his wedding" (p. 76). Twice toward the end of the same chapter the sentence "Thus they lived" appears, and the fifth chapter begins, "Thus a month passed, and then two" (p. 89).⁵ In both *The Confession* and *The Death of Ivan Il'ich* large chunks of biographical information are clustered around such phrases, the frequent repetition of which tends to trivialize

⁵Wasiolek remarks that Ivan Il'ich's biographical chapters read "like an inventory rather than a life." See *Tolstoy's Major Fiction*, pp. 172-73.

the information imparted and point the way toward a subsequent deeper understanding of life's meaning on the part of the protagonist.

It has already been shown that both Tolstoy and Ivan Il'ich become conscious of the emptiness of their lives as a result of comparisons they make between themselves and the peasants. In *The Confession* Tolstoy notes that peasants approach death calmly, even joyfully, while people of his class regard it as the greatest calamity.⁶ Ivan Il'ich makes the same observation with respect to Gerasim, the only one around him who acknowledges the reality of death and never attempts to conceal it from his master. He and his fellow peasants have a healthy attitude toward dying because they have a healthy attitude toward living.⁷ It remains for Tolstoy and Ivan Il'ich to discover their secret.

In the final analysis, the single factor which contributes most to the climactic conversions in the two works is the memory of childhood. In *The Confession* it is the occasion for Tolstoy's discovery, or, rather, rediscovery of God Himself: "In all things I returned to the past, to my childhood, my youth. I returned to faith, to that which produced me and wants something of me. I returned to a state in which the main and sole purpose of my life was to be better, i.e., to live in greater harmony with that will" (p. 46). The repetition of "I returned" in this passage and "I remembered" in others continually emphasizes the need to strip away the layers of extraneous thoughts and feelings and to recover the primordial innocence and goodness which Tolstoy insists on associating with childhood. In *The Death of Ivan Il'ich* the hero makes the same discovery. Looking back on his life, he sees that "the farther he was from childhood and the closer to the present, the more trivial and dubious were his joys" (p. 106) and that while he assumed he was rising in public esteem, he was in fact descending toward destruction. The free associations of memory strengthen his conviction: "One after another scenes of his past came to him. It always started with the point nearest in time and went back to the most remote, to childhood, and stopped there. If Ivan Il'ich remembered the baked prunes which he had been offered that day, he recalled the raw, wrinkled French prunes in his childhood, their special taste, and the abundance of saliva as he came to the pit. And along with this memory of their taste there arose a whole series of memories from that time: his nurse, his brother, his toys" (p. 108). The theme of childhood crystallizes into a concrete image in the final moments of Ivan Il'ich's life when he sees his young son clutch his hand, press it to his lips, and kiss it. After that he loses his fear of death and discovers that "instead of death there was light" (p. 113).

Ivan Il'ich is, to be sure, not the same man as Tolstoy. He is far too accepting and uncritical for that. Furthermore, he devotes his life to a profession which Tolstoy held in the deepest contempt. Nevertheless, they are brought closer to each other by their confrontations with the "black spot" of death, by their vain reliance on human knowledge, by the realization that their lives have been foolishly spent, by the influence of the peasantry and especially by the enormous role played by children and childhood in deepening their understanding of life's meaning. The dissimilarities are largely superficial. The parallels, on the other hand, are found in matters of the greatest import, and they indicate quite persuasively that Ivan Il'ich represents in every essential respect a fictional metamorphosis of the man who created him.

⁶An analogous theme can be found in his early story "Three Deaths."

⁷Not surprisingly, Soviet criticism has heavily emphasized the importance of Gerasim. For a typical Soviet assessment of his role, see Evgenii Aleksandrovich Maimin, *Lev Tolstoy: Put' pisatel'ia* (Moscow: Nauka, 1978), p. 156.