GREAT SHORT WORKS OF Leo Tolstoy

PERENNIAL CLASSICS

The Death of Ivan Ilych
The Cossacks · Family Happiness
The Devil · The Kreutzer Sonata
Master and Man · Father Sergius · Hadji Murad
Alyosha the Pot

Great Short Works

of

Leo Tolstoy

With an Introduction by

John Bayley

In the translations by
Louise and Aylmer Maude

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The translations of *The Cossacks, The Death of Ivan Ilych, The Kreutzer Sonata, The Devil, Master and Man, Father Sergius,* and *Hadji Murád* by Louise and Aylmer Maude and the translation of *Family Happiness* by J. D. Duff are reprinted here from the texts of The World's Classics editions by permission of the Oxford University Press, 200 Madison Avenue, New York, New York, 10016.

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Introduction

It is a mistake to regard the writings of Leo Tolstoy too much in the light of a sage's personal utterances rather than as works of art. It is true that the idea of art, with a capital A, the notion of Art as practised by other novelists of his epoch, notably Turgenev, meant little to Tolstoy. When he worked out his own theory about it in *What is Art?*, he had already written his greatest works. After the first three volumes of *War and Peace* had been published, he wrote an article for *The Russian Archive*, from which the following is an extract.

> *War and Peace* is what the author wished, and was able, to express in the form in which it is expressed. Such an announcement of disregard for conventional form in an artistic production might seem presumptuous were it premeditated . . .

"A good work of art," wrote Tolstoy later to his friend Goldenweiser, "can in its entirety be expressed only by itself." It was not Tolstoy's way to compose a work of art in a particular form, as an epic, a chronicle, a *nouvelle*.

Tolstoy's stories are in some sense founded on a paradox. They are carefully and beautifully composed tales by a genius who did not give his whole allegiance to this formal method of composition. It is an exciting paradox, and like many such paradoxes in art it produced with some incidental defects powerful and unforgettable results.

Not the least interesting aspect of these stories by Tolstoy is their use of the same material that is also contained in the bulk of the novels, but altered and in some cases distorted by its deployment in a more rigid and artificial form. In *Family Happiness* (1859) we have the first example of that understanding and analysis of the modes of communication in a marriage that forms such a superb and self-justifying conclusion to *War and Peace*.

Family Happiness was written four years before Tolstoy's own marriage, which fact shows that he did not necessarily, as his readers often take for granted, have to experience what he wrote before he wrote about it. Tolstoy was imagining what marriage for him might be like. He had a girl in mind, an acquaintance named Valeria Arseneva, and he was attempting to forecast how his own relationship with a young girl in marriage might turn out. To this problem he brought the same kind of honesty and remorseless self-analysis that he was to show when he came to write *A Confession* in 1879. He also reveals the amazing insight into a feminine consciousness that he displays in the presentation of Natasha and of Anna Karenina. Nonetheless, the theme of *Family Happiness* remains intriguingly different because, as I tried to show in my recent book *Tolstoy and the Novel* (London, 1966; New York, 1967), it is based on an hypothesis. This *hypothetical* quality is an important aspect of a great many of his stories.

The account in *War and Peace* of Prince Andrew's last days and death is strikingly similar to that of the situation in *The Death of Ivan Ilych,* with the difference, again, that Tolstoy seems intent on proving something to himself and to us in the story that is no concern of the novel. It is the same with Karenin's obsessive and self-destructive jealousy, emotionally akin to that in *The Devil* and *The Kreutzer Sonata,* but shown in proportion and against the perspective of other lives, not pursued to a bitter and solitary end.

Early stories like *The Wood-felling* and *Sebastopol* show where Tolstoy acquired his intimate knowledge of military life. They are frankly reportage of his own experiences in the Caucasus and the Crimea, but reportage of a singularly vivid and unusual kind. Perhaps the most striking affinity of all with the longer novels is Tolstoy's use in *Hadji Murad,* one of his last and finest tales, of what he called the "peepshow method." This is essentially the method, on a meticulous and miniature scale, that makes *War and Peace* a vast scenic panorama. It is as if Tolstoy had returned at the end of his life to the mood of his greatest work.

But because they are used on this small clear scale, the "peepshows" of which *Hadji Murad* is composed make a very different impression on us. They are pointed, dramatic,

tendentious. For all the majestic clarity and calm with which the story unfolds, it constitutes one of the most ferocious denunciations in all literature of the realities and the necessities of power. It is possible to read *War and Peace* without concerning ourselves, unless we wish, with Tolstoy's views on history in general and on the campaign of 1812 in particular, for the great sweep of the novel holds so much else to engross us. In *Hadji Murad* the *meaning* of the tale presses upon us inescapably and relentlessly, just as do the meanings in Tolstoy's other tales, the meaning of death in *The Death of Ivan Ilych,* of pride in *Father Sergius,* of sexual emotion in *The Devil* and *The Kreutzer Sonata.* We can deny the truth of these meanings if we wish, but we cannot escape the implacable gaze that the author fastens on us, willing us to accept them.

"During the first half of his life," Prince Mirsky notes in his history of Russian literature, "Tolstoy saw the world as an enchanted ball-room. During the second, he saw it as Ivan Ilych's black bag." This may be an oversimplification, but it is a telling one. Certainly the maestro who leads us into the lighted ball-room seems not only a very different kind of man, but a very different kind of writer from the hypnotist whose eyes try to compel us to see the world as he saw it. Like the genius of Shakespeare the genius of Tolstoy can embrace extremes, not only extremes of vision but of technique as well. Yet we feel that the same man is there, experiencing the same continuity of life that we all have to experience.

In his celebrated essay "Goethe and Tolstoy" Thomas Mann takes a subtly patronising line about Tolstoy's moralising earnestness, his search for the meaning of life and the terrible pessimism that he came to feel about the flesh and the life of the body that he had once celebrated. Mann contrasts what seems to him Tolstoy's defeat and collapse with Goethe's development and poise. The contrast is certainly an illuminating one, but few of us feel, I think, that it damages Tolstoy and exalts Goethe quite in the way in which Thomas Mann makes out. All of us are subject to a temporary collapse of our instinct that existence is meaningful and sufficient in itself. Tolstoy, as we know from *A Confession* and elsewhere, experienced such a collapse on an overwhelming scale. His embodiment in his great novels of a kind of universal physical existence

would be far less impressive if he had not also been haunted and obsessed by the questions that he asks in the stories, the questions not only of "How should a man live?" but "How should a man die?" A Tolstoy who continued to write novels of the same sort would have been an intolerable phenomenon, for he seems to encompass all physical existence. But what grows with this sense of existence, haunts it and finally dominates it is the admission of its limitations, the confrontation of self with what is not self, of life with death.

The Tolstoy of *A Confession* and of many of the stories is not ill, nor perverse. He plays out in himself and on his huge scale the most universal and inevitable of human dramas. Ultimately, as Thomas Mann comes near to admitting, even so great a humanistic genius as that of Goethe was fundamentally egotistic. Tolstoy was also a gigantic egotist, but an egotist of a very different kind. If Goethe cared for nothing but himself, Tolstoy *was* nothing but himself; and his sense of what awaited him and of what life had come to mean for him is correspondingly more intimate and more moving. He hits us where we live. "Every bosom," as Dr. Johnson observed of the greatest kinds of literature, "returns an echo" to the message of these stories.

As soon as he had finished *Family Happiness,* Tolstoy rejected it with loathing and referred to it as "a foul blot." The reasons for this disgust are interesting. The main one seems to have been because the story was *made up.* All his life Tolstoy detested the idea of invention, the need of the artist to put things together and to work them out in his own head. Of course, he had to do it, in *War and Peace* no less than in *Family Happiness,* but he always maintained that the ultimate test of a writer was whether things happened in his fictions naturally and inevitably or if they seemed inconsistent and artificial. "It is a terrible thing," he wrote to Goldenweiser, "when the characters in a novel do what is not in their nature to do." He maintained that it was Anna Karenina, not he, who decided that she would throw herself under a train. In his long novels we do have a remarkable sense of Tolstoy's waiting on his characters until extended acquaintance told him how they should behave and what their fates should be.

In the stories it is different. The figures in them seem more like Tolstoy's agents and representatives than inde-

pendent beings. They are aspects of the story's mechanism, and they are to be manipulated to make the story's point, to fulfil its dramatic pattern. In this they resemble significantly the characters of Dostoevsky, for whom *invention* was precisely the point and the privilege of the novelist. *Vdumyvat'*, in Russian, "to think up," was the function on which Dostoevsky prided himself; and, perhaps, this is the reason why we feel in *Crime and Punishment* that the action is taking place in somebody's head rather than in the real world. The events of *The Kreutzer Sonata* might equally be said to take place in the consciousness of the hero Pozdnyshev. His killing of his wife, like Raskolnikov's murder of the old money-lender, is a nightmare about which we are told, rather than an event in which we take part.

This is the note of *hypothesis* that I have mentioned as characteristic of Tolstoy's tales. By inventing a situation they pose a problem. If one married, along what lines might the relation proceed? What would happen if one became murderously jealous or obsessed with desire for another woman? Suppose one were to contract a fatal and painful disease or gave up the world to become a monk or hermit? Even *The Cossacks* shares this element of hypothesis. Its young hero Olenin—who, we should note, is *not* Tolstoy himself—wishes to join in the simple life of the Cossacks and perhaps to marry a Cossack girl. It is the old romantic European dream of "the Noble Savage," of participating in the life of a primitive and unspoiled community; and here we have it in a peculiarly Russian form. Tolstoy's great predecessor Alexander Pushkin had written a long dramatic poem entitled *The Gipsies* which handles a very similar theme. Its hero wishes to abandon civilisation and lead the simple life with a wandering gipsy tribe. He marries a gipsy girl and finds happiness for a time; but when his wife has an affair with a handsome young gipsy, the old standards of civilisation reassert themselves. He kills both his wife and her lover and is cast out by the tribe. At the end of the poem he is left utterly alone. The upshot of *The Gipsies* is starkly tragic; that of *The Cossacks* expansively comic, but in both cases the hero fails to become a different kind of man in a simpler and more heroic world. Both try to change their lives and both fail. The result is a triumph for a certain sort of realism. In Pushkin's case it is highly

economical and poetic; in Tolstoy's, naturalistic and painstakingly exact.

The parallel between the poem and the story is emphasised by the fact that Tolstoy first had thoughts of treating his theme in verse, but he wisely abandoned the notion. Indeed, as far as we know he only once in his life attempted verse, and then only in a letter. His genius was a more literal one, and in the slow and laborious composition of *The Cossacks*, which extended over a number of years, he set himself to make the setting and the characters as real as he knew how. In this he succeeded perfectly. Olenin's romantic dreams are set against the pungent physical presence of the Cossack girl Maryanka and old "Uncle" Eroshka. Maryanka is a superlative creation, for Tolstoy has deliberately turned the sloe-eyed Circassian maiden of Russian romance into a real girl, yet a girl whose physical actuality inspires Olenin as romantically as the literary heroine of his dreams.

There is a deep and rich comedy in this, and for all its familiarity with death *The Cossacks* could be called a comic masterpiece. It is also the only one of Tolstoy's works that has proved technically influential in the sense that later writers have found inspiration in its method and its spirit. We know that Hemingway admired it and can see how he made use of its unemphatic style, though we may also feel that he never attains its peculiar depth and humour of perception. Frederick, the hero of *A Farewell to Arms*, has something in common with Olenin, but its heroine is a sad disappointment after Maryanka. The fact of influence is significant and is surely connected with the technical originality of Tolstoy's story and its carefully wrought effects. It has a definite literary progeny in a sense that *Anna Karenina* and *War and Peace* have never had and could never have.

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It is not too fanciful to trace a continuity in theme between *The Cossacks* and *Father Sergius*, one of Tolstoy's last and most impressive tales. In *Father Sergius* the moving power is again Tolstoy's demonstration that men do not change and that their natures are stronger than their wills. Father Sergius can no more rid himself of the ground of pride in his nature than Olenin can rid himself of the outlook and beliefs of the society in which he has grown

up. As Olenin tries to escape from himself into being a Cossack, Father Sergius tries to escape into the monastic life, and later, in his despair at finding that he is still his old self, into the humble anonymity of a Siberian peasant. But he remains the same, as conscious of what his position demands of him when at the end he is humbly begging alms for his fellow-tramps as when he was on the parade ground in Saint Petersburg, or receiving admirers in his monastic cell.

Though sombre, the end of this story, and particularly the figure of Pashenka, touches us to the heart, as we are touched by a short and simple tale that Tolstoy wrote even later, *Alyosha the Pot.* It is difficult not to feel Tolstoy's own pride and stubborn self-will yearning for the simple goodness of those who have no sense of themselves, the peace that Pashenka and Alyosha possess without knowing, a peace that Father Sergius can never attain. *Father Sergius* is not only an extremely powerful but an agonisingly ambiguous story. It reminds us of Tolstoy's criticism of one of Chekhov's best tales, *The Darling. The Darling* presents a woman who has no character or opinions of her own, but adopts them with a simple and comical seriousness from her successive husbands. It is a light-hearted and ironic tale, but in a celebrated essay Tolstoy insisted on its underlying serious charity. He remarks that Chekhov seems to make fun of "the darling," but "by directing the close attention of a poet upon her he has exalted her."

What is interesting about this criticism is that it suggests what we feel in *Father Sergius,* that a great story-teller need not consciously bring off the overt intention of his story, but may involuntarily suggest another and deeper meaning. Whether, as Tolstoy suggests, it is true of Chekhov's story must remain a matter of opinion, but it is significant that Tolstoy should have thought so. For the idea behind his verdict contradicts in some measure his own view of an artist's intention, which should be to infect us, his readers, with the moral that he has in mind. Tolstoy's view of the story, as we can see from *What is Art?,* came to be based on the example of Christ's parables. *Father Sergius* is surely in intention such a parable, a parable on the nature of pride. But the abiding impression it leaves with us, and this was surely not Tolstoy's idea, is that if we are proud we cannot escape pride! We can

only try to do so, and in the contrast between the effort and the reality lies the true power and pathos of the tale. In *The Cossacks* Tolstoy shows us deliberately that we cannot escape from what we are and from what our background has made us. In *Father Sergius* he reveals involuntarily, and thus more movingly, the same truth in its starkest form.

"The old man wrote it well," Tolstoy is said to have observed about *Father Sergius*. So indeed he did. But in the greatest art there is always an element of unconscious power that carries it beyond the scope of the author's purpose and preoccupation. We can see this power at work in *Father Sergius* as we see it in *Anna Karenina* and in *War and Peace*. Tolstoy himself admitted it, as we have seen in his perceptive words about *The Darling*. Nonetheless, his own view of art did in some ways contradict his instincts. Speaking of modern authors, he writes in *What is Art?* that one can usually see too clearly what they have in mind. "From the first lines one sees the intention with which the book is written, the details all become superfluous, and one feels dull." There is a strong connection between *artfulness* and the impression that the artist wants to make on us: the two go together. Hence, when Tolstoy himself wants to make a particular impression on us, the story may seem artful as well. The strange thing is that as he came to reject and even to hate the notion of art, he makes more and more use of his own powers of artistry. The reason must be that only by making the most deliberate use of those powers can he persuade us to see what he wants us to see and to feel the impact that he wants us to feel.

Master and Man is a good example of the divided mind of Tolstoy in creation. As he wrote it, he noted in his diary: "It is rather good from the artistic point of view, but the content is still feeble." And then a little later, significantly: "It is no good. No character—neither the one nor the other." Whichever Tolstoy meant here, that neither of the main characters was good or that neither art nor content was, it is clear that he was bothered by the way in which the story was turning out. After making the most elaborate corrections and amendments at proof-stage, he finally wrote: "I have sinned, because I am ashamed to have wasted my time on such stuff." Yet *Master and Man* is a triumph, one of Tolstoy's most

superb pieces, and all the more so because we do *not* know how it will turn out. The two characters are not puppets but completely realised, and the motives of Brekhunov remain touchingly ambiguous and absolutely true to his merchant's nature. He sets about saving his servant as if it was a business deal, and he obviously calculates that in keeping Nikita warm he will keep himself warm too. He is wrong: this is the first miscalculation that he has made; yet he comes to realise before he dies that it does not matter.

The heroes of *The Devil* and *The Kreutzer Sonata* have no such independence. Irtenyev in *The Devil* has none at all, and the alternative endings of the tale not only show this, but show that Tolstoy himself realised it. Although much in this piece is strong and vivid—the confrontations between the hero and the servant girl are as terrifyingly potent as those between Maslova and her seducer in *Resurrection*—by Tolstoy's highest standards the story does not come off. The hero is not actualised enough. Is the same true of Pozdnyshev in *The Kreutzer Sonata*? He certainly begins by seeming a mere repository for Tolstoy's more extreme views on sex and marriage, but at the end we realise that he is a human being; and when he says, "Goodbye— Forgive me" (in Russian the two phrases are almost the same word), his case as an individual moves us deeply, though it may be that his theories and denunciations leave us untouched. He has realised that his wife was "another human being," and it is this realisation, coming too late for any recognition between them, that is his tragic and personal experience. That experience is similar to Prince Andrew's in *War and Peace*, who finds that confrontation with Natasha, about whom he has been consumed with jealousy, leads to a disappearance of all the maddening abstractions that jealousy produces. All his embittered emotions fall away, and he sees only the girl herself. That confrontation was a happy one, even though Andrew was mortally wounded, but Pozdnyshev's is tragic, because his injured wife will not and cannot recognise him as a human being as he has at last recognised her. She only looks at him with "cold animal hatred."

The Kreutzer Sonata caused a sensation, and it was published only after the Countess Tolstoy had persuaded Tsar Alexander III to relax the official censorship on its behalf. It was, of course, the shock effect of the story's

views on marriage rather than their artistic presentation that secured its immediate notoriety. But there is some evidence that Tolstoy was well aware in this case of the subtlety with which he had presented the hero, particularly in the final pages. Replying to a criticism of Pozdnyshev as a monstrous being, Tolstoy observed that he "gives himself away not only by abusing himself but by concealing the good sides of his character." That is just it. Pozdnyshev is not unlike one of Dostoevsky's characters, in particular his "Underground Man," in being his own worst advocate. What moves the reader in both cases is the potential for goodness and kindness that has been wasted, distorted by an attitude to life that the conventions and hypocrisies of society have helped to bring about.

Tolstoy worked long on *Hadji Murad* and admitted that it was almost the only one of his later works of which he thought well. In an undisclosed and symbolic way it is one of his most autobiographical works. It is true that Hadji Murad was a real person, a Tartar chieftain who was killed attempting to escape from the Russians after he had gone over to their side; but it is impossible not to be aware of the deep sense of personal identification that Tolstoy feels with him. Tolstoy, too, had cut himself off from his own class and his own life, yet had not been able to find any real peace or solidarity in his new life and among his new disciples. Hadji Murad remembers the tale of the falcon that was caught by men and then pecked to death by its own kind. Tolstoy certainly underwent something of this sort at the hands of his wife during his last days.

And yet *Hadji Murad* is first and foremost a superbly objective tale, a miniature epic or saga, which also shows a penetrating insight into the interplay of power politics, intrigue and colonial conquest. It has something in common, on the one hand, with Shakespeare's plays of power and fate, and on the other, with such a corrosively perceptive study of colonialism as Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The episode itself dates from Tolstoy's own early years in the Caucasus, when Shamil, the Moslem religious leader, was trying to unite the Caucasian tribes against Russian annexation. Whether Tolstoy was fair to Nicholas I hardly matters, any more than whether Shakespeare was fair to Octavius Caesar or Richard III. What counts is

his masterly indictment not only of the hatefulness of power but the dreadful helplessness of those who exercise it. It becomes necessary to its possessors, who exercise it as unreflectingly as ordinary people run their homes or go to the office. Like almost everything that Tolstoy wrote, the lesson or "moral" involved here is one that we can never forget or afford to ignore. It is significant that Soviet critics have tried to see in the story propaganda for the cause of Russia against Moselm fanaticism and for the new order against the old, but its theme is universal, one that leaders of the West today, no less than those of the Soviet system, would do well to take to heart. As one of Tolstoy's most balanced critics has put it:*

> The story impresses one with the great threat to life and happiness which lies in the contrasting despotisms of Shamil and Nicholas . . . and by its compelling sympathy with the fine wild chieftain, tenacious of life to the last, hanging on like the red wild thistle, the only living thing in the field to survive the passage of the plough—the symbol with which Tolstoy begins his tale, and with which he ends it.

This image of the thistle, which holds the wide range of the story in its emblematic vice, has a curiously similar function to the central symbol in another great Russian tale of power and submission, Pushkin's poem *The Bronze Horseman*, in which the statue of Peter the Great dominates the consciousness of the divided hero and eventually helps to drive him mad.

As usual in Tolstoy's best tales, this final masterpiece contains a great variety of effect. The old general's farewell speech is deliciously funny yet moving. Marya Dimitrievna, the drunken major's mistress, is a fine and unexpectedly sympathetic portrait. When she assails with passionate indignation the officers who are displaying Hadji Murad's severed head, she has something of the grandeur of an Antigone. Death presides over the tale, but not the haunting fear and horror of death in so much of Tolstoy's work. Here death has become the fitting climax to an heroic life and a part of the archaic tranquillity of the narrative form. The vivid pictures of his childhood that fill Hadji Murad's mind during his last moments are like those of Tolstoy

* Theodore Redpath: *Tolstoy* (Studies in Modern European Life and Thought).

himself, and he watches them pass "without evoking any feeling within him—neither pity nor anger nor any kind of desire." When Tolstoy, after his flight from home and his final journey, was lying at the Astapovo railway station, he repeated over and over during the last moments of his life: "I do not understand what it is I have to do." Like Hadji Murad, whom he had imagined so well, he had nothing to do but to die.

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Family Happiness

[1859]