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UZHAS IN THE SUBTEXT:
TOLSTOY'S *THE DEATH OF IVAN ILYCH*¹

He is a god of art.

—F. M. Dostoevsky

I

"Andreyev says, 'Boo!' but I am not afraid," Leo Tolstoy once remarked apropos of some of Leonid Andreyev's tales of horror and death. Tolstoy had a very keen sense of the distinction between melodrama and drama. His *Death of Ivan Ilych* (*Smert' Ivana Il'icha*, 1886) is a case in point. There are disturbing moments in this tale's treatment of illness and death, but the elements of horror or terror (*uzhas*)² in the story do not belong to melodrama. Tolstoy's purpose is not to say "Boo!" to the reader, that is, to frighten him to death, but rather to wake him up to life. Yet a part of the story's intense power does rest in Tolstoy's presentation of the general sense of horror, fear, and fright that contact with death typically arouses in people, if not on the plane of consciousness, where all sorts of defensive mechanisms are at work, then in the subconscious where the horror is stored.

¹ First published under the title of "Text and Subtext in the Opening and Closing Lines of *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, or, Phonetic Orchestration in the Semantic Development of the Story," in *Tolstoy Studies Journal*, 4 (1997): 11-24.

² "*Uzhas*"—the feeling or state of a very strong sense of fright or terror. As a noun it may be translated as "horror" or "terror." As a verb the word appears in some Slavic languages, including Russian, in the sense of "to frighten" (*uzhasat' / uzhasnut'*). "A difficult word," the linguist Max Vasmer remarks apropos of the etymology of "*uzhas*." He suggests that "*uzhas*" may be connected with "*gasit*" (to extinguish), a word rooted in the Indo-European. See Max Vasmer, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch der Russischen Sprache* (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1950-1958), 175. "*Uzhas*" and its cognate "*uzhasno*" are key words on the semantic plane of *The Death of Ivan Ilych*. The subtext In Tolstoy's use of "*uzhas*" in the story invariably alludes to death.

The first sentence of *The Death of Ivan Ilych* opens with the words “In a large building of the law courts”—followed by a reference to Ivan Ilyich’s law colleagues who are in a room discussing whether a particular case is or is not subject to their jurisdiction. One person argues that it is not subject, another argues that it is. A third judge who takes no part in the discussion, but who has been leafing through the most recent issue of the newspaper, “Vedomosti” (*News*), breaks in:

“Gentlemen!” (*gospoda*)³ he said, “Ivan Ilych has died.”

“Really!” (*Neuzheli*)

“Here, read it yourself,” he said to Fyodor Vasilevich, handing him a paper damp off the press (*svezhii, pakhuchii eshche nomer*—literally, “a fresh, still-smelling issue or number”). [1]⁴

The lordly members of the court are deciding questions of jurisdiction. At this very moment, information about the Supreme Judgment, as it were, is handed down to one of its members: death. Ivan Ilych has been struck down. How do the little earth gods respond? The news is received with incredulity: “Neuzheli?”—“Really?” We shall return to this response and to the word in particular.

Noteworthy at this point is the manner in which Tolstoy structures the opening lines of the story and the way in which words and images echo each other so as to deepen our perception of the world of Judge Ivan Ilych. Two paragraphs of descriptive material are separated by three lines of dialogue at the center of which is the pivotal word “Neuzheli?” The first sentence, opening with the words “In a large building” is followed, as we have noted, by a brief account of the deliberations of Ivan Ilych’s colleagues. The second paragraph opens with the words “Surrounded by the black border was printed . . .”; these words are followed by a conventionally worded obituary: “Praskovya Fyodorovna Golovina, with profound sorrow, informs

³ “Gospoda,” the plural of “gospodin”—gentleman, master. In Russian, the word is etymologically connected with the word “Gospod”—the Lord.

⁴ Roman numerals after quotations refer the reader to the chapter of *The Death of Ivan Ilych* in which the quotation appears. In this essay I use Louise and Aylmer Maude’s translation of *The Death of Ivan Ilych* (London: Oxford University Press [The World’s Classics], 1935). For purposes of analysis I have in a number of cases amended the translation.

relatives and friends of the demise of her beloved husband, a member of the Appellate Court," etc.

The two paragraphs or worlds stand in direct relation to one another. The world of the law court and the world of the obituary notice are "dead" institutions in which everything works to exclude feeling and humanity. The rituals of law, like the rituals and rites involving death, not only encase people in a formulaic way, but serve to obscure or mask meaning and essence. The "large building" housing the Appellate Court, like the black-bordered obituary and the world it signifies, Tolstoy suggests, is a dead house.

The two paragraphs are linked on the semantic plane in various ways. At the end of the first paragraph, Pyotr Ivanovich, one of Ivan Ilych's colleagues, is leafing through the latest number of *Vedomosti*. The last words of the second paragraph refer to the *vynos tela*, literally, the "carrying out of the body" or funeral of Ivan Ilych. Such is the latest and oldest "news" (*Vedomosti*) or knowledge (*vedoma*). Death. "Gospod' vedaet" — "the Lord knows." *Vedomost'* may also mean "register" or "list." The juxtaposition of the first and third lines of the dialogue "Ivan Ilich-to umer" and "svezhii pakhuchii eshche nomer" (my italics—RLJ) serves to accent on the symbolic semantic plane of the narrative the fact that Ivan Ilych is not only on the Lord's list, but that he is a "freshly smelling" "number" or issue.⁵ This is a colossal put-down for the little earth god.

Pyotr Ivanovich and his colleagues are all on the Lord's list. The general response of Ivan Ilych's friends to his death, however, is one of evasion, suppression and denial: "Neuzheli?" — a word that may be translated as "Really?" "Is it possible?" "You don't say?" and literally as "already?" "not already?" (*ne uzhe li*). The interrogative particle "neuzheli" here expresses a psychological evasiveness, an unwillingness to recognize or face death. The "uzh" in the word "neuzheli," phonologically points to the "uzh" in "uzhas"⁶—

⁵ The allusion to a "freshly-smelling" body turns up in the scene of the wake. We are told that Gerasim "scattered something over the floor," while Pyotr Ivanovich "sensed a slight odor of a decaying corpse" (I). Ultimately, the noxious smell of the corpse and of the sick room will be contrasted with the "clean, fresh" Gerasim, pleasantly smelling of tar and the "fresh winter air," who gladly undertakes the task of caring for his master's bodily functions.

⁶ "Neuzheli" is accented on the third syllable. In his classic dictionary,

a frequently used word in the text; on the semantic plane of Tolstoy's narrative it points to a lurking, barely acknowledged sense of "horror" (*uzhas*) in the response to death.⁷

Tolstoy's linkage of "neuzheli," the death-bearing word "uzhas" and "uzhasno," is first signaled overtly in the conversation between Pyotr Ivanovich and Ivan Ilych's widow during the wake. Ivan Ilych's widow remarks:

- He suffered terribly (*on uzhasno stradal*) the last few days.
- Did he suffer very much? asked Pyotr Ivanovich.
- Oh, terribly (*uzhasno*)! He screamed unceasingly, not for minutes but for hours. Three days in a row, with no alteration in

Vladimir Dal' places the accent on the second syllable, thus, "neUzheli." See his *Tolkovyĭ slovar' zhivago velikorusskago iazyka*, 4 v. (Moscow: Gosizdat, 1955 [reprint 1881 edition]), 2: 540. If the word is pronounced with the stress on the second syllable the phonetic link between "neuzheli" and "uzhas" becomes even more perceptible on the phonological-semantic plane of Tolstoy's artistic endeavor. Thus, "uzhe" and "uzha" would be indistinguishable in pronunciation.

⁷ Tolstoy's sensitivity to aural and visual imagery, as well as his use of sound-formations in words in the development of meaning, have been well illustrated in another context by Richard F. Gustafson. See his analysis of the manner in which sound, the phonetic components of words, external and internal reality (memory), interact in the drowsy subconscious of Nicholai Rostov (*War and Peace*, Part I, iii, xiii) to provide a complex tapestry of meaning with respect to Nicholai's "quandary of identity and vocation" (Richard F. Gustafson, *Leo Tolstoy, Resident and Stranger: A Study in Fiction and Theology* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986], 298–302). I direct special attention in my discussion to Tolstoy's use and integration of three etymologically unrelated words—"neuzheli," "uzhas," and "zhalko"—in the development of semantic dominants in the story. Tolstoy utilizes the purely accidental phonetic relationship of syllables within these words to underscore the complex and shifting attitudes of Ivan Ilych and others toward death. The everyday use of language, Tolstoy suggests, is a continuously creative one: we not only draw upon already established meaning in words, upon recognized etymological relationships, but actively invest the raw material of sound with meaning. Chekhov once spoke of the "affinity between full-bodied Russian verse and artistic prose" in Russian literature. (See A. P. Chekhov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v tridsati tomakh*, 30 vols. [Moscow: Nauka, 1974–1983], *Pis'ma* 12: 177. Two discussions of *The Death of Ivan Ilych* that focus on language and style may be mentioned here: C. J. G. Turner, "The Language of Fiction: Word-Clusters in Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilych*," *The Modern Language Review* 65 (1970): 116–121, and M. M. Girshman, *Izbrannye stat'i* (Donetsk: Lebed, 1996), 82–84.

his voice, he screamed. It was unendurable. I cannot understand how I endured it; you could hear it three rooms off. Oh, what I endured!

—Is it possible that he was conscious?" (*I neuzheli on byl v pamiati?*) asked Pyotr Ivanovich.

—Yes—she whispered—“till the last minute.”

Ivan Ilych's colleagues do not openly give expression to their sense of distress and dread of death, but “uzhas” literally and figuratively lurks in their conventional response, “Neuzheli?” Pyotr Ivanovich, significantly, utters the word “neuzheli” a second time in connection with the account Ivan Ilych's widow gives of the sufferings of Ivan Ilych. Hearing about Ivan Ilych's “terrible sufferings” (*on uzhasno stradal*), Pyotr Ivanovich focuses not on the inescapable reality of death, but on Ivan Ilych's awareness of his impending death. “And is it possible that he was conscious?” (*I neuzheli on byl v pamiati?*) Pavel Ivanovich asks. The idea of being conscious of one's impending death, that is, of facing it directly, is something alien and frightening to him. The “uzhas” or horror people experience in the presence of death, Tolstoy emphasizes, leads precisely to their attempt to suppress, evade, turn away from its reality. “Neuzheli,” a word that hides and harbors “uzhas,” gives expression to this inclination to evade the truth of death.

The evasiveness of “neuzheli” and its hidden horror (*uzhas*) of death is fully disclosed when Ivan Ilych, recognizing for the first time that the issue of his illness is a matter of “life and death,” remarks to himself, “I won't be, so what will be? Nothing will be. So where will I be when I will no longer be? Can this really be death? No, I don't want [it]” (*Menia ne budet, tak chto zhe budet? Nichego ne budet. Tak gde zhe ia budu, kogda menia ne budet? Neuzheli smert'? Net, ne khochu*). “Can this really be death?” (*Neuzheli smert'?*) he repeats a moment later. “Again terror (*uzhas*) seized him” (V). Again and again, Ivan Ilych accents the word “to be” (*byt'*) in its forms “budu” and “budet,” struggling with the existential concepts of being and nonbeing, much as Goethe's Werther a century earlier in *The Sufferings of the Young Werther* (*Die Leiden des Jungen Werthers*, 1774), anguishes over death and the meaning of the words “sterben” and “vergehen” (to die, to perish, to pass away). “No, Lotte, no! How can I perish? How can you perish? We are! [Wir sind ja!—that is, *we exist*]—to perish!—what does that mean? Once again that's a word.” Ivan Ilych, like Werther

before him, finds it difficult to break through limitations of the egoism of life⁸ (my italics—RLJ).

The “truth” begins to press on Ivan Ilych. He seeks to “screen off the thought of death,” but without success. “Is it really possible (*neuzheli*) that it alone is true?” And pondering his condition a few moments later he asks: “What is it all for?” And answers: “It is true that I lost my life over this curtain, as though storming a fort. Really (*Neuzheli*)? How terrible (*uzhasno*) and how stupid! This cannot be! It cannot be, but it is.” (VI). “Neuzheli” squarely expresses Ivan Ilych’s continued resistance not only to the idea that the curtain and his fall

⁸ The entire passage reads: “Die! What does that mean? You know, we are dreaming when we talk about death. I have seen many people die; yet so constricted is human nature that it has no sense of the beginning and end of its own being. At this moment I am my own. Thine! Thine, o, beloved! And in a moment—parted, severed—perhaps for ever?—no, Lotte, no—how can I perish? How can you perish? We *are!*—perish!—what does that mean? Once again that is a word, an empty sound, without meaning for my heart.” (*Sterben! Was heißt das? Siehe, wir träumen, wenn wir vom Tode reden. Ich habe manchen sterben sehen; aber so eingeschränkt ist die Menschheit, daß sie für ihres Daseins Anfang und Ende keinen Sinn hat. Jetzt noch mein, dein! Dein, o Geliebte! Und einen Augenblick—getrennt, geschieden—vielleicht auf ewig?—nein, Lotte, nein—wie kann ich vergehen? Wie kannst du vergehen? Wir sind ja!—vergehen!—was heißt das? Das ist wieder ein Wort, ein leerer Schall, ohne Gefühl für mein Herz*). In the spirit of Werther, Ivan Ilych says to himself: “If I had to die like Caius, I should have known it was so, an inner voice would have told me so, but there was nothing of the sort in me; and I and all my friends—we understood that our case was quite different from that of [mortal] Caius. Yet now here it is! (*A teper’ vot chto!*) It cannot be. It cannot be, but it is (*ne mozhët byt’—a est’!*)! . . . How is this? How is one to understand it?” [VI] Both Goethe and Tolstoy underscore the intangible, abstract, elusive, character of the concept of “death” and the linguistic paradoxes attending any attempt to conceptualize it. Werther defines death, nonbeing, negation only through opposing it to life, existence, affirmation: “Nein, Lotte, Nein” . . . “Wir sind *ja!*” — “We are! [i.e. we exist]. In contrast to unacceptable “death” (vergehen), the negation of life, “ja” is *not* “just a word” to Werther: it denotes presence (as in the everyday German expression “Da ist er *ja!*” — “here he is now”). Ivan Ilych’s “*Ne mozhët byt’—a est’!*” (“It cannot be, but it is’!) offers an interesting parallel to Werther’s “nein”—“ja” formulation, with this difference: the word “est’!” in contrast to Werther’s affirmative “ja,” announces not life and being, not something that *is*, but the arrival of something that “is not,” that is, the void of death. “A teper’ vot chto!” — “yet now here it is!”

from the ladder is the cause of his death, but to the inexorable truth and reality of death itself. "Is it possible that *it* alone is true?" "Is it really true that this is death?" (*Neuzheli pravda, chto smert'*) Ivan Ilych asks himself after a night of frank and brutal self-interrogation. "And an inner voice answers: 'Yes, it is true'" (X). With the recognition that the "truth" is "death," that death is the inexorable "reality" (VIII), the evasive word "neuzheli"—but not "uzhas," not "uzhasno"—understandably disappears from the Ivan Ilych's vocabulary and from text of the story. "Uzhas" (horror, terror) moves to the foreground.

In his final days and hours, Ivan Ilych is fully conscious of the "horror," of the truth and reality of death for himself. In those days, he endured not only its physical horror, but the agony of contemplating the possibility of a life that was badly lived. "Yes, everything was wrong" (*Da, vse bylo ne to*—not right, not the right way, wrong [XII]). "Oh! Oh! Oh!" (U! Uu! U!), he cried in various intonations, three days before his death. "He had begun by screaming, *Ne khochu* (I don't want [it], I won't), and continued to scream on the letter and sound "U" (XII). The final prolonged "U! Uu! U!" is humanly, conceptually, and phonologically fitting at this moment; for the evasive "neuzheli?" has been reduced to "uzhas," and "uzhas" itself to the primordial scream of mortality: "U! Uu! U!"—the interjection for pain in the Russian language. This is not yet the moment of acceptance of death on the part of Ivan Ilych; here, there is not only terrible pain, however. On the conceptual plane, one hears a reflex of the childlike "Ne khochu!"—"I don't want [it]."

2

Tolstoy is engaged in unsmiling satire or parody in his story, particularly in the opening pages and chapters of the work. Foreshadowing certain emphases of Martin Heidegger in *Being and Time* (*Sein und Zeit*, 1927), he explores the deepest realms of human consciousness and its stratagems of defense and denial in the face of death.

Ivan Ilych's colleagues, we are told in the third paragraph of the story, "were fond of him," but on learning of his incurable illness, they immediately were taken up with the question of the impact Ivan Ilych's death might have on the disposition of openings or positions (*mesta*) in the ranks, matters that used to occupy Ivan Ilych himself in his life. "Ivan Ilych's post had been reserved for him," but on learning of his death,

the thoughts of his colleagues turned to “the significance this death might have on transfers (*peremeshcheniia*) or promotions (*povysheniia*) of the members of the court themselves or their acquaintances.”

The discussion of positions, transfers, and promotions, that is, consideration of the “significance” of Ivan Ilych’s death, resonates ironically in the narrative’s subtext. Ivan Ilych’s colleagues consciously ignore precisely the deeper question of the “significance of this death,” just as they fail to connect their preoccupation with future positions or slots (*mesta*) with the fact that Ivan Ilych has been shifted (*peremestit’sia*) to the ultimate slot or “place (*mesto*) in the cemetery” that has been reserved for him; just as they fail to weigh the significance of their earthly activities against the background of Ivan Ilych’s final “promotion,” that is, fail to give consideration to the deeper questions of the moral and spiritual meaning of life that are posed by mortality. Yet at the same time, the language Ivan Ilych’s colleagues use to discuss their mundane concerns, to express their banal thoughts and preoccupations, unconsciously mimics their lost spiritual estate.

“I shall be sure to get Shtabel’s place [*mesto*]⁹ or Vinnikov’s,” thought Fyodor Vasilevich. “I was promised that long ago, and the promotion [*povyshenie*] means an extra eight hundred rubles a year for me besides the allowance.” “Now I must apply for my brother-in-law’s transfer [*perevod*] from Kaluga,” thought Pyotr Ivanovich. “My wife will be very glad, then she won’t be able to say that I never do anything for her relations.” “I thought he would never rise from his bed again [*Ja tak i dumal, chto emu ne podniat’sia*],” said Pyotr Ivanovich out loud. “A pity” (I).

The play on the words *perevod* (transfer, but also translation) and *podniat’sia* (get up, but also to rise, to ascend), as well as the concern for “distances” in the final phase of the conversation between Ivan Ilych’s colleagues, points to a residual, but nonetheless restless concern with the reality of death and its physical and metaphysical mysteries.

The linkage between death and property has a history almost as long as history itself. The genuine, if repressed, anxiety of Ivan

⁹ “Shtabel” in Russian means stack or pile; things evenly laid out.; thus, one may speak of a pile of railway sleepers or ties (*stabel’ shpal*), a pile of bricks, etc. Certainly, Tolstoy’s choice of this particular surname is not accidental: Shtabel’ and his colleagues, busily preoccupied with promotions, will all ultimately be *lined up*, as it were, in their coffins and in the grave.

Ilych's colleagues over illness and death finds expression not only in their concerns for their own material well-being, but in property and possessions per se. The illusion, in general, that property gives of solidity, substantiality, and continuity serves psychologically as a surrogate for the sense of the fullness of existence and of the values and beliefs, moral and spiritual, that traditionally contribute to that sense of wholeness. Death, thus, puts a premium on property in the bourgeois world of the Ivan Ilychs. Ivan Ilych's colleagues have a strong interest in whether he left anything behind. Indeed, the idea of paying a visit to his widow seems spurred not so much by pity for a woman who has lost her mate as by the realization that her husband had apparently left little behind in the way of possessions or property. "I think his wife had a little. But something quite trifling. Yes, we shall have to see her, but they live so terribly (*uzhasno*) far away" (I).

Tolstoy strikingly illustrates the complex intertwining in the subconscious of the triple concern for illness, death, and property through his juxtaposition of two questions: the first, put by one of Ivan Ilych's colleagues, and the second, asked a few lines later by another colleague:

Da chto u nego, sobstvenno, bylo?

[Just what, exactly, was the matter with him]

Chto, u nego bylo sostoianie?

[Tell me, had he any property?]

Da chto u nego, sobstvenno, bylo? The speaker's dominant interest here is the exact nature of Ivan Ilych's illness (Pyotr Ivanovich has just observed that he did not expect Ivan Ilych to recover), but property (in Russian, *sobstvennost'*) is clearly on the mind of the speaker (though the word *sobstvenno* can only mean "exactly" or "precisely"). The same sentence removed from context, could also lean in the direction of an inquiry about possessions, that is, "What exactly did he have or own?"

The second question, in any case, picks up on the undercurrent of the first one. What is on everybody's mind, property, now surfaces in *sostoianie* (possessions, property). "*Chto, u nego bylo sostoianie?*" (Tell me, had he any property?) At the same time, the double meaning of the word *sostoianie* ("possessions," "property," but also "state," "condition"), points to the speaker's deep underlying interest in Ivan's illness, his "condition" or "state" at the time of his death.

In his conversation with Ivan Ilych's widow, as we have noted, Pyotr Ivanovich is very much concerned with Ivan Ilych's condition, his general state of mind at the time of his death. "And was he really conscious?" (*I neuzheli on byl v pamiati?* – literally, "in memory"). Indeed, Ivan Ilych was not merely conscious, but precisely "in memory," that is, reviewing his entire life, seeking to cope with the issues raised by it, trying to give meaning to or find meaning in his death.

In a subtle play with words, Tolstoy demonstrates how two intimately related currents of thought—the one involving property and the other, illness and death—become entangled on the level of the subconscious and invade and subvert the language and thought of even the most propriety-minded people.

The amount of property Ivan Ilych left behind, we learn, was trifling. But what is left of Ivan Ilych? *Where is Ivan Ilych? Where has he gone?* Even for nominally religious persons (and that is the most that can be said of Ivan Ilych and his colleagues); even for atheists or agnostics, as Dostoevsky demonstrated in his satiric tale, "Bobok"; even for the Ivan Ilych, anxiety over death lies just beneath the surface of consciousness. The seemingly idle, good-humored banter about "distances" in a final exchange between Ivan Ilych's colleagues gives evidence of profound anxiety and restlessness.

"Yes, we shall have to see her, but they live so terribly (*uzhasno*) far away."

"Far away from you, you mean. Everything's far from you."

"You see he can never forgive my living on the other side of the river," said Pyotr Ivanovich smiling at Shebek. And they began to talk about the distances between different parts of the city as they returned to the Court. (I)

People have held various views on where the dead go, but mythic consciousness almost invariably has insisted on correlating death with distance. The deceased may not be "here" or "there," but he has gone *somewhere*, "terribly far away," "beyond the river."¹⁰ Here,

¹⁰ Forced to come to grips with the actuality of his own death, however, Ivan Ilych struggles more directly to grasp the problem of being vs. nonbeing; he, too, in part, tries to understand the problem of life and death in spatial terms. Ivan Ilych poses the question in the form of a dialogue with himself, one in which the future of the verb "to be" (*byť*) significantly is employed

the unconscious pondering of Ivan Ilych's colleagues comes to a halt, but not the troubled awareness that Ivan Ilych's journey is one that they, too, will be obliged to make. What is "terribly far away" (*uzhasno daleko*)—the use of the word *uzhasno* is noteworthy—is in reality, for all of us, just around the corner. The reluctant words, "Yes, we'll have to go," the whole casual dialogue about distances, have as their subtext the reluctant awareness that all of us, ultimately, will have to undertake Ivan Ilych's journey "beyond the river."

The linkage between the "journey" and "death" is echoed later on in the story in a more pointed way at the moment Ivan Ilych's wife, his daughter Liza, and her fiancé are standing silently, guiltily, and uncomfortably by his sick bed. Their silence, of course, bespeaks their knowledge of the truth, but also their unwillingness to utter it.

The silence somehow had to be broken, but for a time no one dared to break it and they all became afraid that the conventional deception would suddenly become obvious and the truth become plain to all. Liza was the first to pluck up courage and break that silence, but by trying to hide what everybody was feeling, she betrayed it. "Well, *if we're going*, then it's time (Odnako, *esli ekhat', to pora*)," she said (Tolstoy's italics; VIII).

In the context, the phrase "*esli ekhat', to pora*," means "if we're going, then it's time to go"; yet in the context of Ivan Ilych's dying, the words may be read "if you are going to go, then go, [i.e., die], it's time!" With his italics, Tolstoy alerts the reader to the ambiguity of Liza's remark. The real thoughts of Liza and the rest of the family are not lost on Ivan Ilych.

So too, the carefree but anxious banter of Ivan Ilych's colleagues about distances gives evidence of their concern with death. Their

five times: "I won't be, so what will be? Nothing will be. So where will I be when I will no longer be?" (*Menia ne budet, tak chto zhe budet? Nichego ne budet. Tak gde zhe ia budu, kogda menia ne budet?*) (V). Ivan Ilych's rapid-fire declaration and negation of his "being" and "nonbeing" itself is a kind of psychological device to "capture, as it were" "being," that is, his existence, the nature of his existence, existence itself. One recalls his early work, *Boyhood* (*Otrochestvo*, 1854) where Tolstoy's alter ego in his preoccupation with metaphysical questions of existence reached "such a state of insanity" that he sometimes "looked rapidly in the opposite direction, hoping to catch unawares emptiness (*le néant*) where [he] was not" (*Boyhood*, xix).

dominant and overt interests, however, remain the worldly interests of rank, promotion, upward mobility (*mesto* [position], *perevod* [transfer], *peremeshchenie* [relocation], *povyshenie* [promotion], *podniat'sia* [rising, advancing]—all concerns, as Tolstoy's language suggests, that mimic the long journey “beyond the river” and heavenward.

Beside considerations as to the possible transfers and promotions likely to result from Ivan Ilych's death, the mere fact of the death of a near acquaintance aroused, as usual, in all who heard of it a feeling of gladness (*radost'*)¹¹ that “it was he who is dead and not I” (I).¹²

¹¹ In their translation, Louise and Aylmer Maude write here that the news of Ivan Ilych's death “aroused . . . the *complacent feeling* that ‘it is he who is dead and not I,’” (my italics). Tolstoy wishes to emphasize here that Ivan Ilych's colleagues experience an organic thrill of being alive, that is, something akin to joy or gladness (*radost'*).

¹² This sentiment is echoed later on by Pyotr Ivanovich at the wake: “‘Three days of terrible [*uzhasnykh*] suffering and then death. Why that might suddenly, at any time, happen to me,’ he thought, and for a moment felt terrified. But—he did not himself know how—the customary reflection at once occurred to him that this had happened to Ivan Ilych and not to him” (I). “Everydayness,” observed Martin Heidegger in *Being and Time* (*Sein und Zeit*, 1927) “has already stowed away an interpretation for this event [death]. It talks of it in a ‘fugitive’ manner, either expressly or else in a way which is mostly inhibited, as if to say, ‘One of these days one will die too, in the end; but right now it has nothing to do with us.’” The death of another (the “Other”) “gives the assurance still more plainly that ‘oneself’ is still ‘living.’” See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated from the German by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: Harper, 1962), 297, 298. Heidegger, as has been often noted, found close points of coincidence between his existential analysis of death and Tolstoy's artistic thought in *The Death of Ivan Ilych*. In a footnote to *Being and Time*, he writes: “In his story *The Death of Ivan Ilych* Leo Tolstoy has presented the phenomenon of the disruption and breakdown of having ‘someone die.’” For a discussion of Heidegger and Tolstoy, see Jens Kulenkampff, “Der Tod des Ivan Iljitsch: Sterblichkeit und Ethik bei Heidegger und Tolstoi,” in *Sterblichkeitserfahrung und Ethikbegründung. Ein Kolloquium für Werner Marx*. Hrsg. Walter Brüstle/Ludwig Siep. *SOPHIA. Schriften zur Philosophie*. Band 2 (Essen: Der Blaue Eule, 1988): 164–179. The Heidegger-Tolstoy connection is also briefly mentioned by Zoltan Haynady, “Ivan Ilyich and Existence Compared to Death: Lev Tolstoy and Martin Heidegger,” in *Acta Litteraria Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, ed. G. Tolnai: 27 (Budapest: 1985) nos. 1–2: 3–15.

In referring to the gladness that Ivan Ilych's colleagues felt, Tolstoy is only underscoring the psychological truth he had variously explored in earlier works, for example, in his story "Three Deaths" (*Tri smerti*, 1858–1859), or more extensively, in *War and Peace*, namely the idea that the organic egoism of the life instinct stands in the way of a direct and full recognition or acknowledgement of death; unless, as in the case of Tolstoy's ideal peasants (including Gerasim in *The Death of Ivan Ilych*), the individual in his total being directly and squarely accepts death (his own, in the first place) and yields himself up freely to the total life process. In this respect, Gerasim is emblematic for Tolstoy of the right attitude toward death; an attitude rooted in a total engagement with life; an attitude that views death as neither welcome nor unwelcome, but as a simple fact of life and nature.

Quite different is the attitude of Pyotr Ivanovich who leaves Ivan Ilych's wake to go off to his card game. "Well, friend Gerasim?" said Pyotr Ivanovich so as to say something, "A pity, isn't it? (*Zhalko*)" (I). This off-hand "zhalko" is devoid of any real emotional feeling or genuine pity; it serves to distance the speaker from Ivan Ilych and death. This is a matter for poor Ivan Ilych, Pyotr Ivanovich's remark seems to suggest, but not us. A moment later, however, as he sets off to his card game (Ivan Ilych's wake had kept him from his game), he observes, "It's not late" (*ne pozdno*)—a remark that has an anxious subtext.¹³ Tolstoy's implicit reply is, *it's later than you think*. The game of cards, the play with chance, symbolizing the fundamental escapism and moral-philosophical irresponsibility of Pyotr Ivanovich and his colleagues, will offer no refuge from death. Gerasim's response to Pyotr Ivanovich's evasive "Zhalko?" on the other hand is straightforward, "It's God's will. We shall all come to it some day," said Gerasim, displaying his teeth—the even white teeth of a healthy peasant—and like a man in the thick of urgent work, he briskly opened the front door, called the coachman, helped Peter Ivanovich into the sledge, and sprang back to the porch, as if in readiness for what he had to do next."

¹³ The subtext, of course, is Pyotr Ivanovich's worried thought that what happened to Ivan Ilych could happen to him. See the beginning of note 11 where his concerns are cited.

Gerasim's acceptance of the fact that we will all die is devoid of any false commiseration or evasive banter. It frees him for direct and unaffected action, unimpeded by feelings of guilt or fear. During Ivan Ilych's illness, Gerasim holds the ailing, helpless Ivan Ilych as a mother might hold a sick child or as a grown son might hold his ailing father or mother. His responsive actions, marked by a vigor and "joy of life" (*radost' zhizni*) flow from a direct organic participation in the life process, and from a full-hearted response to the needs and requirements of the moment.

Such is not at all the case with Ivan Ilych's colleagues. Their inner feeling of gladness, of the joy of life on hearing of Ivan Ilych's death takes on the character of a half-conscious celebration not of a freedom *to* life and living, but of a freedom *from* death; an intrinsically anxious and superstitious celebration marked by evasiveness and dread. Such is the case with Pyotr Ivanovich who enters Ivan Ilych's house during the wake, "feeling uncertain, as is always the case, of what he would have to do. All he knew was that at such times it is always safe to cross oneself." (I). Pyotr Ivanovich's gesture, his sign of the cross, gives expression not to religious faith, but to a primordial feeling of dread.¹⁴ Another example of anxiety and evasiveness, one marked by grotesque levity, is presented by Ivan Ilych's colleague, Schwartz: "[He] was just coming downstairs, but on seeing Pyotr Ivanovich enter he stopped and winked at him, as if to say: 'Ivan Ilych has made a mess of things — not like you and me!'"

3

Tolstoy signals Ivan Ilych's recognition, though not acceptance, of death in a linguistically remarkable way. We have noted that "neuzheli" in Tolstoy's story — a signal for evasiveness and denial — marks Ivan Ilych's attitude toward death almost until the last hours of his life. Yet *uzhas*, like some dread incubus, inhabits *neuzheli*; it is *uzhas* that permeates and poisons Ivan Ilych's whole being as death approaches; it penetrates the spirit of all who surround him in the last days of his illness:

¹⁴ So too, as he approaches the hermitage where Father Zosima is living, the blasphemer and buffoon, Fyodor Pavlovich Karamazov, "vigorously crosses himself before the saints painted on the sides of the gate."

"You feel better, don't you?"¹⁵ Without looking at [his wife] he said "Yes." Her dress, her figure, the expression of her face, the tone of her voice, all revealed the same thing. "Not right. All you have lived for and still live for is falsehood and deception, hiding life and death from you." And as soon as he admitted that thought, his hatred and his agonizing physical suffering again sprang up, and with that suffering a consciousness of the unavoidable, approaching end. And to this was added a new sensation of grinding shooting pain and a feeling of suffocation. The expression of his face when he uttered that "yes" was dreadful [*uzhasno*]. Having uttered it he looked her straight in the eyes, turned on his face with a rapidity extraordinary in his weak state and shouted: "Go away! Go away, leave me!" From that moment the screaming began that continued for three days, and was so terrible that that one could not hear it through two closed doors without horror [*uzhas*]. At the moment he answered his wife he realized that he was lost, that there was no return, that the end had come, the very end, and his doubts were still unresolved and remained doubt. "U! Uu! U!" he cried out in various intonations. He had begun by screaming: "I don't want to!" [*Ne khochu*] and continued screaming on the letter "U." (XI–XII)

It would seem, indeed, that the "uzhas" of death, formerly concealed and buried, conceptually and phonologically, in "neuzheli," has finally broken loose, triumphed, and instituted a reign of terror that is not to be mastered. Yet a radical shift occurs at the end of the third day of Ivan Ilych's agony, an hour before his death, when, struggling in a "black bag," he himself acknowledges, finally, that his life has not been a good one. The shift in point of view is simultaneous with an internal physical "blow" (*sila*) experienced in his chest and side. At

¹⁵ "[The] evasive concealment in the face of death," writes Heidegger in what could be a gloss on this scene and several others in *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, "dominates everydayness so stubbornly that, in Being with one another, the 'neighbors' often still keep talking the 'dying person' into the belief that he will escape death and soon return to the tranquilized everydayness of the world of his concern. Such 'solicitude' is meant to 'console' him. It insists upon bringing him back into Dasein, while in addition it helps him to keep his own most non-relational possibility of Being completely concealed. In this manner, the 'they' provides a constant tranquilization about death. At bottom, however, this is a tranquilization not only for him who is 'dying' but just as much for those who 'console' him" (Heidegger, op. cit., 297–298).

the time, Ivan Ilych's son had crept quietly into the room and gone up to the bed of the screaming Ivan Ilych. His flailing hand fell on the head of his son; the latter seized it, pressed it to his lips, and burst into tears. That was when Ivan Ilych fell through the "black hole" and "saw light, and it was revealed to him that though his life had not been what it should have been, this could still be rectified." He asked himself, "What is the right thing?" and grew, still listening.

Ivan Ilych's moment of discovery begins with a blow to the chest; it is something physical, but it is also a moral jolt. It is accompanied by the experience of light (*svet*); but it is also an experience with the world (*svet*) outside of himself—his son, in the first instance. For we do not see light, we only experience it in its interaction with the world. That is the essence of Ivan Ilych's getting out of himself at this moment, of his experience of giving, of his interrelation with others. To give is to be at one with the world (*svet*) and light (*svet*). Ivan Ilych experiences the world around him, first of all, through *touching, listening, feeling, exchanging glances, seeing* in the deepest sense of the word. To see truly, for Tolstoy, is to know deeply; the act of two people deeply looking at or into each other is, for Tolstoy, an ethical act.¹⁶ In the lines that follow seeing of light, Ivan Ilych sees looks of pity and distress on the faces of his family and, in turn, feels pity for those about him. The word "zhalko" (sorry, pity) is used five times:

Here he felt that somebody was kissing his hand. He *opened his eyes* and *glanced at* (*vzglialnul*) his son and felt *sorry* for him (*emu stalo zhalko ego*). His wife approached him. He *glanced at* (*vzglialnul*) her. She was *looking* (*smotrela*) at him open-mouthed with undried tears on her nose and cheek and a despairing expression on her face. He felt *sorry* for her (*emu zhalko stalo ee*). "Yes, I am making them wretched," he thought. "They are *sorry* (*im zhalko*), but it will be better for them when I die." He wished to say this but had not the strength to utter it. "Besides, why speak? I must act," he thought. With a *look* (*vzgliadom*) at his wife he indicated his son and said: "Take him away... *sorry* [for him]...[*sorry*] for you too... (*uvedi... zhalko... i tebia...*)." He tried

¹⁶ On the problem of "looking" in its ethical context in Tolstoy, see "The Ethics of Vision III: The Tolstoyan Synthesis," in Robert Louis Jackson, *Dialogues with Dostoevsky: The Overwhelming Questions* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 55–74. In particular, see my discussion of Pierre Bezukhov's encounter with General Davoust (59–61).

to add "forgive me" (*prosti*), but said "let me through" (*propusti*), and no longer having the strength to correct himself, waved his hand, knowing that he who needed to understand would understand. And suddenly it grew clear to him that what had been oppressing him and would not leave him was all dropping at once from two sides, from ten sides, and from all sides. He was *sorry* for them (*zhalko ikh*), he must act so as not to hurt them (my italics—RLJ; XII)

The weakened Ivan Ilych, of course, has slurred the word *prosti* ("forgive," but a word that also means "farewell"), so that it emerges as *propusti* (let me through). By adding, in his physical weakness, the syllable "pu" he forms the word *propusti*—a word very much on his mind—for he has been struggling in the "black bag" to get *through* to the light.¹⁷ This slip of the tongue marvelously underscores the solemnity, significance, and simultaneity of his physical and spiritual passage from life to death, darkness to light.

Equally marvelous, too, is the manner in which Tolstoy signals the transition in Ivan Ilych from the sense of horror (*uzhas*) to the experience of pity (*uvedi . . . zhalko . . .*). Noteworthy is the sudden disappearance of the terrible sounds and words "U," "uzhas," and "uzhasno" that dominate the end of chapter 11 and the beginning of chapter 12.

Where have these words gone? These words and sounds do not so much disappear as become absorbed in another word and sound. Just as the evasive "neuzheli" ultimately falls away and discloses "uzhas," thus marking Ivan Ilych's recognition of temporal truth, of the ineluctable, and of horror-filled truth of death, so the decisive movement from temporal to moral-spiritual truth in the last chapter is marked by the transition from *uzhas* to *zhalko*, a movement involving the near phonetic absorption of *uzhas* into *zhalko*: *Emu . . . zhalko . . . zhalko ikh*, etc. "Zhalko," the sense of pity or compassion, unlike "neuzheli?" does not evade or deny death; acknowledging death, "zhalko" reaches out: it is, for Tolstoy, an expression of love. "In the language of the people," Tolstoy wrote, "'to take pity on' means 'to love' (*zhalet' znachit*

¹⁷ For a general discussion of the ending of *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, see Gary R. Jahn, "The Role of the Ending in Lev Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilych*," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 24 (1982): 229–238.

liubit'). This is a correct definition of that kind of love which more than anything else unites people and evokes their loving activity." Tolstoy speaks of the "love of a lower being for a higher one," and continues, "There is also a love, and it is most necessary, which is the transferal of self into another, suffering person, compassion, the desire to help him. This is the love that takes pity on."¹⁸ This is the kind of love, or more accurately, the kind of "transferal of self" that Ivan experiences on his death bed. Pity, not for himself, but for another, overcomes fear, overcomes horror (*uzhas*), overcomes death. *Neuzheli? — Uzhas!! — Zhalko*. On interacting semantic and phonological planes, Tolstoy tracks the fear of death from denial of, and rebellion against, death, through anger and acceptance, to the sublimation of horror in pity-love.

The journey from *uzhas* to *zhalko*, however, is a long one. People in Ivan Ilych's immediate surroundings do not feel authentic pity or compassion for one another. Exceptions are the peasant Gerasim who "understood Ivan Ilych's situation and pitied him" (*zhalel ego*; VII) and Ivan Ilych's son, Vasya, who "understood and felt pity (*ponimal i zhalel*); Gerasim's pity, it may be noted, is not expressed in words of commiseration: simply and directly, he *feels* and *acts* — he "lifts," "holds," "embraces" Ivan Ilych. Vasya's pity, too, is not expressed verbally, but in "a compassionate look" (*soboleznuiushchii vzgliad*). "Zhalko" in the vocabulary of Pyotr Ivanovich, however, is a worn phrase that masks, albeit poorly, his own anxious relation to the death of Ivan Ilych ("I never thought he would rise from the bed again. It's a pity [*Zhalko*]"). As an official or family man, Ivan Ilych shows no pity or compassion for others (for his wife, for example, when she is pregnant). When he himself is sick, on the other hand, he pities himself or wishes that others would pity him as one might pity a "sick child" (*[emu] khotelos' togo, chtob ego, kak ditia bol'noe, pozhalel by kto-nibud'*) (VII).

Self-pity lies concealed behind Praskovya Fyodorovna's and Liza's conventional expressions of pity and solicitude: they plainly wish that Ivan Ilych would take pity on them. "I'm sorry for papa, but why

¹⁸ See L. N. Tolstoy, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii (Iubileinoe izdanie)*, 91 vols., ed. V. G. Chertkov, et al. (Moscow: Gosizdat, 1928–1958), 55: 278–279. See Richard Gustafson's discussion of this passage (I use his translation) in the context of Tolstoy's understanding of "love of" and "love for" (Gustafson, *Leo Tolstoy: Resident and Stranger*, op. cit., 186–187).

does he have to torment us?" (*Mne zhalko papa, no za chto zh nas muchit?*) asks Ivan Ilych's daughter (XI). Concealed beneath this self-pity, Tolstoy observes, there slumbers the demon of irritation, resentment, hatred, and poisonous wishes. At the very outset of Ivan Ilych's illness, as he grows more and more irascible, we learn the following about the state of mind of his wife, Praskovya Fyodorovna:

Having come to the conclusion that that her husband (*muzh*) had a terrible nature (*uzhasnyi kharakter*) and had made her life miserable, she began to pity herself (*zhalet' sebia*). And the more she pitied herself (*zhalela sebia*), the more she hated her husband (*muzh*). She began to wish (*zhelat'*) he would die, yet she was unable to wish (*zhelat'*) that because then his salary (*zhalovan'e*) would cease. And this irritated (*razdrashalo*) her against him even more. She considered herself fearfully unhappy just because not even (*dazhe*) his death could save her, and she became irritated (*razdrashalas'*), concealed it, and this concealed irritation (*razdrashenie*) intensified his irritation (*razdrashenie*). (IV)

This astounding bit of prose is remarkable for its subtle linguistic play with a restricted range of sounds and syllables ("zh," "zha," "zhal," "zhe," and "uzh"); the four lines offer a veritable labyrinth of phonetic-semantic linkages and psychological allusions. The awful (*uzhasnyi*) behavior of her husband leads Praskovya Fyodorovna to self-pity (*zhalet' sebia*), hatred, and the wish (*zhelat'*) that her husband would die. She does not really want this to happen, however, because she would no longer have his salary (*zhalovan'e*). "And this irritated (*razdrashalo*) her more." Tolstoy implies that this thought "stings" or bites her. The idea of "sting" (*zhalo*) is buried, though not etymologically, in "*zhalovanie*" (salary, something that is freely received or granted, but the absence of which is painful).¹⁹ "Zhalo" is immediately picked up in "*razdrashalo*," and then again in the next line (*ona razdrashalas'*).

¹⁹ Money, of course, is high on the priority list of both Ivan Ilych and his wife. Ivan Ilych is loath to invite Dr. Leshchetitsky, a specialist, to examine him at home because they would have to be "unsparing" in expenditure. (*Eto znachit znamenitogo doktora priglasit' i ne pozhalet' deneg; V*). The use of the verb "pozhalet'" — usually "to take pity" — is idiomatic here. Tolstoy's use of this idiom is deliberate: Ivan Ilych, who has little pity for others, takes "pity," as it were, on his own money where expenditures are concerned.

A wife (*zhena*) cannot pity such a husband (*muzh*). She cannot kill him, true, but she can at least desire (*zhelat'*) his death, that is, wish to sting or bite him dead. “*Zhena da muzh—zmeia da uzh*” (husband and wife—viper and snake), goes a Russian folk saying.²⁰ Pity (*zhalko*), Tolstoy demonstrates, transformed into self-pity, degenerates into resentment, hatred, and a poisonous sting (*zhalo*). The primordial serpent’s poisonous sting lurks barely concealed in dissembling solicitude and pity (*zhalo* in *zhal[k]o*). Too, a shift in stress from the second to the first syllable of the verb *zhalet'* results in the word “*zhalit'*,” “to sting”—which is exactly what the *zmeia* (viper) does to deadly effect and what the “*zmeia-zhena*” (viper-wife), in this case Praskovya Fyodorovna, wishes (*zhelat'*) to do to her “*uzh-muzh*” (snake-husband). *Zhalit'* (to sting), finally, echoes *zhalit'sia* (to take pity on)—a sentiment that in Ivan Ilych’s family conceals deadly resentment.

In death, as in life, then, Ivan Ilych promises to be a torment to his wife. “Even (*dazhe*) Ivan Ilych’s death could not save her.” Meanwhile, wife and husband can only experience unhappiness in this viper’s nest, that is, experience a constant irritation (*razdrazhenie*—the word is repeated four times), perpetual self-laceration, mutual stinging, torment (“*drazhit*,” the core of “*razdrazhenie*,” suggests “teasing,” “tormenting”). In short, wife and husband are condemned to a kind of connubial living-death, a situation that will end only when Ivan Ilych dies. At that moment, for Ivan Ilych, at least, “pity” is experienced *not* as self-love, but as genuine solicitude for another person, as a “transferral of self into another, suffering person,” as something equivalent to “*zhalovanie*” (salary), something that is freely given and freely received.

In his dying moments, however, Ivan Ilych does not in the conventional sense suddenly “love” those around him any more than Gerasim loves Ivan Ilych when he helps him in his needs. Like Gerasim, Ivan Ilych simply and directly, and with a sense of immediacy, *feels*—

²⁰ “*Zmeia*”—a snake, usually poisonous; it is also used in referring to a cunning, evil person. “*Uzh*” is usually a name for certain nonpoisonous snakes; it is also used metaphorically in the phrase “*polzti uzhom*,” to flatter, to toady—literally, to crawl like a snake. Vladimir I. Dal’ in his dictionary of the Russian language cites a Russian proverb—“*zhena da muzh—zmeia da uzh*”—a saying in which the wife is identified with the often poisonous snake (*zmeia*), while the husband is identified with the nonpoisonous one (*uzh*). See Dal’, *Tolkovyi slovar'*, op. cit., 4: 476.

he "feels sorry," wants to "do something," and acts; and having acted he feels good. "How good and how simple" (*kak khorosho i kak prosto*), he thinks. "Kak khorosho" expresses a pleasurable sense of something that is remedial, salutary, tonic, contributing to the well-being of body and spirit. This good feeling, however, certainly embodies an unarticulated awareness that what has been done is good in the ethical sense; for the phrase, "how simple" (*kak prosto*), clearly refers to Ivan Ilych's awareness that the source of his good feelings was his direct, unpremeditated, "simple" giving of himself, pitying others and not merely himself; doing something to "deliver them and free himself from these sufferings."

Yet whatever the implicit, purely ethical significance of these gestures in this Tolstoyan parable of everyman, Ivan Ilych's condition in these final moments of his life is certainly not that of a person who has been converted to a set of ethical or religious beliefs, not that of somebody who has been, as it were, "spiritually reborn"; Tolstoy avoids denoting the change that Ivan Ilych experiences in such terms, rather it is the condition of a dying man who, reading suffering on the faces of those around him, *without reflecting* does what his heart tells him should be done, and having done it, has an organic, pervasive, and reconciling sense of having done the right thing. Ivan Ilych does not end his life reflecting on lofty moral or spiritual transfiguration; rather at the moment of dying, he returns to what is simple and natural: he comes down, literally and figuratively, to earth. In this sense, and *only* in this nonreligious sense, can we say that the dying Ivan Ilych is born again to light (*svet*) and to the world (*svet*).

The turning of attention away from his own suffering to the suffering of others seems to bring, if only for a moment, the final moment of dying, a lessening of Ivan Ilych's own suffering; even more, fear and death disappear, and "in the place of death there is light. 'So that's what it is!' [*tak vot chto*—here, an exclamation of stupefaction, surprise, discovery], he suddenly said aloud. 'What joy! (*kakaia radost'*)" (XII). The joy that Ivan Ilych experiences here, in contrast to the joy that his colleagues experience on hearing of his death, is not that of a freedom *from* death, but of a freedom *to* death or dying. In contrast to the self-oriented "joys" he experienced in his death-in-life existence.²¹

²¹ See, at the end of chapter III, the listing of "joys" (*radosti*) that Ivan Ilych experiences in his bourgeois life: the "joys of ambition," the "joys of vanity,"

Ivan Ilych experiences a momentary consciousness of selfless life in death.

“To him all happened in a single instant, and the meaning of that instant did not change. For those present his agony continued for another two hours.” (XII) A verbal, as opposed to a graphic, description of what Ivan Ilych experiences can only present the happening as a sequence of separate moments.²² Yet in fact, there is no development of thought or experience, no cogitation, no drawing of conclusions. The transferal of self into the suffering of others and the literal dying of the self; the sensation of light and sense of enlightenment, are essentially *one* experience and the experience of one moment, a moment whose “significance” does not change. “There was no fear because there was no death.” In biblical terms, “there was no more time.” For the observer, Ivan Ilych’s agony continued another two hours. This distinction between empirical time (as experienced by Ivan Ilych’s body and by those observing it) and phenomenological time (as experienced by Ivan Ilych and recognized by the reader) mark the earthly and unearthly end of Ivan Ilych.

“‘It’s finished (*koncheno*),’ said someone above him. He heard these words and repeated them in his soul. ‘Death is finished (*konchena smert*),’ he said to himself. ‘It is no more.’ He drew in a breath, stopped in the midst of a sigh, stretched out, and died.”

The last moment of Ivan Ilych’s life is one in which resolve, action, and accomplishment constitute a unity; it is the condition of a man who, in the personal acceptance of his mortality, is no longer in conflict with himself or his surroundings; the state of a man who, like his servant Gerasim, is neither looking backward nor forward, but

the “joys of cards,” etc. “So they lived” — comments the narrator.

²² Tolstoy overcomes this problem of depicting simultaneous sensations or actions in the dying Ivan Ilych—to the extent that it can be overcome in words—by the device of repeating descriptions of Ivan Ilych’s actions or feelings, each time adding new detail or expanding the context, thus providing a sense of overlapping experience. The reader, used to logical “horizontal” progression in the text, undergoes a sense of time-disorientation at this “vertical” piling up of sensation-experiences—a calculated inconvenience that effectively introduces him into the hyperactive, non-Euclidian world of the dying psyche.

is at one with the moment and its requirements. Here, action fills the space of a single moment. Again, what in words appears as a sequence of actions in reality constitutes one resolute taking-possession of one's death: Ivan Ilych listens, repeats, draws in a breath, lets out a sigh, stretches out, and dies. The verb *potianut'sia*, with the idea of "stretching oneself," "stretching out," but also "reaching out," would seem to sum up Ivan Ilych's unimpeded resolve, his resolution of his life. The final word *umer* (died), that is, death itself, follows as something oddly superfluous, a shell, discarded, harmless. "Death is over. It is no more."

Death in Tolstoy's story is not an ending, it is a beginning. The finishing of death is also the finishing of the end of the story, of the idea of an end. *The Death of Ivan Ilych* is open-ended in form and content. The end is the beginning and the beginning is the end. Thus, the end of the story, the death of the Ivan Ilych, carries the reader back to the beginning of the story where he first learns about the death of the protagonist; it brings him back to the beginning which is the end of Ivan Ilych; it returns him to the lines: "Ivan Ilych has died! Really? Here, read it." And with this invitation to the reader, with the return of "neuzheli" — but now with a new dimension of the surprise just experienced — we are off again, attending to the chronicle of Ivan Ilych's life and death, beginning and end, end and beginning, and so on, ad infinitum.