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Ivan Ilych's Death: Secular or Religious?

Robert L. Duncan

In his essay on Existentialism, William Barrett, after briefly summarizing the plot of *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, concludes, "In the end Ivan Ilych dies content, because he has reached the point of knowing that the life he lived was empty, futile, and meaningless."¹ R. F. Christian quotes D.F. Mirsky's comment that Ivan Ilych, before his death, "sees the inner light of Faith, renunciation and love,"² only to ask, "But faith in what? And whom does he love? And how can he help renouncing life when he is at death's door?" Christian then goes on to contend that Tolstoy "resists a facile 'religious' conclusion," and in his closing remarks on the story states that "man's situation is tragic and absurd -- but not hopeless. For Ivan Ilych the ray of hope comes too late to compensate for what he comes to regard as the futility of past existence."³ Irving Howe and Philip Rahv follow the same vein, with Howe commending Rahv's remarks that we should not see what happened to Ivan Ilych as unusual; for, as Rahv puts it, "Ivan Ilych is Everyman, and the state of absolute solitude into which he falls as his life ebbs away is the existential norm, the inescapable realization of mortality."⁴ Howe warns, "let us not exaggerate and thereby provide Ivan Ilych's end with an 'uplifting' moral. . . . only after he realizes, thereby in a sense forgiving himself, that it does not really matter anymore whether his life has been good -- can Ivan Ilych surrender himself."⁵

The critics cited share the presupposition that the death of Ivan Ilych is secular, that there is no religious meaning in his death. But to say that his death is merely secular is to flatten out the rich multi-dimensional texture of the story and to close one's eyes to Tolstoy's striking imagery and Biblical allusions. My purpose in this paper, therefore, is to argue that Tolstoy's narrative of what occurs in the last days of Ivan Ilych and his use of religious imagery and language, factors neglected by these critics, clearly show that the death of Ivan Ilych is not merely the secular death of an Everyman whose death is like that of all men, but that he experiences a rebirth leading to an answer to his question, "What is the right thing?", an answer involving a newly-experienced compassion, repentance, and awareness of the presence of an understanding God. Thus, I shall argue that his death is "religious" in the broad sense, and, more precisely, that Tolstoy's conclusion places Ilych's death within the perspective of central elements of the New Testament tradition having to do with both new birth and new life.

This interpretation is supported by the conditions of Tolstoy's life at the time he wrote *The Death of Ivan Ilych*. In *My Confessions*, published shortly before his story, Tolstoy tells of the suicidal despair resulting from his overwhelming sense of the meaninglessness of life in view of the inevitability of death, and his passionate search for meaning through faith in God. *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, as E. B. Greenwood has pointed out, "is Tolstoy's attempt to bring home to us through the art of fiction the view he had already expressed in *A Confession*, namely that death is most terrible to those who have never really learned how to

live.”⁶ Thus, Tolstoy’s quest for God and meaning in the face of death provides the background for his story of a man who discovers both in the last hours of his life.

Greenwood, unlike the critics previously cited, grants that Tolstoy attempts to show that Ivan Ilych experiences “spiritual insight” before his death, but “the story emphasizes the emptiness of Ivan Ilych’s life with a thoroughness that makes it very difficult for us to accede to the fact that Ilych received at the end of it an illumination we are far from certain Tolstoy himself, with all his struggles, ever achieved.”⁷ There are two weaknesses in this reasoning. First, it is beside the point to say that Tolstoy never experienced an illumination like that of his fictional character. Although it is true that Tolstoy, unlike Ivan Ilych, sought passionately after spiritual understanding, a search clearly reflected in his later writings, one cannot conclude that what he failed to experience should also be denied to Ivan Ilych. Second, Greenwood’s approach seems to say that any story that ends with a death preceded by a sudden religiously-motivated change in perspective is unconvincing. But the dying person can undergo a transforming religious experience. Are we to deny the writer the possibility of treating such a profound element of life?

I shall argue, however, that Tolstoy does prepare us for a religious ending to his story by first showing us that the smug complacency of Ilych’s life was actually a running sore of self-centered opportunism, a way of life that was the antithesis of the Tolstoyan ethic of self-giving love of neighbor derived from the teaching of Jesus, and then showing us Ilych’s radical questioning of his life amidst the growing awareness that he is dying. In the following brief summary of the plot I shall point up Tolstoy’s indictment of Ivan Ilych as background for my more detailed treatment of his last hours during which his life is profoundly reoriented as he turns first to self and then to others.

The story begins with the news of the death of Ilych and a vignette of the reactions of his juridicial colleagues to the news. Their reactions are designed to be typical: they think of the possible advantageous changes that will take place because of the vacancy resulting from the death and console themselves with the reflection that it is Ivan Ilych who has died and not themselves. The shallowness and egocentrism of these responses is further developed in the account of the visitation at Ilych’s home, especially in the behavior of Ilych’s wife and his friend, Peter Ivanovich, she seeking to obtain a larger widow’s pension and he thinking primarily of the card game he will miss if he does not soon get away from the tiresome and awkward visitation ceremonies.

That Tolstoy intends to indict the shallow living exemplified first in the story by the responses of Ilych’s colleagues and wife to his death and later by himself is supported by the opening statement of the flashback to his life: “Ivan Ilych’s life had been most simple and most ordinary and therefore most terrible.”⁸ “Simple” and “ordinary” here refer to Ilych’s almost unquestioning conformity to the expectations of his class. In the narrative which follows it becomes evident that, with the exception of his childhood and youth, Ilych, a successful member of the Court of Justice, lived a life of opportunism and conformity to the superficial standards of a superficial society that was chiefly

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concerned with appearances. He was adept at playing this game; Tolstoy sums up his life in these damning words:

Even when he was at the School of Law he was just what he remained for the rest of his life: a capable, cheerful, good-natured and sociable man, though strict in the fulfillment of what he considered to be his duty: and he considered his duty to be what was so considered by those in authority. . . . All the enthusiasms of childhood and youth passed without leaving much trace on him; he succumbed to sensuality, to vanity, and latterly among the highest classes to liberalism, but always within limits which his instinct unfailingly indicated to him as correct.

But Ilych had not always lived by such egocentric and opportunistic standards:

At school he had done things which had formerly seemed to him very horrid and made him feel disgusted with himself when he did them; but when later on he saw that such actions were done by people of good position and that they did not regard them as wrong, he was able not exactly to regard them as right, but to forget about them entirely or not be at all troubled at remembering them.

Later, as Ilych in dying seeks comfort by reflecting on his life, the only period from which he derives any pleasure is that of childhood and youth, before he entered upon a life given over to the gratification and comfort of his ego and what his peers expected of him.

The terrible irony of Ilych's life is captured by the detail that after his graduation from law school he hung a medallion from his watch chain inscribed with the words *respice finem* ("Provide for the end"). Ilych's failure to make such provision becomes apparent after the illness that strikes him down at the high point of his life. He has just received the highest paying post of his career, and he and his wife have found a common interest in decorating a new house after passing through a prolonged period of mutual aloofness and alienation. While climbing a step-ladder to show the decorator how he wants the curtains draped, Ilych loses his balance momentarily but is able to avoid a serious fall, sustaining what seems to be only a slight injury, a bruise on his side. Although life for some time after the accident continues as Ilych believes it should, "easily, pleasantly, and decorously" (p. 267), he eventually begins to experience discomfort in his side and an unpleasant taste in his mouth. Even now Ivan Ilych is under sentence of death, although he is a long time coming to an awareness of this grim fact.

Because of his illness it becomes necessary for Ilych to consult doctors, who, ironically, patronize, humiliate, and dehumanize him as he did those who came before his court. Just as he had a legal form for every case and reduced the individual circumstances to the level of the appropriate form, so the doctors do not treat him as an individual but as a member of an abstract class called "sick people." Just as he adopted an attitude toward unpleasant circumstances in his life that would be most conducive to his convenience and justification without sensitive concern for others, so his wife adopts the insensitive attitude that he could get well if he would only take his medicine and do what she tells him. Although Ilych experiences periodic hope of recovery, he eventually plunges into

In the midst of his suffering, Ilych is driven to ask the question, "What is it all for?" But he cannot answer because he insists on justifying his life. Not long before his death, he briefly entertains the possibility that he has not lived as he should. But then he asks, "How could that be, when I did everything properly?" Tolstoy comments that he then "immediately dismissed from his mind this, the sole solution of all the riddles of life and death, as something quite impossible" (p. 295). Thus Tolstoy points up the profound significance of Ilych's self-questioning about the meaning of life.

As Ilych's condition worsens, he lies facing the back of his sofa and recalls the past. Each picture of the past begins with something in the present, with each memory ultimately extending to his childhood. Memories of the joys and pleasures of childhood are painful, but he discovers that "the further back he looked the more life there had been. There had been more of what was good in life and more of life itself. The two merged together." He reflects that just as the pain of his illness grew worse and worse, so his life had grown worse and worse. "There is one bright spot there at the back, at the beginning of life," he thought, "and afterwards all becomes blacker and blacker and proceeds more and more rapidly. . ." (p. 297). He becomes convinced that he could understand his rapid transit toward death if he could admit that he had not lived as he should. "But it is impossible to say that," he contends, remembering "all the legality, correctitude, and propriety of his life" (p. 298).

Finally, as Ilych continues to question his life, he reaches the conclusion that the mental torture he is suffering over this question is even worse than the terrible physical pain. At this point a major break-through occurs in his reflections as he begins to seriously consider the possibility that his life has been wrong:

It occurred to him that his scarcely perceptible attempts to struggle against what was considered good by the most highly placed people, those scarcely noticeable impulses which he had immediately suppressed, might have been the real thing, and all the rest false. And his professional duties and the whole arrangement of his life and of his family, and all his social and official interests, might all have been false. He tried to defend all those things to himself and suddenly felt the weakness of what he was defending. There was nothing to defend. (p. 299)

Thus, he is forced to confront the alternative, "What then?" Now he reviews his life in a very different manner from before. As he contemplates the deceptive and superficial behavior of his family, his footman, and the doctor, he sees himself -- "all that for which he had lived -- and saw clearly that it was not real at all, but a terrible and huge deception which had hidden both life and death. This consciousness intensified his physical suffering tenfold" (p. 299). Ironically, it is at this point that his wife succeeds in persuading him to participate in one more bit of playacting -- the taking of communion. His lack of preparation for this ritual and its consequent emptiness is demonstrated by his renewed hatred for his wife after the service. Now he comes to the realization "that he was lost, that there was no return, that the end had come, the very end,

and his doubts were still unsolved and remained doubts" (p. 301). And so he begins to scream and continues to do so for three days. Shortly afterward he dies.

But in these last days of his life a profound transformation takes place in Ivan Ilych. Tolstoy carefully delineates what occurs; thus, it is strange that it is precisely these concluding pages that are neglected by the critics cited at the beginning. Up to this point Tolstoy has drawn up a bill of particulars against Ivan Ilych that indicts him for his selfish opportunism and shallow living. Tolstoy also portrays Ilych as being compelled to question his life radically because of disease and the onrush of death, a questioning that leads to a reassessment and rejection of the values by which he has lived. Thus, Ilych is stripped of his defenses and stands in naked confrontation with the event that will mark the end of all possibilities for change.

At this point Tolstoy produces the image of the "black sack" into which Ilych feels he is being forced:

For three whole days, during which time did not exist for him, he struggled in that black sack into which he was being thrust by an invisible, resistless force. . . . He felt that his agony was due to his being thrust into that black hole and still more to his not being able to get right into it. He was hindered from getting into it by his conviction that his life has been a good one. That very justification of his life held him fast and prevented his moving forward, and it caused him most torment of all. (p. 301)

It is no accident that Tolstoy, within the space of one page, refers three times to "three days." Tolstoy was a careful student of the Gospels and would be fully aware of the significance of "three days" in the story of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, who, within this very time span, passed from death to life. And the significance of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ is further underscored by Paul's description of Christian conversion in these same terms: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:3-4).

Thus, as Christ died upon the cross, remained within the tomb for three days, and emerged on the third day to renewed life; as the Christian convert dies to self, is buried in the baptismal tomb and rises to "walk in newness of life"; so Ivan Ilych struggles against being thrust into the "black sack" until he "dies" to his old life, "falls through" the sack and "catches sight of the light" that reveals the possibility of a new spiritual life.

The "black sack" is quite clearly a symbol for the womb. Ilych is thus struggling to be born — or reborn. Interestingly, new birth and womb imagery occur in the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus. Jesus states that, "unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Nicodemus, perplexed by these words, asks how a grown man can enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born? (Jn. 3:3-4). Just as Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin, was hindered by his religious credentials from understanding

Jesus and from passing through the womb of spiritual rebirth, so Ivan Ilych "was hindered from getting into the black sack by his conviction that his life had been a good one" (p. 301). He could not move forward through the sack, Tolstoy tells us, because he was held fast by self-justification.

But Tolstoy develops the black sack image further. As Ilych struggles against being thrust into the sack, he once more comes to the conclusion that his life was not right. Then he asks, "But what is the right thing?" The question is significant because it indicates that Ilych is experiencing repentance. Metanoia ("repentance") means a change of mind, and in the Biblical perspective this change involves a renunciation of the past and a commitment to a new way of living. Tolstoy does not leave the question, "but what is the right thing," unanswered, nor does he close the door on the possibility and importance of effective change in Ilych, as Barrett, Christian, and Howe argue. We are told that Ilych's question comes "at the end of the third day, two hours before his death." At that moment his young son, Vasya, approaches Ilych's bedside and his hand falls on the boy's head. Vasya takes hold of his father's hand and begins to cry. "At that very moment Ivan Ilych fell through and caught sight of the light, and it was revealed [italics mine] to him that though his life had not been what it should have been, *this could still be rectified* [italics mine]" (p. 301).⁹ Again he asks himself, "What is the right thing?" and again his son kisses his hand. Significantly, Vasya is the only person who, according to Ilych, "understood and pitied him," with the exception of Gerasim, the peasant youth whose genuine compassion has comforted Ilych in his darkest hours by means of practical acts of kindness and understanding. It is just such people as these, one a child, the other a serf, who, according to Jesus, rank high in the Kingdom of God (Mt. 18:3,4; Mk. 10:42-45). Thus, the compassion of Vasya and Gerasim is the answer to Ilych's question. The "right thing" is compassion and love for the sufferer, especially when the sufferer is not loveable.¹⁰ This truth has been "revealed" to Ilych in conjunction with his rebirth and through the presence of his young son, suggesting a mystical truth communicated from a divine source.

For the first time, now, Ilych becomes sensitive to the feelings of others and places their well-being before his own. We are told that he "felt sorry" for his son, and even for his wife, who has approached his bedside with a look of despair on her face. He reflects on the suffering he is causing them and wants to tell them that it will be better for them when he dies, but he lacks the strength and can only express his sorrow for his wife and son and ask that the son be taken away. His repentance for his failures is expressed in his attempt to say, "forgive me," words that he cannot articulate so that he actually says "forego." But he waves his hand as if to say that this failure is unimportant, for "He whose understanding mattered would understand" (p. 302). Here is a clear reference to an understanding and forgiving God who is a source of comfort and assurance to Ivan Ilych in his last moments.

At this point the "action" quickens: ". . . suddenly it grew clear to him that what had been oppressing him and would not leave him was all dropping away at once from two sides, from ten sides, and from all sides. He was sorry for them,

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he must act so as not to hurt them: release them and free himself from these sufferings. 'How good and how simple,' he thought" (p. 302). Thus death in Ilych's new perspective is no longer an ominous darkness that poses a grim and inescapable threat to all human hopes but a means of release from suffering. "He sought his former accustomed fear of death and did not find it. 'Where is it? What death?' There was no fear because there was no death. In place of death there was life. 'So that's what it is!' he suddenly exclaimed aloud. 'What joy!' " (p. 302). We are told that all of this happened in an instant, but "the meaning of that instant did not change." Thus Ivan Ilych's experience is caught up into the transcendent realm of the eternal, no longer to be affected by the physical disintegration of Ilych himself, who seems, for those observing him, to be in agony for two more hours. Finally it appears he is gone and someone says, "It is finished!" But Ivan Ilych hears these words and repeats them, adding, "Death is finished. . . . It is no more!" (p. 302).¹¹

The Death of Ivan Ilych is the story of a man who, as William Barrett has said, loses all his disguises in confronting the reality of death; who, in "confronting death for the first time in his life, . . . is also confronting himself for the first time." Thus he is driven to ask "Who am I? What has been the meaning of my life?" But, unlike Barrett's conclusion that Ilych "dies content, because he has reached the point of knowing that the life he lived was empty, futile, and meaningless,"¹² my conclusion is that Ilych dies content because he has repented of his selfish and superficial life, and has been born to a new life of compassion for his fellow-sufferers and faith in a God who understands.

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NOTES

- ¹"Existentialism as a Symptom of Man's Contemporary Crisis," in *Spiritual Problems in Contemporary Literature*, ed. Stanley Romaine Hopper (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), p. 143.
- ²D.S. Mirsky, *A History of Russian Literature and Contemporary Russian Literature*, ed. and abr. Francis J. Whitfield (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964), p. 305. The words, "the inner light of faith, renunciation and love," also appear in Ernest J. Simmons' explication of *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, in *Introduction to Tolstoy's Writings* (Chicago: The University Press, 1969), p. 150, but no source is cited.
- ³*Tolstoy: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), pp. 237-38.
- ⁴*Image and Idea* (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1949), p. 77.
- ⁵Irving Howe, ed., *Classics of Modern Fiction: Ten Short Novels*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), pp. 120-21.
- ⁶*Tolstoy: The Comprehensive Vision* (London: J.M. Dent, 1975), p. 121
- ⁷*Tolstoy*, p. 123.
- ⁸*Great Short Works of Leo Tolstoy*, trans. Louise and Aylmer Maude (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), p. 255. Hereafter, Tolstoy's story in this edition will be cited parenthetically within the text.
- ⁹"Revealed" is a translation of *otkryt*, a word used in the Russian New Testament for God's manifestation of his truth (e.g., Mt. 11:25; Rom. 1:17). "Rectified" is a translation of *popravil*, the stem (*prav*) of which is found in the Russian word translating *dikaioō* in the New Testament (e.g., Rom. 3:20, 24). This is the Greek term which, in the passive voice, signifies man's justification by God. (I am indebted to Professor Kenneth Ober, Department of Foreign Languages, Illinois State University, for my notes on the original Russian in this article.)
- ¹⁰Greenwood, p. 122.
- ¹¹"It is finished" is a misleading translation in that it seems to echo the words of Jesus on the cross (Jn. 19:30). Tolstoy used *končeno*, "ended," rather than *sovershilos*, "completed, fulfilled," the word used in the Russian New Testament to render the words of Jesus.
- ¹²"Existentialism," p. 143.