# The Way of All Flesh: On Tolstoy and Mortality

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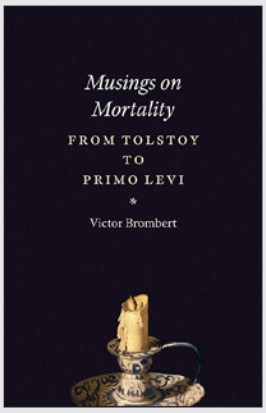
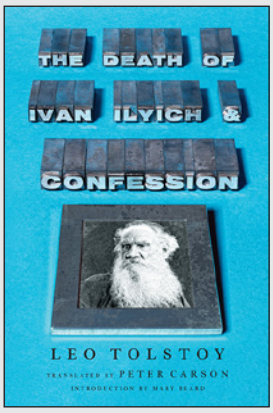
YOU PROBABLY WON'T BE AROUND FOR YOUR death, and it's probably all right that you miss it. In *Middlemarch,* Edward Casaubon's death is another of life's myriad experiences, albeit a "commonplace" one that becomes both an abomination and an act of imagination—one's mind plays tricks, including spiritual tricks, as the mind and body die. In Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain,* doctor Hofrat Behrens tries to comfort the mother of noble young officer Joachim Ziemssen, who lies dying in a sanatorium: "We come out of the dark and go into the dark again, and in between lie the experiences of our life. But the beginning and the end, birth and death, we do not experience; they have no subjective character." Samuel Johnson told James Boswell, in typical Johnsonian fashion, that it simply doesn't matter how a man dies, only how he lives, because dying doesn't last that long. Unless, of course, it does, and for Leo Tolstoy's character Ivan Ilyich, dying is a protracted process that assumes just as much importance as living—a process that indeed takes meaning away from or gives it to the life lived.

Who but Vladimir Nabokov, in his peerless *Lectures on Russian Literature*, could have noticed that "Ilyich" is pronounced *ill-itch*—"the ills and itches of mortal life." Nabokov was clear in pointing out that Tolstoy's famous novella is not about Ivan's death, but about his life (despite the fact that less than a quarter of the novella is devoted to Ivan's life). Nabokov dubs the story Tolstoy's "most artistic, most perfect, and most sophisticated achievement," and that, ladies and gentlemen, is saying quite a lot. The esteemed Tolstoy biographer Henri Troyat called *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* a "double story of the decomposing body and awakening soul." This double quality, this wedding of an-




***Musings on Mortality: From Tolstoy to Primo Levi.*** **By Victor Brombert. University of Chicago Press, 2013. 200p. HB, $24.**

***The Death of Ivan Ilyich and Confession.*** **By Leo Tolstoy; Peter Carson, translator; introduction by Mary Beard. Liveright, 2013. 224p. HB, $23.95.**



tithetical forces, is part of what contributes to the immortal force of *Ivan Ilyich*. The binary of the soul's ascension and the body's decline works only if, as Nabokov asserts, the story becomes about proper living instead of inevitable dying. Johnson meant that dying wasn't important because there was nothing that could be learned from it, nowhere to go after it: As an experience it's worthless, which is exactly what Ludwig Wittgenstein suggested when he wrote in his *Tractatus*, "Death is not an event of life. Death is not lived through."

Peter Carson's new translation of *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*—for the first time paired with Tolstoy's devastating spiritual memoir *Confession*—has its own double story: As Ilyich was dying on the page, Carson was dying at his desk, besieged by the late-stage cancer that would kill him. A revered English publisher, editor-in-chief of Penguin and then Profile Books, Carson was also the translator of Ivan Turgenev's imperishable novel *Fathers and Sons*. Classicist Mary Beard, in her touching introduction to this volume, writes that Carson was "one of the finest translators there has ever been of nineteenth century Russian literature." After his cancer death sentence in 2012, he left Profile and toiled full time on Tolstoy's two classics, and it's impossible not to imagine that this urgent task served as Carson's own spiritual bulwark against the despair of his fate. How determined he must have been to complete this task—his final life's work—even as he felt himself corroding daily from the disease. Carson isn't the only scholar who chose to spend his last mile working on the complexities of Count Tolstoy: The historian William Shirer—author of *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*—died in 1993 just after he completed *Love and Hatred: The Stormy Marriage of Leo and Sonya Tolstoy*.

Peter Carson has composed translations so nuanced and potent they are sure to be the benchmark for decades to come. His ingenious decision to pair these important narratives allows us the privilege of apprehending them as Tolstoy intended, because even for the most secular among us, dying can never be entirely devoid of spiritual yearning. Carson died on January 9, 2013, at the age of seventy-four, having finished both translations just two days earlier. As Beard tells us, the last lines of *Ivan Ilyich*, translated by Carson himself, were read aloud at his funeral:

> "It is finished!" someone said above him.
>
> He heard these words and repeated them in his heart. "Death is finished," he said to himself. "It is no more."
>
> He breathed in, stopped halfway, stretched himself, and died.

*Death is finished*. It's an extraordinary statement, wholly different from saying *I am finished*, and one akin to John Donne's unforgettable image in his *Devotions*: "When one man dies, one chapter is not torn out of a book, but translated into a better language; and every chapter must be so translated." If Donne had been available in Russian, Tolstoy would have admired his feat of imagining—lives *translated* into better lives—and would have found much of his own artistic/spiritual logic in Donne's most famous sonnet, "Death Be Not Proud."

Almost all the English translations of *Ivan Ilyich* prettify Tolstoy's gnarled syntax and staccato cadences in an attempt to make him a smoother, more lyrical storyteller. Carson remains exceedingly loyal to the Russian original, to that element in Tolstoy which Nabokov dubbed "the groping purist": Tolstoy "unwraps the verbal parcel for its inner sense, he peels the apple of the phrase, he tries to say it one way, then a better way, he gropes, he stalls, he toys, he Tolstoys with words." This Tolstoying with words can make for some syntactical tangles and repetitions, stop-and-go paragraphs wanting in fluidity. The simplicity of Tolstoy's plot—an ordinary judge falls from a ladder, bumps his side, becomes ill, and for months lies on a sofa dying in agony—and the almost childlike simplicity of Tolstoy's style—"Ivan llyich's past life had been very simple and ordinary and very awful"—are, as in Ernest Hemingway, deceptive simplicities. Nabokov reminds us that "no major writer is simple. . . . Mom is simple.

Digests are simple. Damnation is simple. But Tolstoys and Melvilles are not simple."

Some context is in order. After he completed *Anna Karenina* in 1877, Tolstoy experienced what we might call a nervous breakdown—a religious crisis which led him to abandon fiction and become a soapboxer, an aspiring saint, a preacher of austerity and fulminator against Orthodoxy. The conversion occurred at the steep expense of friends and his family's harmony. Turgenev, for one, was by turns befuddled and appalled by Tolstoy's conversion, while Sonya Tolstoy and their children refused to follow in his ascetic new beliefs, though many around the world would do just that, and give those beliefs a name, too: Tolstoyism—an iffy doctrine hostile to both Church and State, an Earthly enactment of God's plan to be realized through peaceful rebellion. Tolstoy could hardly have claimed surprise or displeasure when his soapboxing erupted into a worldwide doctrine, since as a young man in his midtwenties he noted in his diary that he wanted to found a fresh religion, a "religion of Christ but purged of dogmas and mysticism." It's true that Tolstoy's religious writings lack the mystical blather that so titillated a thinker such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, but Tolstoy never acknowledged that any spiritual program, no matter how divorced from institution, is organically susceptible to dogma.

Written in 1886, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* was the first fiction Tolstoy published after the spiritual upheaval he chronicles in *Confession*. It's easy to imagine Ilyich as the old and bearded sage-looking man Tolstoy was upon his death, but he's only forty-five years old, and this fact adds to the tremendous pathos of the story: The death of a young man is always more awful than the death of an old man. The priest gives Ilyich little spiritual consolation, and the doctors are self-important fools, incapable of mitigating his pain. His co-workers are disgusted by the thought of his wasting body and care only about jockeying for cozier positions once he dies. His wife and children, occupied by the minutiae of their quotidian lives, refuse to admit what has befallen him. He finds their refusal to confront this fanged truth most disgusting of all: "Ivan Ilyich's chief torment was the lie—that lie, for some reason recognized by everyone, that he was only ill but not dying." His sole comfort comes from Gerasim, the peasant servant who does not recoil from the foul stench, who accepts the inevitability of all flesh. If Ilyich's upper-crust friends regard death as indecent, Gerasim knows otherwise: His peasant's dirty-hands understanding of life, his calm acceptance of every person's fate, helps to calm Ilyich into his own acceptance. (The peasantry's calm acceptance of death, by the way, can be noticed in Turgenev, Dostoevsky, and Solzhenitsyn, to name a few—it seems to fall somewhere in line between Russian literary trope and Russian cultural myth.) Relief for Ilyich comes only after he has followed Gerasim's lead and acquiesced to his fate.

Much has been written about exactly what disease or injury afflicts Ilyich—Troyat is certain it's stomach cancer—but the narrative makes clear that the name or physical nature of the affliction matters not at all. Some have read Ilyich's ordeal as a manifestation of a profoundly sick society wed to Mammon, an indication that an entire culture has been corroded by hedonism and greed. Nadine Gordimer has written that Ilyich "was fatally sickened by his times." Philip Rahv, in an inspired piece on both *Ivan Ilyich* and Franz Kafka's novel *The Trial*, wrote: "As to the mysterious catastrophe which destroys Ilyich, what is it in historical reality if not the ghost of the old idealism of status returning to avenge itself on its murderer? Through Ilyich's death the expropriators are expropriated." What we behold in Joseph K. and Ilyich, says Rahv, is "the historic depletion of man." It's important to remember the essence of Tolstoy's ideology when he was composing *Ivan Ilyich*: The uncomplicated of-the-land peasantry was the paragon of human living, while the city-poisoned bourgeoisie was submerged in the spiritual quicksand of its own rampant materialism.

Rahv has written that this novella "would be utterly pointless if it were to see Ivan Ilyich as a special type and what happened to him as any-

thing out of the ordinary. Ivan Ilyich is Everyman." The literary scholar Victor Brombert agrees; in his lovely new book *Musings on Mortality: From Tolstoy to Primo Levi*, he writes of Ivan Ilyich: "It is hard to imagine a more unremarkable first name and patronymic. It is like calling the protagonist John Smith or Everyman. And nothing could be more common or widespread than death." But it's mistaken to think that every person experiences death precisely as Ilyich does, especially when you heed Nabokov's injunction to see the story as about his spiritually vacant and frivolous life. Despite the universality of his predicament, Ilyich is no Everyman because not everyone spends his final months remorseful over a misguided life. Ivan Ilyich is, rather, more like Count Tolstoy himself: probing, railing, regretful, conflicted, intransigent to the last.

Because Ilyich "sees the light," as the cliché has it, because he comes to comprehend that his existence has been in error, the story amounts to a confirmation of the Christian paradox that one must die in order to live, that one's true life—true because eternal—begins at death. Scholars have noted, too, that the ending of *Ivan Ilyich* smacks of Christ's crucifixion: Ilyich's final agonizing stretch of three days, his exacerbated inquiry, "Why, why do you torment me so horribly?" an unambiguous echo of Christ's famous "Why hast Thou forsaken me?" Brombert skillfully shows how "the transition from chapter 6 to chapter 9 closely parallels the transition from the sixth to the ninth hour of the Crucifixion." All this Christian special pleading makes for a convenient ending, both too hasty and too tidy. Worse, it smells suspiciously of propaganda—the narrative tortures a man only so that he can receive the deliverance which was, we can't help but see, a forgone conclusion. Worse still, it's an obese bromide: One must travel through hell to reach heaven? This is what happens when the fiction writer allows himself to be breathed on by the pamphleteer.

Some scholars view Tolstoy's spiritual crisis as a rupture in his creativity, his conversion as destruction, but look closely at Tolstoy's fiction prior to 1878 and you'll see that the rupture was no such thing, that the quartet of spiritual books he produced from 1878 to 1882—*Confession*, *Critique of Dogmatic Theology*, *Harmony and Translation of the Four Gospels*, and *What I Believe*—was penned by the same creative hand which penned *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*. The question, *How can one live without despair?* crops up everywhere in the work, and one suspects that without his tremendous worldly success Tolstoy would have easily morphed into Kafka, overwhelmed by every breath, stomped under the shoe of existence. What's more, his intense fear and contemplation of death and dying was not unique to the post-conversion period. Five of his thirteen children died before their tenth birthdays—never underestimate how such calamity can warp even the most stoic of men. Tolstoy was crushed by his brother Nikolai's death from consumption in 1860 (he also visited Anton Chekhov during the younger writer's dying from the same disease). As early as 1869 he experienced what Maxim Gorky named the "Arsamasian Terror": During the night in a hotel in Arzamas, Tolstoy woke suddenly with a cutting dread of death and the certain knowledge that living was futile (he'd been eyebrow-deep in the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer, which explains much). One of the central meanings of *War and Peace* is how human beings have as much control of history as they have of their own mortality. And look at the dying of Nikolai Levin in *Anna Karenina* to see how similar it is to the dying of Ivan Ilyich:

> His sufferings, growing more and more severe, did their work and prepared him for death. . . . Hitherto each individual desire aroused by suffering or privation, such as hunger, fatigue, thirst, had brought enjoyment when gratified. But now privation and suffering were not followed by relief, and the effort to obtain relief only occasioned fresh suffering. And so all desires were merged in one—the desire to be rid of all this pain and from its source, the body. But

> he had no words to express this desire for deliverance, and so he did not speak of it.

Here's what Meursault contemplates in Albert Camus's *Stranger* while he's waiting in prison to be executed for murder, a contemplation at the very crux of the spiritual disaster in Tolstoy's *Confession*:

> Deep down I knew perfectly well that it doesn't much matter whether you die at thirty or at seventy, since in either case other men and women will naturally go on living. . . . Whether it was now or twenty years from now, I would still be the one dying. At that point what would disturb my train of thought was the terrifying leap I would feel my heart take at the idea of having twenty more years of life ahead of me. But I simply had to stifle it by imagining what I'd be thinking in twenty years when it would all come down to the same thing anyway. Since we're all going to die, it's obvious that when and how don't matter.

Never the low aimer, Tolstoy called his memoir *Confession* with both Saint Augustine and Jean-Jacques Rousseau in mind. From grievous detail to grievous detail—"life is nonsense . . . nothing ahead but doom . . . complete annihilation"—the book recounts Tolstoy's hard path between spurious "Church" belief and "true" Christian belief, one denuded of officiating and ostentation. Orthodoxy is "stupid, cruel, and immoral"—replace "Orthodoxy" with "Catholicism" and Tolstoy has more in common with Martin Luther than he would have dared admit. In his masterwork *A History of Russian Literature*, D. S. Mirsky calls *Confession* "the greatest piece of oratory in Russian literature," and while that might be a bit of hyperbole, *Confession* does boast an oratorical acuity all the more remarkable because it pretends to do no such thing. The question at its core is this: "Is there any meaning in my life that wouldn't be destroyed by the death that inevitably awaits me?" It's the very question—the very horror—that pesters Ivan Ilyich during his months-long agon against death. And Camus must have had these lines in mind when he was composing Meursault's demise: "You can only live as long as you're drunk with life; but when you sober up, you can't help but see that all this is just a fraud, and a stupid fraud. Precisely that: there's nothing even amusing or witty about it; it's simply cruel and stupid."

And so the great man searched. Schopenhauer, Solomon, and Buddha offered no solace. Scientific rationalism was a coffin for his soul. Others of his own class and education had no clue. Then, in a suicidal stupor, he began to see that the supernaturalism and irrationality of faith, and all the vulgate attached to it, wasn't so stupid after all: "It alone gives mankind answers to the questions of life and consequently the possibility of living." Writing *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* wasn't enough; the love of his wife wasn't enough; the lives of his children weren't enough; Leo Tolstoy also had to have an invitation from the infinite. And those who mailed him this invitation to the infinite were the peasants—because, like Gerasim in *Ivan Ilyich* and unlike all the poseurs from Tolstoy's own set, the peasants didn't pretend. Their beliefs weren't disconnected from their lives; their superstitions were meaningful because they enhanced happiness. Furthermore, their privation and ceaseless hardship were not sources of wonder or remorse—they accepted existence as it was. And by accepting existence as it was they accepted its cessation too. Tolstoy's rabid dread of death turned him into something of a slummer: This genius with deep wealth and unmatched renown tried unsuccessfully to embrace privation and even took to wearing the peasant's traditional dress. But it's one thing to wear their clothes; quite another to live their lives.

In the powerful conclusion of his long essay on Tolstoy, *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, Isaiah Berlin describes the agony of Tolstoy's dying as an inability to resolve "the conflict of what there is with what there ought to be." For Tolstoy, what ought to have been was his physical immortality—his death struck him as an un-

conscionable affront to the cosmic order. How could an intelligence and imagination that vast ever die? He succumbed to pneumonia at the age of eighty-two at a railway station in Astapovo, a far-off Russian village. He'd fled his dismaying and dismayed wife and their estate, called Yasnaya Polyana, ten days earlier. "I am doing what old men of my age usually do," he wrote in his farewell letter to Sonya; "leaving worldly life to spend the last days of my life in solitude and quiet." He died in the care of his daughter Sasha, his family doctor, and a probably awe-smacked peasant stationmaster—his Gerasim—while Sonya was forbidden to see her husband of forty-eight years. (There's a famous, heart-stabbing photo of her peering into a window of the modest home where her husband lay dying. There's also a novel by Jay Parini called *The Last Station* which beautifully imagines the torture of the Tolstoys' final year.) So eminent was Tolstoy that many hundreds, including the Tsar's operatives and a battalion of reporters, descended on Astapovo and created an international commotion. It's highly unlikely that Leo Tolstoy, even in his weakened and addled state, wasn't aware of how his life had just transformed into his fiction, of how by some creative miracle he had augured this very demise twenty-four years earlier in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. ◘