Tolstoy's Earthbound and Doomed Resurrection

by Jeff Plude (February 2021)

In Tolstoy's last novel he creates a detailed panorama of Russian life just as he did in *War and Peace* and *Anna*

Karenina, two of the most widely acclaimed masterpieces in the genre. Though *Resurrection* weighs in at considerably less bulk than those mighty tomes, it's still quite substantial, and maybe even more so given its subject. Unfortunately Tolstoy seals his own fate in the book, I believe, by betraying a master even greater than himself, a master whose teachings Tolstoy claimed saved his life and gave him the happiness nothing else did—not great success and fame, not a wife and a large family, not a lavish estate, not money or privilege or pleasures.

Whatever you may think of Tolstoy, it's hard to ignore him.

I still remember the day three and a half decades ago when I was an in-school suspension monitor at the high school I'd graduated from: I'd stopped in the office one morning as usual before heading to my room, but this time a Russian exchange student walked in and saw me carrying my beatup paperback of *Anna Karenina.* She practically swooned—an American reading her revered countryman, the czar of literature!—as she came up to me and started chatting with me about it.

Ten years ago I was reading another beatup paperback, this time it was *War and Peace*, on the Metro-North train into Manhattan. The fortyish train conductor took my ticket to punch it, then looked at my book. "What are you reading that for?" I was dumbfounded. I don't recall exactly what I said, something like: "Because I want to." I remember what she said next, though: "Is it good?" "Yes," I said, "it's really good." She smiled and moved on down the aisle. I'm just glad she didn't ask me what it was about!

Then a year and a half ago my wife and I were watching *The Front Runner*, a sort of cheesy movie about Gary Hart, and Hart dispenses fatherly advice to a young reporter he's sitting next to on the campaign plane and ends up giving him a

copy of *Resurrection*. A short time later the same reporter rankles Hart by putting him on the spot at a press conference about whether his marriage was traditional, a subject that eventually caused him to drop out of the 1988 presidential race.

Naturally I saw a used copy of *Resurrection* a short time later and bought it.

If you know anything about Tolstoy himself, it's also not hard to see him in at least one of the heroes of each of his three major novels. The difference in *Resurrection* is that we see nearly the entire book through the penetrating consciousness of Prince Dmitri Nekhlyudov, whereas in *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* the point of view shifts among different main characters and even minor ones. But in *Resurrection* there's someone else who overshadows both the author and his stand-in—the author of all life itself, at least to his true followers. Jesus Christ, just as the title suggests, is the linchpin of the novel; he alone is responsible for the protagonist's ultimate epiphany.

But what does that epiphany lead to? That's the eternal and devastating question.

The translator of my Penguin edition of the book, Rosemary Edmonds, says in her introduction that Tolstoy's wife found the book "repulsive," though she grudgingly admired the evocative descriptions.

> *She was troubled by the likeness she could not help noticing between Nekhlyudov and her husband, who had portrayed his hero as progressing from degradation to regeneration. "He thinks this way about himself," she remarked in her journal …. "He has described all these regenerations in books very well, but he has never practiced them in life …."*

Which throws into question the validity of Tolstoy's

so-called solution to life, to its suffering and despair, as expressed through Nekhlyudov. Perhaps the countess's view is jaundiced, since she and Count Tolstoy clashed in later years and were estranged shortly before he died, after he fled home at eighty-two to start a new life (as exactly what is unclear). But anger and truth aren't always divorced.

Is *Resurrection* a good novel, or good literature?

To answer this question I prefer to apply Tolstoy's own formula, which he explains at length in his nonfiction book *What Is Art?* After all it was published the year before *Resurrection*, which Tolstoy finished in December 1899 to the end the century he domineered as a novelist, so what better way to evaluate the maestro than by his own criteria. The first consideration is how well the novel *infects* the reader with the emotion the artist himself feels and wants to communicate; the better the infection the better the art. On this count my verdict is, for the most part, yes: *Resurrection* is good. The other consideration is the moral sense that it ultimately conveys. (This of course ignores the apparent gray in art and life, though one could argue that gray is closer to black, literally and figuratively.) In my view the verdict on this count is a resounding no: *Resurrection* is not good. In fact, despite its pretensions to the contrary, it commits a great evil.

Tolstoy also wrote shorter novels besides the big three, but *Resurrection* is probably the least well regarded of them all. It even helped get him excommunicated from the Russian Orthodox Church, which he portrays in the book as hypocritical and ritualistic. In the three decades after *Anna Karenina*, which was published when Tolstoy was almost fifty, he was entrenched in his own spiritual war. Soon some of the world that had worshipped at the feet of the literary icon not long before was now rejecting the ascetic prophet and preacher who condemned the world, who now preferred to sermonize rather than rhapsodize about it.

But that's not why I ultimately criticize *Resurrection*. All art carries its spiritual consciousness in it, I believe (as did Tolstoy), and that's why for me *Resurrection* is even more harmful: it has the semblance of salvation but leads just as surely to hell—on this earth as well as in the hereafter. Tolstoy's tumultuous final years and demise, I think, are bitter testimonies in support of that case.

The primary theme of *Resurrection* is the age-old man's inhumanity to man. Tolstoy dramatizes this by plunging Nekhlyudov headlong into the penal system and all its legion of horrors. What masquerades as the purveyor of justice actually delivers the opposite, according to Tolstoy. And he doesn't settle for merely ripping off its mask. He rubs our eyes, our nose, our mind, our emotions right into it until you can hardly stand it. But I couldn't turn away either.

Resurrection is divided into three parts, the first of which opens with a group of convicts being transported to the courthouse at dawn as spring is blooming. Among the convicts is Katusha Maslova, who has long dark hair and eyes and, we eventually learn, is sweet and innocent, a natural and entrancing beauty. Then we flash back to meet the hedonistic and dilettantish prince, who's having an affair with another official's wife and who swings from one enthusiasm to another—painting, philanthropy, the economic theory of Henry George and the supposed evil of private property—only to land right back each time at his nihilistic, inescapable self.

But Nekhlyudov's destiny changes forever when he falls for Maslova, the child of a gypsy father and unmarried mother. Nekhlyudov meets her when he spends a summer vacation in the country with his two maiden aunts, who took Maslova in as a godchild-servant. Tolstoy's rendering of all the nuances of a young man and a young woman in love (which perhaps mirrors his own at the same age with a servant on his father's estate) was so well drawn that the Doukhobors, a so-called Christian sect,

returned the proceeds Tolstoy had donated to them from *Resurrection*, according to Edmonds, the Penguin translator, to help them emigrate to Canada.

Predictably Nekhlyudov impregnates Maslova, who tries to resist him, the maiden aunts throw her out, and her lover gives her some money but then bids her an unceremonious farewell as he returns to military duty. She lives in squalid conditions and the baby dies and, now despondent, she turns to alcohol and prostitution. When she becomes embroiled in a plot to poison a rich customer, though she is innocent she is arrested and tried for murder.

It's a decade after they first met, and Nekhlyudov has pretty much forgotten about her. But then he is summoned to serve on a jury. At first he doesn't recognize Maslova in the dock, she has been so degraded by her circumstances. He is overwhelmed with guilt—she was selling her body because of him! And about to be convicted of a serious crime! When she is found guilty and sentenced to hard labor on a technicality—Nekhlyudov misunderstood the jury instructions and voted wrongly when the jurors were polled—he now feels doubly responsible for Maslova's plight.

He eventually realizes that he must try to atone for the great wrong he has done; he must follow his conscience and do what is right. Using his aristocratic title and family connections to gain access to officials, the prince now embarks on a campaign to overturn Maslova's sentence. In the process we get to know the horde of government functionaries—the judges, the prosecutors, the ministers, the wardens, the guards—who feed off the so-called justice system like jackals on a never-devoured carcass but care nothing for justice, only the money and power and prestige it brings them. Tolstoy shows that they're so deluded and arrogant that they manage to derive, ironically, a sense of doing something noble and righteous.

Part two largely consists of Nekhlyudov's realization that he must marry Maslova, whether he wants to or not because it's the right thing to do. He visits her regularly, taking us in and out of the prison where she awaits transfer to Siberia, and we meet the endless array of convicts and their daily life and interactions. Tolstoy mostly idealizes them, though it seems that many of them have indeed been unjustly imprisoned and mistreated, some even executed. Meanwhile, he also transfers ownership of his estate in Petersburg to the local peasants, though he has doubts about running out of money, which he tries to shun but needs in order to carry on his mission of mercy.

In part three, the final act, Nekhlyudov follows the train of prisoners on their trek to Siberia, as they slog along on foot, on carts (if they are sick), and on the train from one station and halting place and prison to the next. It is one long, relentless, merciless portrait of despondence, filth, and hopelessness. The feeling I got was death by a thousand sensory cuts.

During this time the prince becomes particularly attached to the political prisoners, some of whom are actual revolutionaries. One, Neverov, he shows in all his narcissistic malice. But for the most part Nekhlyudov comes to see them as the best part of society, not the menace that the government and its corrupt legal system falsely characterize them as. He tries to help them the best he can, following his new credo to put others' needs before his own—especially Maslova, whom he has proposed marriage to even though they must live apart for four years while she endures hard labor in the Russian tundra.

We learn all their backstories, and not only how they look and feel, but how they outshine in honesty and humility their so-called betters, the ones who prosecute them, judge them, sentence them, lock them up. Their bodies may be ravaged, but unlike their condemners, their souls are

ravishing. There is little gray here except in the visual sense.

All this leads Nekhlyudov to conclude that the penal system, enabled by the government, produces the opposite of its ostensible purpose and is therefore a great evil. It does not punish criminals but makes them idle, and not only that it exposes them to further negative influences that make them even more hardened and likely to do the same or even worse if they're released. Like one of today's social engineers, he declares that these men commit crimes only because of their adverse environments. In other words they are only doing what anybody would do in their place and cannot act otherwise. The men charged with guarding them do not escape unscathed either; they also become hardened and wither inside.

Toward the end *Resurrection* seems to peter out, Nekhlyudov (and the reader too) exhausted by all the ugliness, both physical and metaphysical, primed for his hard-earned revelation. Tolstoy has beaten us down like all the captives he has paraded in front of us. Are we ready to do as he says?

The last few chapters start kind of weirdly. Nekhlyudov uncharacteristically enjoys a luxurious dinner party thrown by a convivial Siberian governor, who invites the prince when he visited the official that morning to see if the pardon he's been seeking for Maslova had arrived yet. It's the kind of soiree Nekhlyudov was accustomed to when the novel opens but had become progressively disgusted by—until now. Even he seems to be tiring of his self-denial, which is threatening to become one of those passing lifestyle changes he indulged in previously to no avail.

One of the handful of guests is an unnamed Englishman who wants to tour the local prison; he's writing a book about the penal system. So the governor suggests that Nekhlyudov, who had already asked the governor's permission to visit Maslova, accompany him. They end up going after dinner because

the Englishman likes to see his subject in the evenings: “Everybody is indoors then, no preparations are made, so one sees things as they really are.”

What have we been seeing up until now? A Potemkin prison?

But Tolstoy has something else up his sleeve, or rather in the Englishman’s bag. First, however, Maslova is led out and he informs her that he has obtained a reduction of her sentence to four years’ hard labor. But she spurns her white knight’s conjugal chivalry and informs him that she’s in love with Simonson instead, an eccentric saintly revolutionary and convict who doesn’t ring true.

After picking himself up from this life-crushing blow, which Nekhlyudov eventually soothes by concluding that Maslova actually loves him and is just trying to save him from sacrificing his life for her, he dutifully translates the Englishman’s questions to the inmates during their tour. As the prisoners jump to attention from their bunks, the prince realizes the Englishman has an objective other than a mere exposé: he takes two bound New Testaments out of his bag to leave with them.

> *“Tell them,” he said, “that Christ pities and loves them, and died for them. If they believe this they will be saved…. Tell them that it is all in this book.”*

In the next cell, where the visitors interrupt a fight that ends in a bloody nose, the Englishman leaves two more New Testaments and another pearl of wisdom.

> *“You have been quarreling and fighting, but Christ, Who died for us, gave us another way of settling our quarrels…. Tell them that Christ’s commandment would have us do just the opposite: if a man strike you on one cheek, offer him the other…..”*

But the convicts trample his words underfoot with mockery and burst into laughter. Unfazed, the Englishman asks Nekhlyudov to tell them that "what seems impossible becomes possible and easy for the faithful."

Back at the hotel we discover that the Englishman has also given the prince a New Testament as a "souvenir," but in truth Nekhlyudov is like a prisoner himself in existential terms. He finally plops down on the sofa after pacing and then randomly opens the book, and like Augustine in the garden it happens to be exactly the verses he needs. Reading through Matthew 18, he soon comes to where Peter asks Jesus how many times he should forgive a brother, seven times? and Christ answers, seventy times seven. Next comes the parable of the unjust servant who is forgiven his debt by the king but then cruelly demands payment from one of his debtors and is then punished for his cruelty.

> *"And can that be the whole answer," Nekhlyudov suddenly exclaimed aloud. And the inner voice of his whole being said, "Yes, that is all."*
>
> *… The thought that had at first appeared so strange, so paradoxical, laughable even, ever more frequently finding confirmation in life, suddenly appeared to him the simplest, incontrovertible truth. Thus he realized quite clearly that the only sure means of salvation from the terrible wrongs which mankind endures is for every man to acknowledge himself a sinner before God and therefore unfitted to punish or reform others.*

He is saved! … so he thinks. He concludes that people must follow Christ's commandments in the Sermon on the Mount and all will be well, there will be a brotherhood of man. All crime will apparently stop in this utopia, since Nekhlyudov proclaims that it is now clear: "The age-old question of what to do with wrongdoers—surely not let them go unpunished?—no longer perplexed him."

So Nekhlyudov is as smugly misguided as his targets. After all his soul-wringing and sleepless nights he has fallen for yet another panacea that, like a placebo, will pacify him for the time being.

Note well the difference between the Englishman's and Nekhlyudov's conception of Christ's overall message, that is, the entire gospel. In both his speeches the Englishman refers to Christ's crucifixion—He "died for them" and "died for us." Implicit in that is that Christ rose from the dead, meaning he was not only man but God too. What else can it mean? How can you die for someone unless you save them? So the next question is save them from what? From eternal condemnation. But why are they eternally condemned? Because Adam and Eve disobeyed God and committed the first sin—the only one they could have committed at the time, since there was only one rule they needed to follow—and transmitted sin and its hideous twin, death, to all their progeny. Jesus died on the cross to atone for that sin, which God cannot allow to go unpunished because he is holy and just, but a person must put their faith in Christ while they are on this earth to receive that divine acquittal. Just as the Englishman affirmed.

There is no gray here, except for somebody with an agenda. Tolstoy was a true child of the nineteenth century—for all his spiritual ponderings he was still at heart a materialist who couldn't believe in Jesus's supernatural resurrection. He makes this quite clear in a nonfiction book he wrote called *What I Believe* (which is also known as *My Religion*). He believed that the *resurrection*, a word he falsely claims was mistranslated and that Jesus never meant such a thing, was purely metaphorical.

As the apostle Paul said, the cross (and the resurrection) are "foolishness to the Greeks," or Gentiles, who seek after worldly wisdom, but "the foolishness of God is wiser than men."

So for Nekhlyudov, Jesus and his gospel are just another of his schemes and gurus to keep him from hanging himself. If Nekhlyudov would've kept reading he would've come to John 11, when Jesus visits his friend Lazarus's sisters four days after their brother's death. When Jesus finally arrives, he sees Martha first.

> *Jesus saith unto her, Thy brother shall rise again.*
>
> *Martha saith unto him, I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day.*
>
> *Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live.*

Jesus then raises Lazarus from the dead. Thus the context itself belies Tolstoy's canard of biblical word games. He is no less than a false prophet, in my view, one of the many Jesus predicted would come in his name.

I also must point out that Nekhlyudov was right in the first place that Christ's counterintuitive commandments are "impossible" to keep—because of our fallen human nature. It is the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Godhead, who empowers true believers to obey them, though sometimes they falter too as they undergo the process of sanctification.

Nekhlyudov's resurrection is merely a moral one, a sort of self-help tool from a master teacher who is human only and not the son of God at the same time. A plastic Jesus for the dashboard of life. This is why I say that Tolstoy has betrayed his master. Interestingly, like Judas, Tolstoy wanted to hang himself, as he admits in his nonfiction book *A Confession*, which was written the year after *Anna Karenina* and was the first of a series of spiritual memoirs and tracts that led up to *Resurrection*. The only difference is that Judas actually did it.

Surely the penal system, then and now, is fraught with misery and corruption. While various reforms may help and should be attempted to minimize the damage, men and women on both sides of the bars—the incarcerators and the incarcerated—will continue to injure each other this side of the New Jerusalem. “How this new chapter will end,” Tolstoy winds it all up, “only the future will show.” But as long as Nekhlyudov’s sustains his earthbound and doomed resurrection, believers know exactly how it will end.

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