

The Final Chapter:  
Terminal Illness in Russian Literature (1850–1999)

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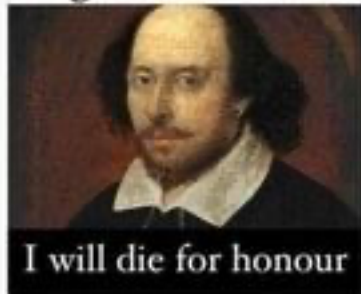
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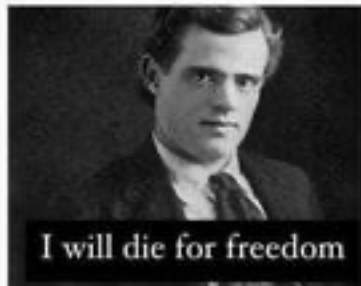


I will die for honour

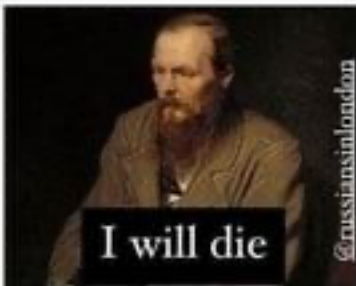


I will die for love

American literature: Russian literature:



I will die for freedom



I will die

## Abstract

In “The Final Chapter: Terminal Illness in Russian literature, 1850–1999,” I investigate the experience of confronting one’s mortality through the prism of terminal illness in the literary works of Realist Russian writers Turgenev, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Chekhov, Solzhenitsyn, and Ulitskaya. In exploring what it means to die a “good death,” I consider the perspectives of terminally ill patients, their doctors, and their caregivers, arguing that a complete picture of the dying experience depends on the careful examination of each perspective’s understanding of illness. I trace how the idea of a “good death” changes across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and argue that an ideal death is one in which the dying person finds courage and strength to accept their mortality, and one in which their doctors and caregivers respect their patient’s dignity and autonomy. I contend that doctors and caregivers do what is called empathic witnessing of their patient’s illness and practice “attuned care” in order to create a nurturing environment for the dying person to pass away peacefully.

## Preface

“The Final Chapter,” is a project ten years in the making. When asked where I came up with the idea to write an entire dissertation on dying from terminal illness in Russian literature, I usually struggle to find an answer because I have been developing this idea since before I can remember. My mother jokes that I was a “morbid child,” always fascinated with cemeteries and existential questions. Even at age thirty, I still find cemeteries to be uplifting and peaceful places—I love looking at old headstones and wondering what life was like when these people were living, what the city looked like back then, what made them happy or sad. Looking around at the trees and flowers and hearing the birds chirp helps me realize that maybe death is not so scary.

The moment which inspired my interest in the end-of-life experience was in eleventh grade when I was interning as a physician’s assistant. My job was to sit with patients, many of whom were elderly, and write down their symptoms before the doctor came in for their consultation. I noticed that many patients were eager to talk about their lives and to impart upon me the lessons they learned over the years. Fifteen years later, I still carry their words with me and often wonder what advice I will give if I am privileged to make it to old age. In college, I studied philosophy with a focus on end-of-life ethics alongside Russian studies. I was lucky to find a spot in end-of-life specialist Dr. Jim Hoefler’s “Death and Dying” course where we visited the ICU to see up close what dying really looked like. I noticed how alone many of the patients were, and I realized that these people were sequestered to the sidelines and pushed out of view because death is so terrifying. Their perspectives deserved attention. I was eager to combine my passions for literature and bioethics in graduate school, and I came to the University of Virginia already prepared with my dissertation topic.

I was lucky to be able to plumb the depths of my topic in Dr. Marcia Childress' Medicine and Literature course at the UVA School of Medicine and in Professor Jarret Zigon's anthropology course Relational Ethics. It was after taking these courses and working with medical students that I realized that writing about terminal illness solely from the perspective of the dying patient was an incomplete picture of the end-of-life experience. If I really wanted to present what it was like to confront one's mortality, I would have to consider the physician's perspectives as well, since they are so intimately connected to the dying process. When I moved to Berlin in 2019 and began writing my dissertation in the throes of the Covid19 pandemic, I realized that caregivers were also essential to the experience of end of life. I decided that a true exploration of terminal illness needed to include the perspectives of the patient, doctor, and caregiver.

Writing this dissertation has been the most challenging task of my academic career (probably also, my life) but I firmly believe that the dying person's perspective needs to be shared with the world. In discussing death and dying, we Authentically confront the essence of our being, in Heideggerian terms, our *being-towards-death*. I hope that my dissertation will encourage medical students, doctors, and nurses to engage with the dying person's illness and to hold the concept of a good death at the center of their practice.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to express profound gratitude to my dissertation advisor Edith Clowes, whose support over the last seven years was invaluable to this project and to myself as a scholar. Also, my sincere thanks to my committee members David Herman, Katia Dianina, and Marcia Childress, who read over my chapters and provided insightful comments. Additional thanks to the Jefferson Scholars Foundation, Renate Voris, and Jeffrey Grossman whose provided me with financial and other the assistance during my time at the University of Virginia. Special thanks to Susanna Frank, who sponsored my visa in Germany and granted me affiliation with Humboldt Universität. And most of all to my family: my mom Galina, who constantly encouraged me to pursue my passions, my sister Anya who supported me through good and bad times, to my grandmother Nina whose zest for life inspires me to take risks and follow my dreams, and to my grandfather Edik who inspired my love for Russian literature and who propelled me to pursue higher education. I couldn't have completed this enormous project without you all.



## Note on Transliteration

In the transliteration of Russian, I have used the Library of Congress transliteration system without diacritics with the following exceptions:

The names of well-known authors in the English world such as Dostoevsky.

Introduction:  
Dying as Life's Final Chapter

“Death is an awesome process of making and remaking meaning through which we come to constitute and express what is most uniquely human and our own.”  
—Arthur Kleinman, *The Illness Narratives*<sup>1</sup>

Death is the conclusion of one's life, its final chapter and its most poignant event.

Nowhere is this profound chapter given greater attention than in the chronicles of Russian literature. In Fedor Dostoevsky's (1821–1881) short satirical story “Bobok” (1873) the unsuspecting narrator comes across a strange scene in a cemetery: from below the earth, he hears the whispering of the dead, conversing with one another from beyond the grave. Beneath a freshly dug grave, one corpse pipes up, distress quivering in his voice: “oh, oh! What is happening to me?...I was at [Doctor] Schultz's; I had a complication, you know, at first it was my chest and then a cough, and then I caught a cold: my lungs, influenza...and all of a sudden, quite unexpectedly...”<sup>2</sup> As the narrator incredulously brings his ear closer to the earth, the recently departed continues, “the worst of all was its being so unexpected...”<sup>3</sup> The other corpses chortle and interject: “If it was the chest, you should have gone to [Dr.] Ecke and not to [Dr.] Schultz...I've heard he's attentive and foretells everything beforehand...”<sup>4</sup>

While Dostoevsky's departed characters have the chance to tell their story and to debate its precursors, the realities of human existence do not offer the luxury of such contemplation. Death is often something that looms large on the horizon, is compartmentalized in denial, and is

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Kleinman, *The Illness Narratives: Suffering, Healing, and the Human Condition* (New York: Perseus Book Group, 1988, 157).

<sup>2</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Short Stories* (New York: Books, Inc., 2012), 210. («Ах, ах... ах, что же это со мной?...Я у Шульца; у меня, знаете, осложнение вышло, сначала грудь захватило и кашель, а потом простудился: грудь и грипп...и вот вдруг совсем неожиданно...» [Ф. М. Достоевский, *Дневник писателя 1873*, том 21 (Ленинград: Издательство «Наука», 1980), 46]).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. («...главное, совсем неожиданно» [ibid]).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. («Но если грудь, вам бы скорее к Эку, а не к Шульцу» [ibid]).

not given its proper weight in the examination of one's life story. If we were to treat our lives as a narrative—Walter Benjamin, for example, proposes such a reading—then dying would serve as the summarizing “final chapter.”<sup>5</sup> Russian literature, in particular, is rich in narratives centered on the experience of dying and, more specifically, on the experience of confronting death through the prism of terminal illness. Starting with Ivan Turgenev (1818–1883) in the 1850s and continuing until our present day with Liudmila Ulitskaya (1943–), Russian writers have explored existential questions in scenes of terminal illness, the quintessential example being Lev Tolstoy's (1828–1910) *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (*Смерть Ивана Ильича*, 1886). In the story, the title character undergoes a moral and spiritual transformation in the throes of incurable illness. While this story has received much attention from literary critics, medical professionals, and bioethicists, there is an additional trove of material on the end-of-life experience that are written by other Russian authors, whose accounts, in my view, merit sustained attention. Beyond Tolstoy, Turgenev, Dostoevsky, and later Anton Chekhov (1860–1904), Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (1918–2008), and Ulitskaya delve deep into the physical, emotional, and spiritual challenges inherent in the dying process to show the importance of courage, dignity, and autonomy in facing death, and use this liminal period of life to explore pressing existential questions about how to live meaningfully and how to die decently.

Terminal illness is often used as a literary precept to examine the “life-limiting” elements of the final phase of life. Terminal illness is defined as an incurable disease or condition in which the ill person has six months or less to live. In my investigation of fictional accounts of dying in Russian literature, I question how Russian writers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries use

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<sup>5</sup> “Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death” (Walter Benjamin, *The Storyteller Essays*, ed. Samuel Titan, trans. Tess Lewis [New York: New York Review of Books, 2019], 93). Benjamin here refers to the end of a narrative, implying that it is only the end that can confer meaning on a life in narrative.

the limited period at the end of life to explore pressing existential questions of what is the “right” and “good” way to live and how to best accept the terrifying truth of our mortality. Terminal illness as the lens through which to address these issues is particularly useful because it serves not only as the liminal space between life and death, but also as the “final chapter” of life, in which the dying person can reflect on their choices, relationships, and beliefs. As Socrates famously said in his preparation for death, “We move closer to the truth only to the extent that we move further from life.”

In all world’s literature, Russian writers are starkest explorers of life’s final moments. Many of their fictional narratives illuminate the existential tension between life and death, being and nonbeing, existence and nothingness. Across the span of centuries, Russian writers identify dying as the critical time to address once and for all moral, spiritual, and philosophical concerns that a person ignores in their carefree days of health and happiness. Prior academic reviews of end-of-life issues in Russian literature have focused analysis on death itself, and the different angles from which it is presented. For example, Galina Rylkova discusses Russian writers’ quest for figurative immortality through their art and reputation as a way to transcend physical death in her monograph *Breaking Free from Death: The Art of Being a Successful Russian Writer*.<sup>6</sup> Other commentaries investigate different forms that death can take such as suicide, as in the case of Alexander Graf’s *Das Selbstmordmotiv in der russischen Prosa des 20. Jahrhunderts* and Irina Paperno’s *Suicide as a Cultural Institution in Dostoevsky’s Russia*, as well as murder, such as Rina Lapidus’s *Passion, Humiliation, and Revenge: Hatred in Man-Woman Relationships in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Russian Novel*.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Galina Rylkova, *Breaking Free from Death: The Art of Being a Successful Russian Writer* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> Alexander Graf, *Das Selbstmordmotiv in der russischen Prosa des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1984); Irina Paperno, *Suicide as a Cultural Institution in Dostoevsky’s Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University

Other scholars consider illness through the prism of madness and insanity, such as in Angela Brintlinger and Ilya Vinitsky's edited volume *Madness and the Mad in Russian Culture* and Nina Allen's *Madness, Death, and Disease in the Fiction of Vladimir Nabokov*.<sup>8</sup> Disease in Russian literature is mostly discussed in metaphorical terms, such as in Fredrick H. White's *Degeneration, Decadence, and Disease in the Russian Fin de Siècle* and in Katherine Bowers and Ani Kokobobo's *Russian Writers and the Fin de Siècle: The Twilight of Realism*.<sup>9</sup> While these scholars briefly or tangentially mention chronic and terminal illness in their analyses, none have delved into a full discussion of the physical, emotional, and spiritual turmoil that these illnesses induce and how they are expressed and treated in Russian literature.

In the present study, I use the framing concept of a “good” death and a “bad” death to discuss the moral issues inspired by being near death. As Elena Fratto shows, the concept of a good death was established as early as 1347 after the devastation of the Black Plague. The instructions and protocols on achieving a good death were collected in two Christian texts from the fifteenth century titled *Ars moriendi*—literally meaning “the art of dying.”<sup>10</sup> Here the good death is one without fear and warns against “the temptations that haunt those who are dying—including impatience, avarice, [and] lack of faith.”<sup>11</sup> The idea of what constitutes a good death in Russian literature changes across the nineteenth century to the twentieth, and one of the objectives of my analysis is tracing the progression of thought as it relates to this matter. While a

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Press, 1997); Rina Lapidus, *Passion, Humiliation, and Revenge: Hatred in Man-Woman Relationships in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Russian Novel* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> Angela Brintlinger and Ilya Vinitsky (eds), *Madness and Mad in Russian Culture* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2007); Nina Allen, *Madness, Death, and Disease in the Fiction of Vladimir Nabokov* (Birmingham: University of Birmingham Press, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> Fredrick H. White, *Degeneration, Decadence and Disease in Russian Fin de Siècle* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014); Katherine Bowers and Ani Kokobobo (eds), *Russian Writers and the Fin de Siècle: The Twilight of Realism* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> Elena Fratto, *Medical Storyworlds: Health, Illness, and Bodies in Russian and European Literature at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 45.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

good death for the nineteenth-century writers Turgenev, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky reflects that which is posited in *Ars moriendi*, namely accepting death and approaching it with courage, for the twentieth-century writers Solzhenitsyn and Ulitskaya, a good death becomes dying on one's own terms, which reflects the movement towards agency and self-determination, yet is more tenuous and subjective.

My dissertation focuses on the experience of terminal illness from three crucial perspectives: the dying person, the doctor, and the caregiver. While the decision to include all three perspectives may seem ambitious, I argue that a discussion of terminal illness and the challenges of confronting death in this context would be incomplete without the perspectives of the doctor and caregiver, as they are both intimately involved in the dying process. Doctors try to avert death through medicine and surgery.<sup>12</sup> Avoiding death eventually becomes impossible, and particularly when the *doctor* becomes the patient diagnosed with terminal illness. It is this special instance that sets the doctor's dilemma in poignant relief. While the doctor can avoid witnessing death by discharging the patient from their care, the caregiver who attends to the dying patient and takes responsibility over their care is more intimately intertwined with the dying process. I uphold the caregiver as a figure instrumental in providing a good death for terminally ill characters.

In the following section in which I explicate and justify my methodology, I describe the philosophical foundation of my investigation, namely Heidegger's existential phenomenology, and define his concepts that guide my literary investigation into the end-of-life experience. As one of the leading existential philosophers of the twentieth century, Heidegger most clearly probes the experience of confronting death. In describing the structures of Being and identifying

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<sup>12</sup> n.a., "The Hippocratic Oath: Modern Version," [https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/doctors/oath\\_modern.html](https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/doctors/oath_modern.html)

*being-towards-death* as the foundation of our existence, Heidegger shows our understanding of death as evidence of our certain annihilation inspires intense and unbearable Anxiety that we then attempt to defuse by denying the reality of our mortality. Among Heidegger's bases for his philosophy was the Russian Realist tradition and his ideas were influenced by the existential ideas presented in Tolstoy and Dostoevsky's works. I then address the relevance of literature for the study of terminal illness and dying and argue that Realism is the best literary style through which to explore these experiences. Furthermore, I conclude with a short history of terminal illness, doctoring, and caregiving in Russia across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to show how these perspectives are interlaced.

Philosophical foundation:  
Heidegger's phenomenology of *being-towards-death*

To be confronted with one's mortality, especially in the context of receiving a terminal diagnosis, often results in the "loss of the destination and map" (in Frank's words) that previously guided one's life trajectory. While those who are healthy can balance their present vitality against the certainty of death, or even to push it from their minds, those who are terminally ill are forced to confront this fact in a way that they never had before. Here we think of Ivan Ilyich, who is trapped by and drowning in his own anxiety at the prospect of dying as he comes to understand that his sickness is more serious than he or his doctors originally thought. To be lost amid chaos is frightening, overwhelming, and oftentimes unbearable. Much of our emotional orientation is influenced by our beliefs, whether they be philosophical or religious. As Russian writers show in their fiction, these beliefs can either help us overcome the chaos and orient ourselves towards "the quest" to achieve a good death or they can steer us farther into despair and lead us towards a bad death.

Many religious figures and philosophers have weighed in on one's ideal orientation in the face of death, but none have been as influential in their investigations as the German existential phenomenologist Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), whose discussion of *being-towards-death* has influenced the discussions in end-of-life ethics and metaphysics for over a century. Heidegger's formulations of the structures of Being, complicated and opaque as they are, are nevertheless important to explain in order to understand the isolation, fear, and anxiety that those who are terminally ill experience as they contemplate their mortality. His ideas of *being-towards-death*, Anxiety, and Authenticity and Inauthenticity form the foundation of my analysis into Russian literary treatment of terminal illness and dying. My goal in explicating Heidegger's existential phenomenology is twofold: the first is to establish a philosophical foundation from which to understand and challenge existential concerns inherent in the end-of-life period, which Russian writers describe in their fiction; the second is to show that many of the ideas presented by Heidegger in his phenomenological analysis of Being were already anticipated by Russian writers in the nineteenth century—namely Turgenev, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky.

Heidegger was himself an avid reader of Russian literature and particularly of Dostoevsky. He had a framed picture of the writer on his desk and included him in a short-list of authors who influenced his work in the early twentieth century.<sup>13</sup> While many scholars see traces of Rilke and Jaspers in his existential philosophy, Heidegger himself mentions only Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* in his magnum opus *Sein und Zeit (Being and Time, 1929)*, referencing the novella in a footnote and arguing that Tolstoy's story accurately describes the phenomenon of having someone die.<sup>14</sup> Alan Pratt argues that “Clearly Tolstoy's novella made a lasting

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<sup>13</sup> Ulrich Schmid, “Heidegger and Dostoevsky: Philosophy and Politics,” *Dostoevsky Studies* 15 (2011): 37.

<sup>14</sup> William Irwin, “Death by Inauthenticity: Heidegger's Debt to Ivan Il'ich's Fall,” *Tolstoy Studies Journal* 25 (2013): 15.



impression on Heidegger because in it he could find dramatically illustrated most of the characteristic behaviors and evasive attitudes uncovered in his own phenomenology on death.”<sup>15</sup>

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger outlines the parameters of what it means to Be, to exist, to live, and to experience human life, arguing that humans are different from other beings in that they are acutely aware of the significance of their existence, which necessarily ends in death. To die is to cease to exist, and as he explains in his essay “What is Metaphysics” (1929), “the end of the world—is death. The ‘end’ that belongs to existence limits and defines the whole of Existence.”<sup>16</sup> For the individual, which for matters of simplicity is what Heidegger refers to as Dasein (in German literally meaning *being there*), the knowledge that human life necessarily ends in death and in the annihilation of Being is inherently traumatic and terrifying.<sup>17</sup> This horror inspires an overwhelming sense of Anxiety, which catapults Dasein away from Authenticity (in which it is aware of the truth that “I am a mortal being that must die”) into the mode of Inauthenticity, where it is distracted from this same terrifying truth. Heidegger outlines two modes of existence that speak to this dilemma: the Authentic mode (in which the individual is aware of the certainty of death, and more particularly, that they must and will die one day), and the Inauthentic mode (in which the individual shirks from the certainty of death and distracts itself with other thoughts, actions, and preoccupations). To be Authentic is to accept our finitude, mortality, and individuality, which involves taking ownership of our choices and actions and recognizing that we are ultimately responsible for creating meaning and purpose in our lives.

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<sup>15</sup> Alan Pratt, “A Note on Heidegger’s Death Analytic” in *The Elemental Dialectic of Light and Darkness: The Passions of the Soul in the Onto-Poiesis of Life*, ed. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (Berlin: Springer Nature, 1992), 297.

<sup>16</sup> Martin Heidegger, *What is Metaphysics?* trans. Siavash Jamadi (Manilla: Phoenix Publishing, 2014).

<sup>17</sup> It is important to mention that in Heidegger’s formulation, the individual does not equal Dasein but for the sake of my argument, I am reducing it to that. What Dasein actually refers to is the entity that observes the world, and the unique state of being that the individual occupies. Dasein is distinguished from all other beings on Earth in that it is concerned about its being, and knows that it knows and therefore wants to know the why and the how (Heidegger’s reinterpretation of Descartes’ *I think, therefore I am*, in Dasein, becomes *I am, therefore, I must be*).

To be Dasein is to be perpetually caught in the tension between internalizing the certainty of death and trying one's utmost to escape this inevitability. For the individual who is born into a certain time, place, and milieu (and who is thus characterized by their *thrownness* into the world), life is determined by the choices they make, most of which are unconscious. The individual, then, defines their life continuously through certain choices, and in doing so, can observe and reflect upon itself. And in reflecting upon itself, Dasein cannot escape indefinitely from the truth that all will end in death. Heidegger defines this as the determining quality of Dasein—or in other words, Dasein is characterized by its *being-towards-death*. Death, then, is the end of the road, the conclusion we all run from but must one day inevitably face.

The traumatic nature of confronting death inspires unbearable Anxiety within Dasein. The terrifying truth that one must experience one's own death (in other words, no one can die for you), Heidegger reminds us, is what makes this individuating nature of death all the more terrifying. He argues that Dasein is “always dying already. It is in Being-towards-its-end. And it hides this Fact from itself by recoinng “death” as just a “case of death” in Others.”<sup>18</sup> Here we can recall the opening scene of Tolstoy's *Death of Ivan Ilyich*, where upon hearing of his death, the deceased Ivan Ilyich's closest friends think about “the speculation this death prompted in each of them about transfers and the possible changes at work which might ensue from the death, the very fact of the death of a close acquaintance prompted in all who had learnt of it a feeling, as always, of joy that it was he who had died, not I.”<sup>19</sup>

Heidegger argues that the thought of death is almost always associated with Anxiety, in that confronting the certainty of death for Dasein is inherently traumatic and terrifying. On the

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<sup>18</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1962), 298.

<sup>19</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, trans. Ian Dreiblat (Brooklyn: Melville Publishing House, 2008), 4.

one hand, Dasein understands that its existence is defined by its *being-towards-death*, yet this fundamental truth and the awareness of this truth is often “covered over,” pushed away to the back of one’s mind, or sometimes even conveniently forgotten. This escape from the traumatic truth is what Heidegger refers to as *fleeing*. Our fear of death allows us, then, to retreat to the Inauthentic mode, best characterized by “the They” (*das Man*), which is understood as “everydayness”—the realm of the mundane, the familiar, and the known—that provides distraction from the certainty of our deaths. The They can also be understood as the greater human community that, for the most part, is complicit in denying death and seeing it as shameful, as a failure, and as a truth too horrible to accept. It is important to note, however, that in Heidegger’s formulation, Authentic and Inauthentic states are morally neutral: it is not “good” to be Authentic or “bad” to be Inauthentic—rather, these states describe one’s existential orientation and their current internalizing of the fact that Dasein’s existence will end in death.

In Heidegger’s view, thinking about death and confronting its traumatic nature, especially in the manner as it is thought of by the They, is seen as a “cowardly fear, a sign of insecurity on the part of Dasein, and a somber way of fleeing from the world. The ‘They’ does not permit us the courage for anxiety in the face of death.”<sup>20</sup> This Anxiety is not directed towards some specific object, but is rather a mood that Dasein finds-itself-in. Thus, as a mood, anxiety ‘opens up’ the ‘world’ to Dasein as a place where it no longer feels at home, which results in Dasein seeing its world as terrifying, unintelligible, and foreign. Here we remember Frank’s loss of destination and map analogy. Through Anxiety, the possibility (nay, distant certainty) of Dasein not being-in-the-world (absent from the world through death) is revealed to Dasein. In other

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<sup>20</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 298.

words, death inspires a feeling of Anxiety, and this Anxiety allows us as individuals to find ourselves face to face with the “nothingness” of death.

However, these moments of Anxiety—despite the terror they inspire—hold the key to experiencing what Heidegger calls ‘Authentic’ moments. Confronting death (and in turn experiencing Anxiety) is the “factual occasion for Dasein’s first paying attention to death at all”<sup>21</sup> This, for Heidegger, is the first step towards Authenticity. Through Anxiety, Dasein can experience what Heidegger refers to as “the Call.” For Heidegger, the Call is a call of conscience, in which Dasein’s Self is summoned from its “lostness in the They,” from the Inauthentic mode.<sup>22</sup> The Call “sounds” like an external caller, like an alien voice, to Dasein—yet it is really Dasein itself calling itself out of its Inauthentic mode, calling itself back to mortality. Heidegger asserts that the Call “asserts nothing, gives no information about world-events, has nothing to tell. [The call] calls forth Dasein into its ownmost possibilities, as it summons to its ownmost *potentiality-for-Being- its-Self*.”<sup>23</sup>

Thus, the disclosure of Authentic Being for Dasein occurs solely in the instance when it confronts the facticity of its own mortality and finitude by accepting that Dasein is inescapably on the path towards its own death. Indeed, “in such Being-towards-its-end, Dasein exists in a way which is authentically whole as that entity which can be when ‘thrown into death.’”<sup>24</sup> For terminally ill patients, this confrontation with their own deaths is intensified—while many healthy people transition between Inauthentic and Authentic moments throughout their lives, terminally ill patients are forced to stare their deaths in the face in a much more acute way. This, as this analysis has attempted to show, causes intense Anxiety. Coupled with often painful

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 301.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 318.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 378.

symptoms and disorienting and rapidly shifting moods, this phase of end-of-life is often traumatic and emotionally overwhelming for patients.

Even though Heidegger lived and wrote on *being-towards-death* many years after Turgenev, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy had died, his framework is nevertheless helpful for understanding the philosophical undertones of these writers' works. As we shall see, Heidegger's formulation of the one's existential relationship to one's own death is a theme that emerges in these writers' understandings of death. Turgenev anticipates the idea of Anxiety at *being-towards-death* in his short story "Поездка в полесье" (Journey into Poles'e, 1857) and his novel *Отцы и дети* (*Fathers and Sons*, 1862); Tolstoy similarly delves into the feeling of Anxiety and the seductive pull of the They in denying death, and attempts to discover whether there is a "good" way to experience Authentic moments; and Dostoevsky's portrayal of Ippolit's fear of death and his insistence on disappearing into the world of They also aligns with Heidegger's discussion of Anxiety and Inauthenticity.

Heidegger's ideas are complicated when transposed into the Soviet context: it can be argued that the entire Soviet enterprise was rooted in the Inauthentic They, in denying the idea and reality of death in virtually every sector (literature, medicine, philosophy, science). Solzhenitsyn's doctor characters in *Cancer Ward* reinforce this denial of death by refusing to disclose terminal diagnoses to their patients and by aggressively treating disease—much to many characters' physical and psychological detriment—and refusing to hear any word in protest to their prescribed methods. Yet the characters who find themselves in cancer ward no. 13 are nevertheless forced to reexamine their life choices through their Anxiety and move into an Authentic state. Ulitskaya's dying protagonist Alik dies in the United States where death is just as vehemently feared, yet he is the only character in Russian literature who is not overwhelmed

by Anxiety at his approaching death. He resides in the Authentic mode but does so peacefully and in full acceptance of his situation, and thus Ulitskaya presents a dying process that is ultimately life-affirming as opposed to terrifying and morose.

To sum up, a dying patient must move from the Inauthentic mode of denying the certainty of their death through Anxiety into the Authentic mode, where the truth of oneself as a dying being becomes crystallized. Through this move, the dying patient confronts certain existential and moral truths that have the potential to reconfigure their understanding of their lives and purpose; the doctor, particularly the doctor-turned-patient, must confront these existential truths in the state of Anxiety in an arguably more acute way, for the doctor's mission in staving off death at any cost roots them in the Inauthentic mode. In challenging their internalized values of death as a failure, doctors must essentially rework their entire framework regarding life and death. To extend this argument, caregivers for terminally ill patients must confront their own deaths by taking care of their dying loved ones—in experiencing the death of another (what Heidegger calls “being-there-alongside”), the caregiver must tolerate the Anxiety that being so intimately close to death inspires.<sup>25</sup> Unlike the doctor who can discharge the patient from their care, the caregiver who takes on the responsibility of attending to the needs of the dying patient is intimately immersed in the end-of-life experience. After the patient dies, the caregiver lives on, and the experience of witnessing the death of another forces the caregiver into an acute Authentic state. I connect Heidegger's existential ideas to patients, doctors, and caregivers cursorily here, but I explicate them further in each chapter.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 282.

## Why Literature?

The period of end of life has been discussed from many angles—medical, sociological, anthropological, philosophical, and narratological. I argue that narrative in the form of literature—and fiction in particular—is an especially useful lens through which to explore the experience of dying. While there is much to be gained by studying historical documents relating to illness and by reading non-fiction or memoir accounts of dying, fiction allows for the use of metaphor and other forms of representation that give voice to specific experiences that cannot be adequately explained by use of facts and statistics. The literary treatment of dying also contributes to the philosophical areas of ethics and metaphysics. To highlight this philosophical and psychological depth, I employ Heidegger’s phenomenological concepts to frame my analysis, in which he describes what it means *to be* (in other words, to exist as a human being in our shared experiential world), the reality of one day *not-being* (death), and the implications that come at confronting *not-being* (confronting one’s mortality).

Philosopher Martha Nussbaum, who has written extensively on the importance of fiction in understanding philosophical problems, argues that literature allows the reader to enter credible worlds that they otherwise would not experience. Nussbaum argues that “our experience is, without fiction, too confined and too parochial. Literature extends our life experience, making us reflect and feel about what might otherwise be too distant for feeling.”<sup>26</sup> She continues, “novel reading places us in a position that is both like and unlike the position we occupy in life: like, in that we are emotionally involved with the characters, active with them, and aware of our incompleteness; unlike, in that we are free of certain sources of distortion that infrequently impede our real-life deliberations.”<sup>27</sup> In reading and engaging with fiction, then, one exercises

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<sup>26</sup> Martha Nussbaum, “Introduction” in *Love’s Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 48.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

the ability to empathize and to enter the world of a character, and in doing so, expands one's own understanding and worldview. John Gibson in his article "Reading for Life: Why Do Philosophers Read Literature?" extends Nussbaum's argument and asserts that literature is read not only for understanding others but also for understanding life, in that literary content is both thoroughly fictive while at the same time capable of revealing reality. He asserts that literature offers "conceptions, stances, and perspectives [and] when we read, we are drawn into these perspectives, we think from within them."<sup>28</sup>

Literature, then, expands the reader's experience into areas that are emotionally fraught and philosophically confusing, particularly when it comes to the experience of dying from terminal illness and the physical and emotional pain that accompanies it. As Elaine Scarry argues in her seminal book *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (1985), pain inherently destroys language, and while she refers specifically to physical pain, her argument can also be extended to emotional and psychological pain. Scarry encapsulates this argument by referring to pain's inability to be expressed except through pre-language (groans, shouts, cries) or through literary language (through similes and metaphors, for example: the pain in my arm is like a burning fire, or in "as if" structures, such as: I feel as if my head were going to explode). Furthermore, Scarry connects pain to imagination and asserts that imagination is pain's antithesis: while pain is objectless and *destructive*, imagination is objectless but *constructive*. Thus, Scarry argues that human creation is a product of the intentional relation between imagining and pain, in that through imagination, pain can be reformed, refashioned, reconfigured. Literature and specifically fiction, by definition, is an exercise in imagination. By engaging with works of fiction that center on the experience of dying, the writer gives voice to a

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<sup>28</sup> John Gibson, "Reading for Life" in *The Literary Wittgenstein*, ed. John Gibson and Wolfgang Huemer (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 111.



specific existential pain that is otherwise impossible to express, and the reader can receive it and explore the multi-faceted experience of confronting one's death. As Arthur Frank puts it, "Storytelling is for another just as much as it is for oneself. In the reciprocity that is storytelling, the teller offers [themselves] as guide to the other's self-formation."<sup>29</sup>

### Why Realism?

In the nineteenth century, the treatment of end of life and the experience of dying in literature was strongly tied to the style and worldview of Realism, which predominated as the artistic and literary style of Russian cultural output in the mid- and late-nineteenth century. In describing the overall mood that characterized late nineteenth-century Europe, German scholar Max Nordau argues in his book *Degeneration* (1892) that the prevailing mood of the times could be understood by appealing to metaphors of death and rebirth, particularly the

despair of the dying man, who feels himself dying by inches in the midst of an eternally living nature blooming insolently forever...is the mortification of the exhausted and impotent refugee from a Florentine plague, seeking in an enchanted garden the experiences of a Decameron, but striving in vain to snatch one more pleasure of sense from the uncertain hour.<sup>30</sup>

In their analysis of *fin-de-siecle* spiritual malaise and anxiety, Kokobobo and Bowers remark that Nordau's description seems "located in the tension between the feeling of death and the desire for life...[in] the despairing quest met with indifference and the inevitability of one's own decay."<sup>31</sup> Within the Russian context, this description is particularly relevant—for I contend that

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<sup>29</sup> Arthur Frank, *Wounded Storyteller* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 17.

<sup>30</sup> Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 3. This edition's text is reprinted from an English translation (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1895); neither version specifies the translator.

<sup>31</sup> Katherine Bowers and Ani Kokobobo (eds), "Introduction" in *Russian Writers and the fin-de-siècle* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015): 2.

Russian Realist writers of the nineteenth century were preoccupied with ideas of sickness, dying, and death.

While scholars often debate which qualities define Russian Realism, there is relative agreement on the movement's goals in portraying as accurately as possible the picture of modern society with all its problems, attitudes, and ideals. Roman Jakobson argues that Russian Realism "aims at conveying reality as closely as possible and strives for maximum verisimilitude" and in doing so, upholds a materialist worldview which allows for the exploration of various philosophical positions.<sup>32</sup> Another hallmark of Russian Realism is the author's emphasis on character and atmosphere rather than on plot and action, with particular focus on illuminating socio-economic issues (such as poverty and the decline of the gentry), political issues (the abolition of serfdom and social reforms), and the exploration of the human condition (proto-existentialist debates and questioning established religious dogma). I argue that another focus of Realism that deserves more sustained attention in scholarly debates is the focus on the human body, especially as it is affected by sickness. Furthermore, I assert that the Realist focus on the experience of illness, particularly terminal illness, shaped the philosophical discourse surrounding death and dying that served as a foundation of existentialist and phenomenological thought in the twentieth century.

Many major writers in the nineteenth century questioned the doctrine of the Russian Orthodox Church, and with it, the belief in life after death and a transcendent paradise. This skepticism was likely one of the driving forces behind the mortal terror and fear of death that marks much of the literature from this period. Bowers argues that this loss of faith in established religious dogma led to a broader cultural impetus to understand death and its metaphysical

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<sup>32</sup> Roman Jakobson, "On Realism and Art" in *Language and Literature*, ed. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), 20.

properties, for example, questioning whether an afterlife exists, and if it does, whether divine judgment awaits us after death.<sup>33</sup> According to Bowers, Russian Realist writers tap into the idea of death as a collective experience.<sup>34</sup> While this assertion is true for some Realist writers (such as Dostoevsky), for others (such as Turgenev and Tolstoy), dying was understood as an inherently individual experience. This understanding of death as individuating and isolating strengthens the fear and dread that marks many of the dying protagonists' final days in Realist fictional works.

While Realism as a style refers to works written in the nineteenth century, the goal of portraying reality is evident in works written in the twentieth century as well. If the cultural and medical objective in nineteenth century Russia was to understand death and to find a spiritual and existential solution to its inevitability, in the twentieth century death was seen as something to be overcome at any cost. With the Bolshevik Revolution in 1918 came the “official” end of the social pessimism and projected doom that gripped the nation for more than three decades. From the ashes of Decadent defeatism and depression rose an active conviction—to quote Irina Masing-Delic in her monograph *Abolishing Death: A Salvation Myth in Twentieth-Century Russian Literature* (1992)—“that victorious communism would overcome the dragon of death together with all the monsters it had already conquered, such as ‘the reptile of capitalism.’”<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, the idea of overcoming death was tied to the Soviet goal of humans conquering nature by harnessing machines and technology. Thus, any religious or metaphysical ideas of immortality were replaced with scientific and material ones. With dying seen as antithetical to Soviet positivist philosophy, heroic efforts were made to halt death at any cost in the first

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 182.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Irina Masing-Delic, *Abolishing Death: A Salvation Myth of Russian Twentieth-Century Literature* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1992), 9.

decades of the Soviet Union—the most famous example being Bogdanov’s fatal blood transfusions.<sup>36</sup>

As Masing-Delic shows, Soviet ideology placed extravagant hope in overcoming mortality, but this idea was not centered in hope of individual immortality (for example, one person living forever), but rather in the immortality of the collective. Consequently, any idea of individualism was seen as a vestige of bourgeois-capitalist thinking and was rejected outright by both Lenin and Stalin’s Soviet apparatus. For early Soviet thinkers, the idea of the “self” was itself fundamentally flawed: the self was seen as a philosophical and metaphysical category that had no practical (i.e. productive) application. Thus, the idea of the self as it is tied to individualism was erased and replaced with another: the human was no longer considered to be an individual, but was instead considered to be a member of a greater collective, an indiscriminate “little cog of a great state mechanism” (to paraphrase Stalin’s words).<sup>37</sup> Mikhail Geller argues that the masterminds of the October Revolution knew that their dreams of constructing a communist utopia could only be realized with the creation of a new type of person-citizen. This new type of person-citizen (often referred to as the Soviet Man and Woman) was constructed with one goal in mind: to develop an idea of the self as inherently social, as an inextricable member of the collective, as an “instrument for the building of the New World.”<sup>38</sup>

In the context of my discussion on death and dying, this Bolshevnik project of reforming ideas of the self exerted a profound influence on cultural and social ideas of illness in Soviet

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<sup>36</sup> Aleksandr Bogdanov (1873–1928) was a Bolshevnik revolutionary, science-fiction writer, physician, and philosopher who pioneered Soviet efforts to achieve immortality, eternal youth, and rejuvenation. He started blood transfusion experiments in 1924 as a method to achieve immortality and successfully underwent eleven transfusions before dying from blood infected with tuberculosis and malaria.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Slava Gerovitch, “‘New Soviet Man’ Inside Machine: Human Engineering, Spacecraft Design, and the Construction of Communism,” *Osiris* 22, no. 1 (2007): 139.

<sup>38</sup> Mikhail Geller, *Cogs in the Soviet Wheel: The Making of the Soviet Man* (London: Collins Harvill Press, 1988), 28.

Russia.<sup>39</sup> For one, the idea of the Soviet Man and Woman as a primarily productive entity established a dichotomy between those who were healthy and could work, and those who were unhealthy and could not.<sup>40</sup> In tracing the progression of Soviet medical history (and with it, biomedical ethics), occupational therapy was singled out as the most productive and preferred form of treatment, as it allowed the sick person to return to work as quickly as possible.<sup>41</sup> Conversely, any person who could not live up to the standards of the ideal citizen (in that they were unable to heal and contribute towards the collective) was isolated—and in many ways, banished—from healthy society. Michel Foucault discusses a similar phenomenon in *Birth of the Clinic*, particularly the separation and segregation of medicine from the eighteenth century to the twentieth, in which sick people (and here he includes those with mental illness as well as physical ailments) were placed in asylums and clinics as a way of separating them from their healthy counterparts.

The Realist agenda of philosophically and scientifically understanding the self and the subsequent Soviet project of refashioning the individual into a social organism shaped the discourse about the body, illness, and death in Russian literature. Since the 1980s, narratives dealing with illness and dying have been analyzed and interpreted as a distinct subgenre of literature under the umbrella of medical humanities. Identifying “illness narratives” (including those of physicians and caregivers as well as ill persons) within classic Russian literature highlights how significant life-experiences of terminal illness play a central role in Russian literary storytelling of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Across the span of two centuries

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<sup>39</sup> For more information on the problem of individualism as it pertains to Marxist-Leninist ideology, see: Gary C. Shaw, “Socialist Individualism,” *Studies in Soviet Thought* 21, no. 4 (1980): 331–339.

<sup>40</sup> Сергей Мохов, *История смерти: как мы боремся и принимаем* (Москва: Индивидуум, 2020), 93.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

marked by major sociocultural and political change, these narratives chart shifting understandings among Russians of good and bad deaths.

### The Medical Humanities and Illness Narratives

In the burgeoning field of medical humanities, a discussion of a good death from the literary perspective sheds light on how literature is used as a tool to discuss issues that have been generally ignored in medicine, particularly the experience of the dying patient. The dying person reminds us of our own mortality and of the limits of medicine and medical technology. However, denying and concealing the experience of the dying person from public discourse has further isolated terminally ill patients from the world of their healthy counterparts, pushing them further into despair and despondency. In analyzing fictional narratives of illness, I hope to bring the experience of living with and dying from terminal illness to the forefront of bioethics and medicine.

Although interest in the intersection of medicine and literature has been revived in the last fifty years, the connection between the two has been established since (at least) the days of Homer. As Arthur Frank explains in his seminal work *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics*, the ill person, in communicating their experiences, becomes the narrator of their own story, a shift that allows for the sick person to turn from a passive “victim” of their disease into an active protagonist in their own life story.<sup>42</sup> Frank asserts that “the ill person who turns the illness into story transforms fate into experience; the disease that sets the body apart from others becomes, in the story, the common bond of suffering that joins bodies in their shared vulnerability.”<sup>43</sup> Frank shows that constructing an illness narrative allows the sick person to take

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<sup>42</sup> Arthur Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, xi.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

back a sense of agency that has been lost in the experience of illness. He continues, “Seriously ill people are wounded not just in body but in voice. They need to become storytellers in order to recover the voices that illness and treatment often take away... Sooner or later, everyone [becomes] a wounded storyteller,” echoing Susan Sontag’s famous words: “Illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick.”<sup>44</sup>

Frank is one of many theorists, scholars, and medical professionals who have joined the contemporary discussion of what scholars in the medical humanities call *illness narratives*. Coined by medical anthropologist Arthur Kleinman in 1983, illness narratives are defined as a genre “wherein an illness and its effect on the patient’s life are told as an autobiographical or biographical account [that serve] as forms of meaning making.”<sup>45</sup> As the genre evolves, competing definitions of illness narratives continue to emerge. In describing the various theories of illness narratives that dominate the field of medical humanities, I show how fictional accounts of illness fit into the discussion.

In *The Wounded Storyteller*, Frank identifies the three types of narratives that storytellers use to structure and interpret stories as restitution, chaos, and quest, all which weave throughout most illness narratives at some point. Restitution is the story of hope: “I am sick now, but I will get better”—a reminder of health that is lost but is to be recovered, and which is told often to inspire courage in facing and living with illness. Chaos is the story of despair and restitution’s direct opposite: while restitution narratives imply a forward progression (“I will get better in the future”), chaos narratives are temporally disjointed. Frank refers to the chaos tale as the *anti-*

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid, xiii; Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1978), 3.

<sup>45</sup> Annie Le, Kara Miller, and Juliet McMullin, “From Particularities to Context: Redefining Our Thinking on Illness Narratives,” *AMA Journal of Ethics* 19, no. 3 (March 2017): 304.

*narrative* of “time without sequence, telling without mediation, and speaking about oneself without being able to reflect on oneself...these stories cannot be told but can only be lived.”<sup>46</sup> Essentially, the chaos narrative is a reconstructed story: the voice of the storyteller is recovered from shambles, yet chaos reinforces the belief that no one is in control (“there is no way out”), a feeling terminally ill patients are intimately familiar with. The last type of illness narrative that Frank identifies is the quest when the ill person meets suffering head on and transforms their illness experience into a journey or a quest. In the case of the terminally ill patient, framing their illness within the restitution narrative is no longer possible—their task, then, is reclaiming a voice from the depths of chaos and recasting it into a quest. For Russian writers, defining the objective of the quest forms the backbone of their fictional illness narratives: for the nineteenth-century writers, the quest is finding courage in the face of death, while for the twentieth-century writers, it is dying on one’s own terms.

Frank’s discussion of illness narratives in terms of plot, temporal structure, and metaphor extends Susan Sontag’s analysis of the words we use to understand illness and the concepts we use to construct these narratives. Sontag pays particular attention to the metaphors employed in speech and writing in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to discuss illness (for example, tuberculosis as a disease of the passions; cancer as a punishment or divine wrath; or disease in general as an expression of “weak will”) and the detrimental effects these metaphors have on patients experiencing the disease.<sup>47</sup>

Lars-Crister Hyden, a leading scholar on literature and medicine, takes a structural approach to illness narratives. He identifies the different forms it can take as, first, illness *as*

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<sup>46</sup> Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, 98.

<sup>47</sup> Sontag traces the origin of this idea back to Homer, who presents illness in *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad* as supernatural punishment, and she shows how this idea has been reinforced by religion as “God’s wrath” for moral failures.



narrative (in which the narrator, illness, and narration are melded into one) which is the most common, in that the illness is expressed and articulated through a narrative. The second form, narratives *about* illness, conveys knowledge and ideas about the sickness (oftentimes, by someone—be it a doctor or other medical professional—discussing the illness, along with its symptoms, history, and prognosis).<sup>48</sup> In *Medical Storyworlds: Health, Illness, and Bodies in Russian and European Literature at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (2021), Elena Fratto shows that this type of narrative (or medical narrative, as Frank calls it) is also a form of storytelling, in that the tools used to analyze literature (for example, plot construction, questions of authorship, narrative time, space, and perspective) are essential to the way medicine is understood and practiced. Fratto asserts that both patients and doctors engage in “plot-building” (“making meaningful totalities out of scattered events,” according to Ricoeur) as a diagnosis is discussed, communicated, and experienced both by the patient living with the disease and the doctor treating the disease. Furthermore, Fratto argues that literary texts are invaluable tools for understanding the otherwise opaque field of medicine in that “they undermine public and scientific narratives that seek to generalize about human bodies and human lives.”<sup>49</sup>

For the purposes of my dissertation, I focus on Hyden’s first form of illness narrative—illness *as* narrative. It is important to note that many illness narratives discussed by Frank and Hyden are written by the patients themselves. Anne Hunsaker Hawkins describes these kinds of illness narratives as *pathographies*, which function as forms of autobiography or biography that describe personal experiences of illness and treatment. She refers to a pathography as “our modern adventure story [in which]...the ill person is transported out of the familiar everyday world of into the realm of a body that no longer functions and into an institution as bizarre as

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<sup>48</sup> Lars-Christer Hyden, “Illness and Narrative,” *Sociology of Health and Illness* 19, no. 1 (1997): 53–54.

<sup>49</sup> Fratto, *Medical Storyworlds*, 3.

only a hospital can be.”<sup>50</sup> The case studies which I use as the basis of my analysis, however, are not purely autobiographical, although many of their authors drew from their own personal experiences of illness to inform their fictionalized accounts. For example, Turgenev “during his lifetime battled with a variety of ailments, such as abdominal pains, cholera [and]...cardiac disease,” and who, during the last period of his life, developed symptoms alternately attributed to gout, rheumatism, and lumbago, ultimately dying from spinal cancer in 1883.<sup>51</sup> Dostoevsky, famously living with epilepsy, died from a pulmonary hemorrhage, the symptoms which in many ways correspond to those of tuberculosis (a disease about which he wrote extensively and from which many of his characters perish). Chekhov also lived half his life with tuberculosis and died as a result of the disease at the young age of forty-two; Solzhenitsyn’s protagonist Oleg Kostoglotov of *Cancer Ward* is in many ways based on Solzhenitsyn himself—both the fictional character and his author suffered from advanced testicular cancer in their mid-thirties; and finally, Ulitskaya battled breast cancer, for which she underwent treatment in 2010 and is now in remission.<sup>52</sup>

My task in transposing these scholars’ discussions of illness narratives as they are written in autobiographical or memoir form into a discussion of fictional narratives is what Stella Bolaki calls “critical interloping.”<sup>53</sup> In the introduction to her work *Illness as Many Narratives*, she argues for a multidisciplinary approach to “explore illness within the field of the medical humanities [in order] to expand its scope and existing approaches, and to create a more inclusive

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<sup>50</sup> Anne Hunsaker Hawkins, *Reconstructing Illness: Studies in Pathography* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1999), xxiii.

<sup>51</sup> Wim P. Ceelan, Luc Michel, and David Creyten, “The Cancer Diagnosis, Surgery, and Cause of Death of Ivan Turgenev (1818-1883),” *Acta chirurgica Belgica* 115, no. 3: 242.

<sup>52</sup> Masha Gessen, “The Weight of Words: One of Russia’s Most Famous Writers Confronts the State,” *The New Yorker*, September 29, 2014; <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/10/06/weight-words#:~:text=Four%20years%20ago%2C%20Ulitskaya%20received,of%20them%20were%20as%20lucky>

<sup>53</sup> Stella Bolaki, *Illness as Many Narratives* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 13.

illness narrative canon; and at the same time modeling ways in which the arts and arts/media scholarship can enlarge their practices and critical approaches (for example on aesthetics, ethics, the body, disability and death) through more explicit dialogue with the critical medical humanities.”<sup>54</sup>

In analyzing fictional accounts of illness, one might wonder whether these accounts can accurately represent the experience of real illness. Can Tolstoy (who, as far as we know, never suffered from stomach cancer like his protagonist Ivan Ilyich) accurately describe the experience of facing sickness-unto-death?<sup>55</sup> Can Dostoevsky, who was never diagnosed with a terminal illness, verifiably represent the anxiety at the certainty of death from illness, as he attempts to do through the character of Ippolit in *The Idiot*? Can Ulitskaya realistically convey the experience of dying from an immobilizing disease when she herself lacks experiential knowledge of it? Does she know what it is like to slowly lose all motor function? Indeed, this question has been posed repeatedly in discussions of literature and medicine. I assert that, yes, these authors’ attempts to recreate such existential situations in their fictions are invaluable to understanding the experience of illness because they unflinchingly investigate real existential problems that many approaching the end of their lives struggle with but are unable to express. By using their gift for storytelling, these great writers allow their readers to inhabit perspectives that would otherwise be inaccessible to them; they allow for the possibility that a terminally ill patient finds solace and understanding in their words; and finally, they allow for us to address and reexamine issues in end-of-life ethics by encouraging and cultivating empathy.

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Elena Fratto argues in the affirmative, that Tolstoy’s “diaries reveal the extent to which the writer shared with his characters a fear of dying and an anxiety regarding the passage of time that challenged linguistic- literary description or formalization, and he attempted to tame and control that fear and anxiety by anchoring them to the page and capturing their contours.” (Fratto, *Medical Storyworlds*, 49).

## Historical Context

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Russia saw major socio-political, philosophical, and scientific changes. Instead of focusing my analysis on just one of these centuries (which contains in themselves troves of material), I include both to show a cultural and philosophical progression in thought about death and dying. While the major nineteenth century writers were captivated by the idea of death (literal and metaphorical aspects of death, for example, ideas of decay and degeneration), in the twentieth century, Soviet ideology declared death to be taboo, and so any discussion of death in literature and philosophy became in itself an act of rebellion. While many of the socio-political structures look completely different in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, ideologically the two time periods are connected in their pervasive skepticism of established religious dogma, which had informed ideas of death and dying in Russia for over a thousand years. When the certainty of an afterlife and the immortality of the soul is put into question, then the controversy of what comes after death becomes ever more pressing. In the face of nothingness after death—a position furthered by materialists in both centuries—the moral weight of our actions is also put into question.

In order to discuss the Russian literary treatment of death and dying, it is first important to review the historical context in which real deaths occurred. Russian mortality rates have been notoriously higher than those of other European and Asian countries for centuries.<sup>56</sup> Reasons for this finding range from alcoholism to poor living conditions (sometimes attributed to the harsh climate), to a higher prevalence of cardiac disease amongst the Russian population.<sup>57</sup> While a

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<sup>56</sup> For more information on this topic, see Michelle A. Parson, *Dying Unneeded: The Cultural Context of the Russian Morality Crisis* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2014), Catherine Merridale, *Night of Stone: Death and Memory in Russia* (New York: Viking Adult, 2001), and Л. А. Беляев и В. Н. Захаров (eds), *Жизнь и смерть в русской империи: новые открытия в области археологии и истории России XVIII–XIX вв* (Москва: Индрик, 2020).

<sup>57</sup> Albert Szymanski, “The Health Crisis in the USSR: An Exchange,” *New York Review of Books*, November 5, 1981, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1981/11/05/the-health-crisis-in-the-ussr-an-exchange/>.

comprehensive medical history of terminal illness in Russia has yet to be written, epidemiologists and anthropologists have compiled histories of individual diseases such as tuberculosis and cancer, and of epidemics such as cholera and polio.<sup>58</sup> It is important to note that there is a dearth of medical and scientific data on terminal illness in Russia.<sup>59</sup>

In presenting the history of what it is like to die in Russia, there are many aspects and dimensions to consider: the first and foremost is the actual experience of dying; the second is the practical and religious beliefs surrounding the process of dying and death, and how these beliefs reinforced certain practices in end-of-life care; and the third is how the idea of death and dying in general has changed over the course of 150 years. In this section, I summarize all three concerns, while acknowledging that such a topic deserves far more attention in contemporary research.

Terminal illness in Russian culture has been understood mostly in religious terms, namely, that an incurable disease was a manifestation God's divine wrath and that one's subsequent death as an expression of God's will, or as a result of being cursed by witches, sorcerers, or other nefarious other-worldly actors—this was a popular tenet of *dvoeverie*.<sup>60</sup> In treating illnesses, many Russians—mostly peasants but upper-class people as well—often sought

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<sup>58</sup> For more information on tuberculosis in Russia, see A. A. Ефременко, "История борьбы с туберкулёзом в дореволюционной России," *Проблемы туберкулёза*, no. 3 (1991): 75–76; for cholera, see Roderick E. McGrew, *Russia and the Cholera* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1965) and Frank Clemow, *The Cholera Epidemic of 1812 in the Russian Empire* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1893); for a general medical history in Russia, see Charlotte E. Henze, *Disease, Healthcare, and Government in Late Imperial Russia: Life and Death on the Volga 1823–1924* (Milton Park: Taylor & Francis, 2011) and Elisa M. Becker, *Medicine, Law, and the State in Imperial Russia* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2011).

<sup>59</sup> As Alain Blum and Irina Troitskaya show, it is impossible to present accurate data from the imperial times because the registration of mortality rates in the *Revizii* started only in the late eighteenth century—and many deaths were excluded from the official registry, namely those of infants and peasants not associated with upper-class households (Alain Blum and Irina Troitskaya, "Mortality in Russia During the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries: Local Assessments Based on the *Revizii*," *Population: An English Selection* 9 [1997]: 126). Furthermore, medical statistics from the Soviet Union are frequently called into question, as it was common practice to exaggerate success in the healthcare sector to prove superiority to western bourgeois countries. The purpose of healthcare statistics in the Soviet Union was not "fix or analyze the social reality in the country, but to establish a utopian view of it in the minds of contemporaries." (Sergei Zatravkin and Elena Vishlenkova, "Early Soviet Medicine: Statistical and Narrative Utopias," *Квартальный истории наук и техники* 64, no. 4 [2019]: 84).

<sup>60</sup> *Dvoeverie* is best translated as "double-faith," which is a common Russian practice that blends pagan elements within the Russian Orthodox belief system.

the help of spiritual healers. Healing was often based on natural medicine, shamanism, and spirituality (and this holds true to this day, particularly in rural Russian communities) and was often performed by a healer endowed with supernatural powers, such as *znakhar'*, *koldun*, and *volkhv*.<sup>61</sup> These healers were revered within their communities, and people turned to them to request help for a myriad of matters, such as healing ailments, banishing evil spirits, and reversing curses. This practice continued well into the Soviet period, even when healing outside the biomedical system was officially outlawed in 1923. Solzhenitsyn's Kostoglotov from *Cancer Ward* (which takes place in 1955), for example, seeks the aid of a *znakhar'* in procuring a mandrake root said to cure cancer.

Russians have historically distrusted their healthcare systems, particularly the representatives of it—namely, doctors. Since the eighteenth century, when Peter the Great invited the first official biomedical doctors from Europe, doctors were distrusted almost unanimously by the population because their methods were 'foreign,' invasive, and often-times unsuccessful. Indeed, many of the medical practices in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were based on Enlightenment ideas, such as reason, deduction, and empirical study. These practices naturally went against the overarching cultural and religious beliefs.

Doctors in Russia notoriously functioned as agents of the state, from the time of Peter the Great all the way through the Soviet times. Even with the implementation of the *zemstvo*, which included medical and sanitation services for mostly peasant populations and served as a form of decentralized governance, the antagonistic relationship between doctors and their patients

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<sup>61</sup> N.a., "Russia Boasts More Faith Healers than Real Physicians," *voanews.com*, June 21, 2011, <https://www.voanews.com/a/russia-boasts-more-faith-healers-than-real-physicians-124363134/170715.html>; W.F. Ryan shows in Russian popular folk literature of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a *volkhv* was indistinguishable from a medical doctor, but who had more "social, even political, significance" (W. F. Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight: An Historical Survey of Magic and Divination in Russia* [University Park: Penn State University Press, 1999], 71).

continued well into the twentieth century.<sup>62</sup> This distrust is reflected in the literary and cultural output, with writers, playwrights, and poets portraying doctors as buffoonish and helpless (Catherine II herself wrote an anti-doctoral polemic) or as strange and foreign, even demonic (as portrayed by Dostoevsky in *The Double* [Двойник, 1846]).<sup>63</sup> In the Romantic era, doctors were often linked to “mesmerists”—figures motivated by malevolent spirituality who hoodwink their subjects and subjugate them to their evil will.

While there were of course those who trusted doctors and sought their expertise, as is shown in Turgenev’s short story “A District Doctor” (“Уездный лекарь,” 1850), others continued to be skeptical. In *Anna Karenina*, for example, Kitty’s father oversees her medical examination and thinks that he, who “as a man who had seen something of life, and was neither a fool nor an invalid, [and] who had no faith in medicine...was furious at the whole farce.”<sup>64</sup> In a personal letter in 1876, Tolstoy professed that “I do not believe in either doctors or in medicine or in the fact that remedies made by people should in the slightest way alter the state of health.”<sup>65</sup> Evidently, Tolstoy also believed that one’s health was in God’s hands.

Mikhail Bulgakov, who fictionalized his experience of serving as a doctor to the local population in the early days of the Soviet Union doctor in *A Country Doctor’s Notebook* (*Записки юного врача*, 1924) also mocked patients’ distrust in their doctors. In the story “A

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<sup>62</sup> The *zemstvo* was an institution of local government established in 1864 with the aim of introducing measures of autonomy into regional governance. The medical arm of the *zemstvo* (which provided mostly-free medical care and was supported by local taxes) employed physicians who established a network of medical centers and hospitals. These physicians were responsible for controlling epidemics, providing vaccinations, and training other medical staff.

<sup>63</sup> Aleksei G. Bobrinskii, “Dnevnik Grafa Bobrinskogo, vedennyi v kadetskom korpuse i vo vremia puteshestviia po Rossii i za granitseiu,” *Russkii Arkhiv* 15, no. 10 (1877): 116–165; Ekaterina Neklyudova, “Under Doctors’ Eyes: Private Life in Russian Literature in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century,” PhD Diss, Stanford University (2012), 4.

<sup>64</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1946), 107. («Он, как поживший, не глупый и не больной человек, не верил в медицину и в душе злился на всю эту комедию, тем более что едва ли не он один вполне понимал причину болезни Кити» [Лев Толстой, *Анна Каренина* (Москва: «ЭКСМО-ПРЕСС», 1998), 119]).

<sup>65</sup> Fratto, *Medical Storyworlds*, 49.

Steel Windpipe” (“Стальное горло”), a mother and grandmother bring in their young daughter, dying from diphtheria. The doctor is incensed that they waited so long to seek medical attention, and their responses reveal their skepticism of the doctor and his medical practices. When the young doctor insists on an invasive surgery to save the young girl, “The mother looked at me as if I was mad and shielded the little girl from me with her arms, while the old woman started muttering again: ‘The idea! Don’t you let them cut her open! What—cut her throat?’”<sup>66</sup> Even well into the twentieth century, many Soviet citizens were either hesitant or outrightly refused to seek treatment from the Soviet healthcare apparatus: as Albert Szymanski shows, parents whose children died from pneumonia did not seek medical help until it was too late, with 22% of parents attempting to treat the illness themselves first.<sup>67</sup> It is important to note, however, that the antagonistic doctor-patient relationship went both ways: doctors viewed their patients as backwards and uninformed, further fueling the divide between those who were ill and those who were treating illness.

The tradition of doctors acting as agents of the state was strengthened in the Soviet context. By the 1930s, the entire medical landscape had changed: no longer were there private medical practices and home visits from doctors as had been the tradition in nineteenth-century Russia, but healthcare became one of the many arms of the Soviet apparatus that aimed to control Soviet bodies, minds, and behaviors. One’s health became the property of the state, in that health equaled capable workers which equaled productivity. As a result, dying was seen as a failure not only of the Soviet health system, but of the entire Soviet philosophical enterprise, so much so, that there were grand plans and efforts in the early twentieth century to render death

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<sup>66</sup> Mikhail Bulgakov, *A Country Doctor’s Notebook*, trans. Michael Glenny (Brooklyn: Melville House Publishing, 2013), 22.

<sup>67</sup> Albert Szymanski, “The Health Crisis in the USSR: An Exchange.”



obsolete by attempting to attain immortality. The Soviet healthcare structure left entire generations traumatized, mainly because of the tradition of reporting patients to the state for perceived treason, such as abortion (when it became illegal) and professing philosophy that deviated from Marxism-Leninism and by forcing invasive and aggressive treatment onto patients.<sup>68</sup> Additionally, hospitals were typically unsanitary, doctors were underpaid and overworked, and there existed a disproportionate number of patients to doctors across the country. Additionally, those who hoped to heal themselves in the old-fashioned “natural” way were barred from doing so, as this practice was categorically outlawed in the 1920s: those who sought such healing (as well as the shamans who worked with them) were arrested.<sup>69</sup>

Being ill and dying in Russia has historically occurred at home in the presence of family. The practice of dying at home, and the understanding that it is the preferable way to die, however, has not changed over the course of 150 years. While it is a more common practice in the West to die in hospitals, in Russia, terminally ill patients are typically discharged from the hospital to die at home, and family members take over the medical and caregiving responsibilities. Cultural anthropologist Sergei Mokhov argues that specialized care for the dying was virtually nonexistent in the Soviet Union.<sup>70</sup> In many cases, the terminally ill patient’s prognosis was rarely communicated to them, and as is still the practice in contemporary Russian healthcare, the diagnosis was most often communicated to family members or legal guardians.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Those who professed anti-Soviet ideologies were often imprisoned in Soviet hospitals and diagnosed with fake psychiatric conditions, such as sluggish schizophrenia—this became a common practice in which to control dissidents in the 1970s and 80s.

<sup>69</sup> Anu Korb, “Healers and Healing Skills in Ryzhkovo Vironian Community,” *Folklore* 140 (2010): 31

<sup>70</sup> “Специализированной помощи умирающим, в том числе онкологическим больным, в СССР не оказывали” (Сергей Мохов, *История смерти: как мы боремся и принимаем* [Москва: Individuum, 2020), 91.

<sup>71</sup> In a fact sheet comprised by the University of Washington Medical Center in 2007, contemporary medical personnel are still discouraged from discussing a terminal diagnosis with the Russian patient themselves: “Bad medical news is often shielded from the patient by the family in the belief that telling the patient will only make the patient’s condition worse.”

This tradition is already evident in the works of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. In *Anna Karenina*, Nikolai Levin's doctor confirms his patient's terminal diagnosis only to his brother. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Markel's diagnosis is communicated to his mother who in turn unsuccessfully hides the reality from her dying son. To discuss a terminal prognosis with a patient was (and still is) considered to be cruel and distressing to the patient—instead, doctors conceal the truth from their patient in the hopes of reassuring them. In Solzhenitsyn's *Cancer Ward*, the doctor Vera Gangart “lie[s] very persuasively and animatedly” to one of her dying patients about his prognosis, knowing “there was nothing she could do to help.”<sup>72</sup> Thus, treatments for terminally ill patients were often purely superficial and aimed at managing certain symptoms, like incontinence, insomnia, or side-effects from other medications. However, this treatment was far from palliative. Pain management was not a priority for Soviet doctors, although painkillers were still prescribed when all other treatment options failed.<sup>73</sup>

When terminally ill patients are discharged from the hospital, the burden of care falls on their family members and/or friends who assume responsibility for the dying person's medical, physical, and emotional care. Historically, the responsibilities and roles of caregiving have fallen primarily to women in Russia. Before the 1917 Revolution, healers (unlicensed health practitioners) in many parts of rural Russia were primarily women. While the first hospices and palliative care centers for terminally ill patients in Russia were established before the October Revolution, after the Bolsheviks came to power many centers were closed because of their connection to religious organizations. In 1910 almost 3,500 nurses (called Sisters of Mercy, serving under the umbrella of the Church and other religious organizations) worked in the capacity of hospice-attendants, not just as caregivers for dying soldiers on the battlefield, but for

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<sup>72</sup> Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *Cancer Ward* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1991), 373.

<sup>73</sup> Мохов, *История смерти*, 93.

the common folk as well.<sup>74</sup> By 1930, however, the idea of resource assistance from one person to another was considered to be “philanthropy,” which for Soviet officials doubled as a remnant of bourgeois tradition, and so the practice of palliative assistance towards dying patients virtually disappeared for the rest of the Soviet Union’s duration. The first hospice in the Russian Federation was opened in St. Petersburg in 1990 by the efforts of Viktor Zorza. Since then, there has been an increase in establishing hospices as an alternative to dying at home.<sup>75</sup> However, as Russian fiction relating to end of life shows, it is evident that the tradition of dying at home in the presence of family and friends is seen as the ideal way to depart from this world, for family members are understood as better able to meet the needs and demands of the dying person than a doctor or other medical professional. Ultimately, I uphold the caregiver as the hero in my research, for they are instrumental in providing a good death for the dying patient.

### Chapter Summary

In “The Final Chapter: Terminal Illness in Russian Literature 1850—1999,” I analyze narratives of terminal illness through the lens of fiction in order to understand how Russian authors illuminate this challenging period of end of life. I discuss what it is like to face death from the perspective of the dying patient, the physician who attends to the dying person, and the caregiver who assumes responsibility for the wellbeing of the dying person (typically, once they are discharged from the hospital). While there are many fictional and poetic accounts in Russian literature that use death and dying as metaphors for religious transcendence, I focus on works of

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 83.

<sup>75</sup> In 2018, the Russian Ministry of Health has allocated significant annual funding (60 million euros) towards hospice and palliative care services across the country ([https://ehospice.com/international\\_posts/new-government-action-plan-to-improve-palliative-care-in-russia/#:~:text=The%20first%20hospices%20in%20Russia,the%20support%20of%20local%20governors](https://ehospice.com/international_posts/new-government-action-plan-to-improve-palliative-care-in-russia/#:~:text=The%20first%20hospices%20in%20Russia,the%20support%20of%20local%20governors))

critical realism in which dying is treated as a physical process and period of life with emotional, psychological, and spiritual implications. In illuminating the intricacies of the end-of-life period through their art, Russian writers offer invaluable insight into the experience of being terminally ill that has real-world implications.

“The Final Chapter” has four main chapters organized into two parts. In the first part—“The Dying”—I explore the perspective of the dying patient, in which I identify the question preoccupying writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as “is there such a thing as a ‘good’ or ideal death, and if so, how can one achieve it?” In chapter 1 “Sickness-unto-death: Discourses of Illness from Nineteenth Century Patients’ Perspectives,” I focus on experiences of dying patients in nineteenth-century Russian literature and trace the evolution of the discourse about end of life across the works of Turgenev, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky. While each of these writers identify the fear of death as the main obstacle to overcome in order to achieve a good death, they differ in their definitions of what a good death is, and therefore propose different solutions to achieve it. My aim in this chapter is to deduce what exactly each writer considers to be a good death and to trace the evolution of their thoughts on this matter across their oeuvre.

In chapter 2 “Dying on Your Own Terms: Discourses of Illness from Twentieth Century Patients’ Perspectives,” I continue my analysis of Russian writers’ quest of achieving a good death into the twentieth century, where I argue that the task of the dying character becomes less about overcoming their fear of death and more about asserting their self-determination and honoring their dignity. Within the Soviet political context where individual choice is compromised in favor of the collective, deciding and advocating for one’s wishes at the end of life becomes of paramount importance. In *Cancer Ward*, Solzhenitsyn questions what can be considered a good death: an earlier death (that comes from rejecting aggressive but lifesaving

treatment), or a death far into a future that tail-ends an empty and meaningless life (rendered so by life-saving treatment). In other words, Solzhenitsyn defends the need for autonomy and self-determination in end-of-life decision making—a practice which is undermined in the Soviet medical context. In her novella *The Funeral Party*, Ulitskaya explores the idea of death as an event to be accepted, even welcomed, and paints the process of dying as in its own way beautiful and life-affirming.

In part II “The Living,” I investigate the perspectives of the doctor and caregiver who continue to live on after the terminally ill patient dies. In the third chapter “The Doctor’s Dilemma,” I investigate the perspective of the physician, which has arguably driven the bioethical and medical debates that surround the end-of-life experience. Tasked with the often-impossible task of preventing death at any cost (often disguised under the premise of “healing” and ‘doing no harm’), the physician carries a tremendous burden, both professionally and personally. A patient’s death is often considered a failure on the part of the physician, as the dead characters in “Bobok” imply. And yet, to find a balance between accepting death and preventing it remains the main task of many doctor characters in Russian literature. While detailed accounts of treating a patient until death are absent from Russian literature (which makes sense, considering my earlier claim that terminally ill patients are “lost causes” in the eyes of biomedicine), what is present is the figure of the doctor-turned-patient who must recalibrate their understanding of death as they confront their own impending ends. Chekhov and Solzhenitsyn explore the doctor-turned-patient character in detail and show the professional contradictions and existential struggles inherent in the experience of being a physician.

In the fourth chapter “Mediating Death: Caregivers’ Perspectives,” I present the perspective of the caregiver, which I argue is the most illuminating perspective in end-of-life

experiences and one that has been almost completely overlooked. I begin my analysis with a stark exploration of the caregiver archetype in Tolstoy's fiction, arguing that he is the first writer in Russian literature to cast light upon the caregiver's actions as instrumental to providing dying characters with a good death. I then compare his understanding of the caregiver with Ulitskaya's, who both complements and challenges Tolstoy's ideas in her representation of caregivers in her novella *The Funeral Party*. By comparing caregiver characters in the works of Tolstoy in the nineteenth century and Ulitskaya in the twentieth, I investigate how each author illustrates the caregiver figure, what qualities they consider to be inherent in a successful caregiver, and the indispensable role the caregiver plays in the physical, psychological, and spiritual processes of the dying patient.

My dissertation is both formal and philosophical as I question how Russian writers conceptualize this experience of living-with and dying-from terminal illness. From a structural point of view, I analyze the leading poetic devices and narrative structures they use in describing the experience of terminal illness. To gain insight into the experiences of dying, I explore the various conceptions of 'good' and 'bad' deaths and their philosophical underpinnings as these concepts are questioned and challenged by Russian writers across two centuries.

Part I:

“The Dying”:  
Patients at the End of Life

## Part I Summary

### “The Dying:” Patients’ Perspectives of Terminal Illness and *Being-Towards-Death*

With only a few weeks left to live, Ippolit Terentyev of Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot* laments the fact that his young life is cut so unceremoniously short by terminal illness and bemoans “being sentenced to death.”<sup>76</sup> Like many other characters in Russian literature who are forced to confront their mortality while battling incurable illness, Ippolit is terrified of death and struggles with despondency and despair as he draws closer and closer to his end. In Russian literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, writers underscore the existential significance that can be gleaned from addressing one’s mortality by exploring the existential and liminal period of end of life. In illustrating the thoughts, emotions, and spiritual struggles inherent in the act of dying, Russian Realist writers such as Turgenev, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Solzhenitsyn, and Ulitskaya show how the enormous and overwhelming task of confronting oneself, one’s beliefs, and one’s actions allows one to discover existential meaning and moral truth in the months, weeks, days, and moments leading up to death. In trying to capture the essence of life, one must first understand death. The paradox of this situation, however, is that death itself is experientially impossible to understand: the closest we can come to death is in the dying process that functions as a transition period from life to death. It is thus from the period of end of life that we must extract wisdom.

Russian literature is rich with end-of-life scenes in which characters struggle with this vital task. While *death* is universal—a fate all of us will one day face—Russian writers show that *dying* is an individual experience that is unique and particular to each person. Just as no two lives are lived the same way, no two deaths are experienced the same way. And yet, while various dying characters come to different conclusions about the “right” way to live, many of them are

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<sup>76</sup> Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 356.



united by their fear of death. This fear poses the biggest challenge to existential clarity and to an ultimate acceptance of death, and many of the characters who die in a state of mental anguish (in other words, who die “bad” deaths), are entirely consumed by it.

This tension between death as a universal and an individual experience: we must all die, but *how* should we die? Is there, perhaps, a way to die well? Certainly, the Realist writers of the nineteenth century agree that there is a way to die poorly. Many characters die in a state of physical and mental agony, overcome with fear and distress at the certainty of their approaching deaths, like Turgenev’s Evgenii Bazarov from *Fathers and Sons*, Tolstoy’s Nikolai Levin from *Anna Karenina* and Ivan Ilyich from *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, and Dostoevsky’s Ippolit from *The Idiot*. Other characters, however, die without fear of death, and this existential orientation seems to bring them peace, clarity, and acceptance in their final moments, like Turgenev’s Maxim and Lukeria from *A Hunter’s Notebook*, Tolstoy’s Natalia Savishna from *Childhood* and Platon Karataev from *War and Peace*, and Dostoevsky’s Markel and Father Zosima from *Brothers Karamazov*. The question of dying well—in other words, dying a “good” death—becomes of paramount importance Realist writers to unravel.

In part I “The Dying,” I analyze the experience of end of life—and more specifically, the experience of dying from terminal illness—from the perspectives of dying characters as they are presented by Russian writers from 1850 to 1999: Turgenev, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Solzhenitsyn, and Ulitskaya. In the chapter 1 “Sickness-unto-Death,” I explore accounts of dying from incurable disease in nineteenth century Realist literature, using as my case studies excerpts from Turgenev’s *Diary of a Superfluous Man*, *A Hunter’s Notebook*, and *Fathers and Sons*; Tolstoy’s *Childhood*, “Three Deaths,” *War and Peace*, *Anna Karenina*, and *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*; and Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot* and *The Brothers Karamazov*. Against the backdrop of Heidegger’s

existential phenomenology, I frame my analysis with the dichotomy of the “good death” and “bad death,” which each writer incorporates into their fictional works. By analyzing how these writers quantify and define a good and bad death, I show how these concepts have been understood and reframed by each writer over the course of the nineteenth century.

Indeed, while an acceptance of death is a prominent feature of a good death for each of these three writers, they differ in their ideas of how one is to come to such acceptance. For Turgenev, acceptance of death is “dying decently” [умирать прилично] and is modeled by his peasant characters, who see death as a natural occurrence and who consider themselves an inextricable part of nature—a quality which his upper-class protagonists sorely lack.<sup>77</sup> For Tolstoy, accepting death is “dying beautifully” [умирать красиво], and is derived from recovering lost faith, even if this recovery occurs in the last seconds before death.<sup>78</sup> For Dostoevsky, an acceptance of death is “dying virtuously” [умирать добродетельно],<sup>79</sup> and is achieved through an active relationship with faith and by inspiring a sense of community within the living that the dying person leaves behind.

In chapter 2 “Dying on Your Own Terms.” I investigate how the idea of a good death changes in twentieth century critical realist literature, referring primarily to Solzhenitsyn’s *Cancer Ward* and Ulitskaya’s *The Funeral Party*. If what preoccupied nineteenth century writers

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<sup>77</sup> Turgenev introduces this term “dying decently” [“как бы умереть прилично?”] during his protagonist Bazarov’s deathbed scene in *Fathers and Sons* (English version: Ivan Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons*, trans. Richard Freeborne [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991], 195; Russian version: И. С. Тургенев, *Накануне. Отцы и дети. Степной Король Лир* [Ленинград: «Художественная литература», 1985], 296).

<sup>78</sup> Tolstoy introduces this term “dying beautifully” in a letter to A. A. Tolstoy, in which he discusses his short story “Three Deaths” [«Три смерти»]: he writes, “the tree [in the story] dies quietly, honestly, and beautifully. Beautifully, because it does not lie or break; it is not scared or sorry” [Л. Н. Толстой. *Собрание сочинений в 22 т.*, том 18 (Москва: *Художественная литература*, 1984), 513–15].

<sup>79</sup> Dostoevsky introduces this term “dying virtuously” [“как мне всего лучше умереть?... Чтобы вышло как можно... добродетельнее то есть?”] through the words of the dying character Ippolit in *The Idiot* (English version: Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 474; Russian version: Ф. М. Достоевский, *Полное собрание сочинений в тридцати томах*, том VIII: *Идиот* [Ленинград: Издательство «Наука», 1973], 433).

was cultivating courage in the face of death, for twentieth century writers acceptance of death becomes secondary to the task of dying on one's own terms, and furthermore, discovering what those terms are. As Solzhenitsyn shows through his protagonist Kostoglotov, who would rather die from cancer than live out the remainder of his life on someone else's terms (particularly, on the terms of the Soviet state), and as Ulitskaya shows through her protagonist Alik who *does* die on his own terms in his own apartment, surrounded by an eclectic entourage of lovers and friends, there are worse things in life than death and dying. I argue that in the twentieth century, asserting one's self-determination in the face of death and having one's dignity respected during one's dying period become the priority of the dying person.

Ultimately, I argue that there is a narrative and philosophical arc that flows across these works that span 150 years. Turgenev, as the first Realist writer to articulate what Heidegger calls Anxiety at *being-towards-death*, introduces the problem of achieving a good death into Russian literature that is later inherited by Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. Turgenev argues that educated (and therefore self-conscious) people (us readers included) see themselves as individuals ultimately removed from nature, which makes the concept of death and dying overwhelmingly terrifying and unfathomable, while peasant characters who live in harmony with nature are already ingrained with a sense of acceptance at the prospect of death, therefore positioned to die good deaths. Tolstoy's struggle with Anxiety at *being-towards-death* weaves throughout his *oeuvre*, with his dying characters struggling to make the necessary leaps of faith in combatting the mortal fear of death, He shows that in confronting death and staring into its abyss, one can achieve true enlightenment and understanding. Similar to Turgenev, Tolstoy upholds peasant characters as exemplars of this truth. While Dostoevsky dismisses peasants altogether from his analysis of a good death, he echoes Tolstoy's idea that faith is both the antidote to the fear of death and to the

radical self-consciousness that demands control over life and leads to a bad death. Dostoevsky, however, extends this idea by arguing that faith in the face of death can inspire a sense of community in the living, an ultimately life-affirming act which can itself alleviate this mortal fear of death (as exemplified by Father Zosima).

In the twentieth century, the idea of dying is complicated by the intensely altered political, sociological, and philosophical landscape ushered in with by the Bolsheviks. Death itself becomes a problem needed to be eradicated for the Marxist-Leninists who privilege the immortality of the collective over individual experiences of death and dying. Within this context, Solzhenitsyn parodies the idea of a good death proposed by Turgenev, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky by showing that exercising one's self-determination in the face of death is more important than religious or spiritual faith. While the characters of nineteenth-century Russian Realist literature were privileged to live their lives without many restrictions (in part due to their wealth and social status), characters living and dying within the Soviet system are denied this possibility. As Ulitskaya shows in *The Funeral Party*, the Russian émigré artist Alik can dictate the terms of his dying process because he dies in the United States—he is free from the shackles of the Soviet system and has the freedom to assert his self-determination, which ultimately allows him to experience a good death. The faith proposed as the antidote to the fear of death, as intimated by Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, is altered in the twentieth century: it is less about faith in a higher religious power than it is about faith in oneself and one's own choices that enables a good death.

Chapter 1  
Sickness-unto-Death:  
Nineteenth-Century Patients' Perspectives

“Of course, we all die, but it’s sad nonetheless.”  
—Anton Chekhov in a letter to Natalya Lintvareva (October 25, 1891)

“Death may be an old joke, but for us it is as new as ever.”  
—Ivan Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons*<sup>80</sup>

In *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844), philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) describes “sickness-unto-death” as the despair arising from a person’s awareness of their own death. He argues that this sickness is more a spiritual condition than it is a physical one, and results from our struggle to find meaning and purpose in the face of death. Kierkegaard suggests the antidote to this mortal despair as the process of “becoming a self” which requires a radical transformation of one’s sense of identity and a recognition of one’s relationship to God. Tolstoy echoes such ideas in *My Confession* (*Исповедь*, 1884), and although he did not read Kierkegaard during his lifetime, both thinkers independently reach the same conclusion and pinpoint faith as the cure to Anxiety and despair.

In Russian literature of the nineteenth century, death poses the greatest challenge to one’s sense of self. What happens to the self before death, Russian writers wonder, and what happens to us when we confront our mortality and after we die? How do we overcome the sense of futility crystalized by the certainty of death? How do we remain strong and brave in the face of annihilation? In this chapter, I explore how Turgenev, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky approach this problem through the prism of terminal illness and what solutions they offer to cure our sickness-unto-death. Each writer identifies courage as an important aspect in accepting our mortality which allows us to experience a good death. For Turgenev, a good death is “dying decently” and

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<sup>80</sup> Ivan Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 195.

accepting death as a natural and routine event as opposed to a catastrophe; Tolstoy sees a good death as “dying beautifully” in recovering lost faith; and Dostoevsky considers a good death to be “dying virtuously” by serving as a moral example for the living.

### “Dying Decently” in Turgenev’s Fiction

Turgenev is often considered to be the first great Realist writer in Russian literature, and indeed, he was the first writer in Russia to articulate the existential horror of confronting death within the genre of fiction. In the last few weeks of his life, Turgenev discussed the illness of his long-time muse and close friend Pauline Viardot—who at the time seemed close to death but who outlived Turgenev by almost forty years—with his close friend Isaak Pavlovskii. “A bad thing—this death!” Turgenev lamented, “One couldn’t complain if it killed one at a stroke; then it would be over; but it glides behind you like a robber, takes from man all his soul, his intelligence, his love of the beautiful; it attacks the essence of the human being.” After a strained silence, Turgenev whispered, “yes, death is a lie!”<sup>81</sup>

This idea of death as an omnipotent and merciless force reappears continually in his novels and short stories—the first evidence of the idea being already explored in his first published work of fiction *The Diary of a Superfluous Man* (*Дневник лишнего человека*, 1850). The dying protagonist Chulkaturin laments, “death is coming...I can hear [its] menacing crescendo...it’s [so] hard for a living creature to part with life!”<sup>82</sup> As he chronicles his last two weeks before death, Chulkaturin is overwhelmed by the superfluity of his life, of the “little

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<sup>81</sup> Edward Garnett, *Turgenev: A Study, with a Foreword by Joseph Conrad* (London: W. Collins Sons & Co. Ltd., 1911), 290.

<sup>82</sup> Ivan Turgenev, *Diary of a Superfluous Man*, trans. Constance Barnett (Frankfurt am Main: Outlook Verlag GmbH, 2018), 41. («Смерть, смерть идет. Мне уже слышится ее грозное crescendo...Пора... Пора!...») [И. С. Тургенев, *Собрание сочинений*, том 1 (Москва: Государственное издательство художественной литературы, 1961), 288]

comedy [of his existence that has been] played out.”<sup>83</sup> Until the very end of his journal entries, he berates himself for the choices he made in life and is consumed by debilitating fear of his impending death. While he accepts his doctor’s diagnosis that he is “soon, very soon to die,” Chulkaturin does not succeed in overcoming his fear of death.<sup>84</sup> Until the very end, Chulkaturin is “full of dread...half hanging over the silent, yawning abyss, I shudder, turn away, and with greedy intentness gaze at everything around me.”<sup>85</sup> In Turgenev’s formulation, Chulkaturin dies a bad death.

The question of whether dying decently (and here, I am borrowing the words that Turgenev’s protagonist Bazarov of *Fathers and Sons* [*Отцы и дети*, 1862] utters when he is on his deathbed) and achieving a ‘good’ death is possible is one of the starkest themes in Turgenev’s fiction, and one that deserves a more robust exploration in literary scholarship. While Turgenev presents more examples of bad deaths in his novel, a good death is reserved for peasant characters who accept their mortality without fearing death. In Heideggerian terms, peasants live Authentically without a sense of Anxiety—and mysteriously so, for this acceptance of the natural order seems impossible for the upper-class protagonists to internalize.<sup>86</sup> In the short story “Journey to Poles'e” (“Поездка в Полесье,” 1857), the narrator travels through a dense forest and, in thinking about his own mortality, feels stifled by Anxiety at the prospect of death. He realizes that,

It is hard for man, the creature of a day, born yesterday, and doomed to death on the morrow, it is hard for him to bear the cold gaze of the eternal Isis, fixed without sympathy upon him...He feels that the last of his kind may vanish off the face of the earth—and not one needle will quiver on those twigs; he feels his isolation...and in

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid. («Моя маленькая комедия разыграна» [181])

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, 1. («Да, я скоро, очень скоро умру» [179]).

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 26. («я утихаю—точно, и вместе с тем... жутко мне. Да, мне жутко. До половины наклоненный над безмолвной, зияющей бездной, я содрогаюсь, отворачиваюсь, с жадным вниманием осматриваю все кругом. Всякий предмет мне вдвойне дорог» [181])

<sup>86</sup> In Heidegger’s formulation, it is not possible to experience Authenticity without experiencing Anxiety, but for Turgenev and Tolstoy’s peasant characters, Anxiety is not necessarily a part of an Authentic experience.

hurried, secret panic, he turns to the petty cares and labors of life; he is more at ease in that world he has himself created; there he is at home, there he dares yet believe in his own importance and in his own power.<sup>87</sup>

In this passage, Turgenev's unnamed narrator is overwhelmed by the power and might of the world outside himself: amid the thicket of trees, he realizes the fragility of his existence and the certainty of his own death. He understands that he is but a mortal being, alone in his individuality, and this realization sparks an intolerable Anxiety that can only be assuaged by distraction. Instead of sitting with the horror of death and finding a way to make peace with it, the narrator distracts himself from the glaring existential truth upon which he has stumbled: he retreats into a world in which he has falsely convinced himself that he is safe—the social world, the world of humans, the They—where he mistakenly thinks that he is in control. This world, however, is but a fantasy that perpetuates what would be called, in Heideggerian terms, an Inauthentic existence. The Anxiety that is sparked by realizing with certainty that “I must die” is too unbearable—indeed, the only way to escape it is to distract oneself and to forget the ever-approaching event of death. The non-peasant characters try to deny their impotence in the face of death, to show that they have control over nature (or rather, over their fate) in order to relieve themselves of the Anxiety they feel at being human and *being-towards-death*.

The peasants who die good deaths live and function outside the social and political sphere that many of Turgenev's upper-class protagonists occupy. They are forever on the periphery, and as a result, are always idealized, for while the gentry narrator Petr Petrovich of *A Hunter's*

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<sup>87</sup> «Трудно человеку, существу единого дня, вчера рожденному и уже сегодня обреченному смерти, — трудно ему выносить холодный, безучастно устремленный на него взгляд вечной Изиды; не одни дерзостные надежды и мечтания молодости смиряются и гаснут в нем, охваченные ледяным дыханием стихии; нет—вся душа его никнет и замирает; он чувствует, что последний из его братии может исчезнуть с лица земли—и ни одна игла не дрогнет на этих ветвях; он чувствует свое одиночество, свою слабость, свою случайность—и с торопливым, тайным испугом обращается он к мелким заботам и трудам жизни; ему легче в этом мире, им самим созданном, здесь он дома, здесь он смеет еще верить в свое значение и в свою силу» (Иван Сергеевич Тургенев, *Поездка в Полесье* [Москва: Книга по Требованию, 2012], 3).



*Notebook* (*Записки охотника*, 1850) and Bazarov of *Fathers and Sons* attempt to understand the peasant *mir* and their spiritual worldviews, they never truly succeed in their task. What Turgenev shows in his analysis of peasant deaths versus non-peasant deaths is that peasants reside in the natural world—the world created *for* them by a mysterious power—while the non-peasant characters (gentry, *raznochintsy*, aristocrats) reside in the social world—the world created *by* them. Turgenev’s peasants themselves are part of nature, which allows them to internalize death as a routine and natural occurrence instead of as a tragedy. Thus, in accepting the natural order of the universe, these peasant characters also accept the unpredictable and sometimes hostile forces of nature which are concentrated in the event of death.<sup>88</sup> They do not attempt to harness the powers of nature, as Bazarov does to his own detriment, nor do they fight against them.

In order to understand Turgenev’s ideas regarding a bad death and a good death, it is imperative to discuss his use of certain metaphors and imagery regarding death itself. In his works, Turgenev continually returns to symbols of nature, and particularly, to the image of the forest to show the difference in attitudes amongst peasants and non-peasants regarding death. In his discussion of nature, Turgenev plays with images of light and darkness and of noise and silence—equating the traditional notion of light and noise as representative of life, and darkness, silence, and cold as representative of death. Donna Orwin adds that metaphors and imagery of water, and particularly the ocean, also function as metaphors for life in Turgenev’s fiction. She appeals to the story “Kasian” in *A Hunter’s Notebook* in which the narrator “intuits the wholeness of life, as it is often represented in Turgenev’s fiction, as an ocean, with water as a metaphor for life...the narrator floats securely on top [as he is lying on the ground looking up at

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<sup>88</sup> It is important to note here that the peasant world of nature includes both natural and supernatural elements.

the sky, imagining it as an ocean]. Elsewhere in Turgenev’s fiction, when love turns tragic or a character is dying, he may imagine himself at the bottom of the sea.”<sup>89</sup> Indeed, in “Journey to Poles'e,” the unnamed upper-class narrator travels alongside his peasant guide Yegor through a dark, silent forest and compares the silence of the forest (representative of death) to the noisiness of the sea (representative of life, in Orwin’s formulation):

...the forest is gloomier and more monotonous than the sea, especially the pine forest, which is always alike and almost soundless...the dark, unchanging pine-forest keeps sullen silence or is filled with a dull roar—and at the sight of it sinks into man's heart more deeply, more irresistibly, the sense of his own nothingness.<sup>90</sup>

The narrator is gripped by a sense of Anxiety at the “primaeval untouched force [that] lies outstretched in [the forest’s] breadth and majesty before the eyes of the spectator.”<sup>91</sup> He is overwhelmed by dread and fear and hears “from the heart of the eternal forest, from the undying bosom of the waters, comes the same voice: ‘I have nothing to do with thee,’—nature says to man, ‘I reign supreme, while do thou bestir thyself to thy utmost to escape dying.’”<sup>92</sup>

In his earlier works, Turgenev represents nature with images of the garden, which can be understood as representative of the Garden of Eden. For example, in *The Diary of a Superfluous Man*, Chulkaturin recalls moving to Moscow following the death of his father, who had recently died in a state of torment. He admits that while he as a child, “I grieved over the sale of our home, or rather, in reality, I grieved over our garden. My only bright memories are associated

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<sup>89</sup> Donna Orwin, *Consequences of Consciousness: Turgenev, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2007), 83.

<sup>90</sup> «Но лес однообразнее и печальнее моря, особенно сосновый лес, постоянно одинаковый и почти бесшумный. Море грозит и ласкает, оно играет всеми красками, говорит всеми голосами; оно отражает небо, от которого тоже веет вечностью, но вечностью как будто нам нечуждой...Неизменный, мрачный бор угрюмо молчит или вот глухо — и при виде его еще глубже и неотразимее проникает в сердце людское сознание нашей ничтожности» (Тургенев, *Поездка в Полесье*, 150).

<sup>91</sup> «И впечатления им возбуждаются те же; та же первобытная, нетронутая сила расстилается широко и державно перед лицом зрителя» (ibid).

<sup>92</sup> «Мне нет до тебя дела,—говорит природа человеку, —я царствую, а ты хлопочи о том, как бы не умереть» (ibid).

with our garden.”<sup>93</sup> Chulkaturin’s “expulsion” from the garden comes after witnessing his father’s death from stroke, which sparks within the young boy the life-altering realization that “Death looked me in the face that day and took note of me.”<sup>94</sup> “I will never forget that night,” Chulkaturin admits, “My father was lying with his head thrown back, all red, gasping fearfully...I looked into his face and an unendurable horror caught my breath; I shrieked with terror...I felt something terrible was happening to me.”<sup>95</sup> Before his father’s death, Chulkaturin lived in blissful ignorance of the cruelty of death, basking in the beauty of nature and in his innocence. His “expulsion” from the garden results in the birth of self-consciousness through his awareness of death, and consequently, of his own mortality.

Despite Chulkaturin’s claim after receiving a terminal diagnosis that “tearful evocations to nature are mortally absurd,” he continuously and tearfully exalts nature.<sup>96</sup> “Oh, my garden, oh, the tangled paths by the tiny pond! Oh, the little sandy spot below the tumbledown dike, where I used to catch gudgeons! And you, tall birch-trees, with long hanging branches, from beyond which came floating a peasant’s mournful song, broken by the uneven jolting of the cart, I send you my last farewell! On parting with life, to you alone I stretch out my hands” he laments:<sup>97</sup>

Would I might once more inhale the fresh, bitter fragrance of the wormwood, the sweet scent of the mown buckwheat in the fields of my native place! Would I might once more hear far away the modest tinkle of the cracked bell of our parish church; once more lie in the cool shade under the oak sapling on the slope of the familiar ravine; once more watch the moving track of the wind, flitting, a dark wave over the golden grass of our

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<sup>93</sup> Turgenev, *Diary of a Superfluous Man*, 5. («Я, признаюсь, даром что был тогда молод, а погрузил о продаже нашего гнезда; то есть по-настоящему я грустил только об одном нашем саде. С этим садом связаны почти единственные мои светлые воспоминания» [183])

<sup>94</sup> Ibid. («Смерть мне тогда заглянула в лицо и заметила меня» [182]).

<sup>95</sup> Ibid, 4. («Не забуду я этой ночи...отец лежит с закинутой назад головой, весь красный, и мучительно хрипит... Я взглянул ему в лицо—невыносимый ужас захватил мне дыхание...я весь отяжелел, но чувствовал, что со мною совершается что-то страшное» [182]).

<sup>96</sup> Ibid, 6. («А слезливые обращения к природе уморительно смешны» [181]).

<sup>97</sup> Ibid. («О мой сад, о заросшие дорожки возле мелкого пруда! о песчаное местечко под дряхлой плотиной, где я ловил пескарей и гольцов! и вы, высокие березы, с длинными висячими ветками, из-за которых с проселочной дороги, бывало, неслась унылая песенка мужика, неровно прерываемая толчками телеги,—я посылаю вам мое последнее прости!.. Расставаясь с жизнью, я к вам одним простираю мои руки» [184]).

meadow!...Ah, what's the good of all this? But I can't go on today. Enough till tomorrow.<sup>98</sup>

This exultation is rich with descriptions of the senses brought to life by the simple joys of nature. Chulkaturin yearns for the natural world of his childhood and wishes to return to the state before the birth of his self-consciousness, before his realization that he was marked for death.

Yet, despite these evocations to nature, Chulkaturin is consumed by problems of the social world as he is dying. In writing the story of his life (his stated goal in keeping the journal), Chulkaturin mainly recalls his failures in love and his disappointments within the social realm of the gentry, but he continues to contrast his “superfluous” life with the enduring beauty and charm of nature. He cannot articulate his disconnect from nature, but he is nonetheless acutely aware of it. He does, however, identify self-consciousness as the reason for his miserable existence: “I was conscious of this [falsity within] myself...I analyzed myself to the last thread, compared myself with others, recalled the slightest glance...laughed vindictively at my own pretensions to ‘be like everyone else,’ and suddenly, in the midst of my laughter, collapsed utterly into gloom [and] absurd dejection.”<sup>99</sup> In the midst of dying, Chulkaturin is overwhelmed with regret.

In his last entry before he dies, however, Chulkaturin once more makes an overture to nature: “Here I am dying...A heart capable of loving and ready to love will soon cease to beat...Farewell, life! farewell, my garden! and you, my lime-trees!” he laments, “When the summer comes, do not forget to be clothed with flowers from head to foot...and may it be sweet

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid. («Я бы хотел еще раз надыхаться горькой свежестью полыни, сладким запахом сжатой гречихи на полях моей родины; я бы хотел еще раз услышать издали скромное тьяканье надтреснутого колокола в приходской нашей церкви; еще раз полежать в прохладной тени под дубовым кустом на скате знакомого оврага; еще раз проводить глазами подвижный след ветра, темной струею бегущего по золотистой траве нашего луга...Эх, к чему все это? Но я сегодня не могу продолжать. До завтра» [184]).

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, 7. («Я сам это чувствовал и спешил опять уйти в себя. Тогда-то поднималась внутри меня страшная тревога. Я разбирал самого себя до последней ниточки, сравнивал себя с другими, припоминал малейшие взгляды...язвительно смеялся над своим притязанием «быть, как все»,—и вдруг, среди смеха, печально опускался весь, впадал в нелепое уныние» [186]).

for people to lie in your fragrant shade, on the fresh grass, among the whispering chatter of your leaves...Farewell, everything and forever!”<sup>100</sup> His last recorded words are an entreaty to the living reader to enjoy life, and he ends with a poem: “And about the grave / May youthful life rejoice, / And nature heedless / Glow with eternal beauty.”<sup>101</sup> This last passage is reminiscent of the concluding passage of *Fathers and Sons*, in which the narrator recounts Bazarov’s parents visiting his grave in a desolate cemetery:

can the prayers [of Bazarov’s parents] and their tears be fruitless? Can love, sacred, devoted love, not be all-powerful? Oh no! No matter how passionate, sinning, rebellious is the heart hidden in the grave, the flowers growing on it look at us serenely with their innocent faces; they speak to us not only of that eternal peace, of that great peace of ‘impassive’ nature; they speak to us also of eternal reconciliation and of life everlasting...<sup>102</sup>

Just like Chulkaturin, who appeals to his heart which is consumed with love and hope, the narrator of *Fathers and Sons* remarks on the futility of human desires within the greater context of nature. After Bazarov’s untimely death, life has moved on, and indeed, nature has moved on without him. His accomplishments during life are forgotten, and while his memory lingers in those whom he has left behind, soon even they will die and all that will remain of Bazarov’s life will be his grave and the flowers that bloom around it. For Bazarov who throughout the novel vehemently rejects philosophy and idealism as irrelevant to existence, dying from terminal illness forces him to confront pressing existential issues. He can no longer discard important

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid, 42. («О боже мой, боже мой! Я вот умираю... Сердце, способное и готовое любить, скоро перестанет биться... Прощай, жизнь, прощай, мой сад, и вы, мои липы! Когда придет лето, смотрите не забудьте сверху донизу покрыться цветами... И пусть хорошо будет людям лежать в вашей пахучей тени, на свежей траве, под лепечущий говор ваших листьев, слегка возмущенных ветром. Прощайте, прощайте! Прощай всё и навсегда!» [230]).

<sup>101</sup> Ibid. («И пусть у гробового входа / Младая будет жизнь играть, / И равнодушная природа / Красою вечно сиять!» [231]).

<sup>102</sup> Ivan Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons*, 201. («Неужели их молитвы, их слезы бесплодны? Неужели любовь, святая преданная любовь не всесильная? О нет! Какое бы страстное, грешное, бунтующее сердце ни скрылось в могиле, цветы, растущие на ней: безмятежно глядят на нас своими невинными глазами: не о одном вечном спокойствии говорят нам они, о том великом спокойствии «равнодушной» природы: они говорят также о вечном примирении и о жизни бесконечной...») [Иван Тургенев, *Отцы и дети* (Санкт-Петербург: «Академический проект», 2000), 224]).

questions about the meaning of life in the face of death. He realizes too late his hubris in privileging materialist ideas over deep philosophical exploration into the human experience.

Bazarov's death in *Fathers and Sons* is emblematic of Turgenev's philosophy of life, and more specifically, his judgment of humans' hubris in attempting to understand and rationalize nature's mysteries, especially when it comes to triumphing over death. For the duration of the novel, Bazarov rejects anything he considers "irrational," which includes faith and love—tenets, as it happens, of the peasant community—and his dogmatic insistence on materialism and rationality crumbles in the face of death. My interpretation challenges Donna Orwin's, in which she views Bazarov as "not spiritually defeated by the outside forces that destroy him" as he is dying.<sup>103</sup> I assert the opposite, that Bazarov's stoicism and sarcasm on his deathbed are not genuine expressions of mirth but are rather final attempts at maintaining the illusion that he has control over his life. This perceived stoicism disintegrates along with his faith in his own convictions and materialist dogma as his fatal illness takes its course. When Anna Sergeevna Odintsova visits him before he dies, he admits that he loves her, which is a sharp turn from his professed disbelief in love. "I love you!" he says to her, "That didn't have any meaning then and has even less now. Love is just a form of being and now my own form is disintegrating."<sup>104</sup>

Yet Bazarov stands out as the only protagonist in Turgenev's fiction who understands an inkling of the eternal truth before his death—that he is utterly insignificant in the face of nature.

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<sup>103</sup> Donna Orwin, *Consequences of Consciousness: Turgenev, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy*, 44.

<sup>104</sup> Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons*, 195. («...я любил вас! Это и прежде не имело никакого смысла, а теперь подавно. Любовь—форма, а моя собственная форма уже разлагается» [218]). That is a far cry from his earlier statement to Arkadii, in which Bazarov—in discussing Pavel Petrovich and his doomed love affair—proclaimed "All that I say is that a man who has staked his card upon a woman's love, and, when the card's beaten gets all *embittered* [раскис] and sinks to the point where he's not fit for anything—I say that such a man is not a man, not a real man" [ibid, 33]. It is ironic that, upon sensing Anna Sergeevna's rejection of his love for her, Bazarov himself turns into such a man. Even his father, upon noticing his dejection and reticence, says, "Our Enyushka breaks my heart...it's not that he's dissatisfied or angry...he's *embittered* [огорчен], he's sad—that's what's awful" [184]. Not long after his parents' remarks on his taciturn nature, Bazarov is infected with blood poisoning after performing an autopsy on a peasant who had died from typhus.

“I used to think, after all, I’ll do a whole mass of things, I’ll not die, no way!” Bazarov admits to Anna Sergeevna, “There’s a task to be done and I’m a giant! And now the giant’s only task is to *die decently* [как бы умереть прилично], although no one cares a damn about that.”<sup>105</sup> By throwing himself into his scientific work and his materialist ideals, Bazarov hoped to be an immortal “giant,” but only as he is dying does he understand that his life was spent in a state of Inauthenticity in order to distract himself from the truth of his mortality. As his rational mind deteriorates from the fever brought on by the fatal blood infection, Bazarov grows increasingly sentimental and, like Chulkaturin, is finally able to admit his superfluity. This realization, however, does not liberate him as it does the peasant characters who die decently, but hardens him and makes him reject life even more derisively. Bazarov’s earlier words to his friend Arkadii ring true on his deathbed:

my parents have pretty good lives...but as for me...the tiny little place I occupy is so small in relation to the rest of space where I am not and where it’s none of my business, and the amount of time which I’ll succeed in living is so insignificant by comparison with the eternity where I haven’t been and will never be...and yet...the blood circulates, the brain works and even desires something as well...what sheer ugliness! What sheer nonsense!<sup>106</sup>

Bazarov’s failed love affair leads to an experience akin to ego-death, in which his former understanding of himself as a purely material, rational being now seems empty, even absurd. Bazarov here is in a state of Heideggerian Authenticity—he understands that, just like his parents, he gladly rejected the truth of his insignificance and superfluity. Like Chulkaturin, he admits his hubris as he lays dying, and just as Chulkaturin did to his readers, Bazarov entreats

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid, 195. («И ведь тоже думал: обломаю дел много, не умру, куда! задача есть, ведь я гигант! А теперь вся задача гиганта - как бы умереть прилично, хотя никому до этого дела нет...Все равно: вилять хвостом не стану» [ibid].

<sup>106</sup> Ibid, 126. («Я думаю: хорошо моим родителям жить на свете!...а я...Узенькое местечко, которое я занимаю, до того крохотно в сравнении с остальным пространством, где меня нет и где дела до меня нет; и часть времени, которую мне удастся прожить, так ничтожна перед вечностью, где меня не было и не будет... А в этом атоме, в этой математической точке кровь обращается, мозг работает, чего-то хочет тоже...Что за безобразия! Что за пустяки!» [149]).

Anna Sergeevna to “live a long life, that’s best of all, and enjoy it while there’s time.”<sup>107</sup> His last words are “there’s a forest here...and now...darkness,” signaling his closeness to death.<sup>108</sup>

In contrast to Chulkaturin and Bazarov who die “bad” deaths because they cannot accept their mortality, Turgenev’s peasant characters are more able to face death Authentically and accept its inevitability, which allows them to experience a good death. The clearest example of peasant attitudes toward death can be found in Turgenev’s *A Hunter’s Notebook* (1850). In the short story “Death (“Смерть”), Petr Petrovich observes “how wonderfully indeed the Russian peasant dies! The temper in which he meets his end cannot be called indifference or stolidity; he dies as though he were performing a solemn rite, coolly and simply.”<sup>109</sup> Earlier in the story, the narrator walks through the forest—and here, we return to Turgenev’s formulation of a silent forest representing death—and notices how “some trees, still covered with leaves below, fling their *lifeless*, ruined branches upwards, as it were, *in reproach and despair*; in others, stout, dead, dry branches are thrust out of the midst of foliage still thick, though with none of the luxuriant abundance of old; others have fallen altogether, and *lie rotting like corpses* on the ground.”<sup>110</sup> Petr Petrovich is haunted by this sight and thinks “looking at the dying trees: ‘isn’t it shameful and bitter for you?’”<sup>111</sup> Immediately after having this thought, the narrator is made aware of a fatal accident that has just occurred in the woods and arriving at the scene, Petr Petrovich sees

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid, 195. («Живите долго, это лучше всего, и пользуйтесь, пока время» [218]).

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, 196. («Тут есть лес... Теперь...темнота...» [219]).

<sup>109</sup> Ivan Turgenev, *A Hunter’s Sketches*, trans. unknown (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, undated), 252. («Вообще удивительно умирают русские люди. Много покойников приходит мне теперь на память» [И. С. Тургенев, *Собрание сочинений*, том 5 (Москва: Государственное издательство художественной литературы, 1954), 150]).

<sup>110</sup> Ibid, 249, italics my own. («Иные, еще обросшие листьями внизу, словно с упреком и отчаянием поднимали кверху свои безжизненные, обломанные ветви; у других из листвы, еще довольно густой, хотя не обильной, не избыточной по-прежнему, торчали толстые, сухие, мертвые сучья; с иных уже кора долой спадала; иные наконец вовсе повалились и гнили, словно трупы, на земле» [144]).

<sup>111</sup> Ibid, 250. («Что, думал я, глядя на умирающие деревья: чай, стыдно и горько вам?» [ibid]).



the peasant forester Maxim lying crushed under the weight of a fallen tree. The dead trees that Petr Petrovich had stumbled upon earlier foreshadow this very moment:

We found poor Maxim on the ground. A dozen peasants were standing about him...He hardly moaned at all; from time to time he opened his eyes wide, looked round, as it were, in astonishment, and bit his lips, fast turning blue. The lower part of his face was twitching; his hair was matted on his brow; his breast heaved irregularly: he was dying. The light shade of a young lime-tree glided softly over his face.<sup>112</sup>

While those around him scramble to find a doctor, Maxim rejects their help and asks only for the priest. “I am dying,” he says, “forgive me lads, if in any way...” he trails off. ““God will forgive you, Maxim Andreich,” said the peasants thickly with one voice, and they took off their caps; ‘do you forgive us!’”<sup>113</sup> It is important to note here that the peasants respond in unison as opposed to individually, which highlights the sense of community that underscores their relations, as opposed to the gentry protagonists who see themselves as inherently singular and individual. After Maxim dies, the narrator is struck by his stoicism in the face of death. He recalls another instance in which he witnessed a peasant who had been badly burned and was close to death. Petr Petrovich asks him if he is in pain or if he desires anything, but the peasant does not answer. He dying peasant’s family continues to go about their business as usual. The narrator realizes that the peasant “was waiting for death, that was all. I could not bear it and went away.”<sup>114</sup>

Perhaps the most emblematic short story about death in Turgenev’s work is “A Living Relic” (“Живые мощи,” 1873).<sup>115</sup> In the story, Petr Petrovich stumbles upon Lukeria—a young

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid, 251. («Мы нашли бедного Максима на земле. Человек десять мужиков стояло около него. Мы слезли с лошадей. Он почти не стонал, изредка раскрывал и расширял глаза, словно с удивлением глядел кругом и покусывал посиневшие губы...Подбородок у него дрожал, волосы прилипли ко лбу, грудь поднималась неровно: он умирал. Легкая тень молодой липы тихо скользила по его лицу» [145])

<sup>113</sup> Ibid, 252. («—Нет, умру. Вот...вот подступает, вот она...Простите мне, ребята, коли в чем...—Бог тебя простит, Максим Андрейч,—глухо заговорили мужики в один голос и шапки сняли,—прости ты нас» [ibid]).

<sup>114</sup> Ibid, 253. («Ну, стало быть, и все в порядке: ждет смерти, да и только. Я не вытерпел и вышел...» [150]).

<sup>115</sup> Written nine years before Turgenev’s death, this was the last short story to be added to *A Hunter’s Notebook* during his lifetime.

peasant girl he once knew in his youth—who is living with a painful and incurable illness and being kept away in a small shed surrounded by nature. Lukeria lives alone, silently, patiently, and shrouded in darkness to the point where she is almost indistinguishable from her surroundings—a clear indication of her closeness to death. The imagery conveyed by the narrator in describing Lukeria shows her intimate connection to nature. Upon entering her shed and before he recognizes her, Petr Petrovich smells “a scent of mint and balm” and notices “fingers twitching like little sticks.”<sup>116</sup> Lukeria explains that her illness started after an accidental fall off the balcony.<sup>117</sup> She tells Petr Petrovich of her life after the accident, which is marked by pain but also by her silent acceptance of her sad fate: “What surprised me particularly was that she told her story almost cheerfully, without sighs and groans, not complaining nor asking for sympathy,” Petr Petrovich admits. She compares her plight to others’ and explains, “there are some blind or deaf; while I, thank God, have splendid sight, and hear everything—everything. If a mole burrows in the ground—I hear even that... When the buckwheat comes into flower in the meadow, or the lime-tree in the garden—I don't need to be told of it, even; I'm the first to know directly.”<sup>118</sup> Lukeria’s admission underscores her communion with nature—indeed, she seems less like a person than a part of the natural scenery. “I lie here and don't think; I feel that I'm alive, I breathe; and I put myself all into that,” she admits, “I look and listen. The bees buzz and hum in the hive... or a sparrow flies in, or a butterfly—that's a great treat for me.”<sup>119</sup> She notices

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid, 409. («Я заглянул в полуоткрытую дверь: темно, тихо, сухо; пахнет мятой, мелиссой... У подбородка, на складке одеяла, движутся, медленно перебирая пальцами, как палочками...» [242]).

<sup>117</sup> This is similar to what happens to Ivan Ilyich in Tolstoy's novella, although he falls off a ladder.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid, 412. («—А у иного и пристанища нет! А иной—слепой или глухой! А я, слава Богу, вижу прекрасно и все слышу, все. Крот под землею роется—я и то слышу... Гречиха в поле зацветет или липа в саду—мне и сказывать не надо: я первая сейчас слышу» [ibid]).

<sup>119</sup> Ibid, 413. («Нет... а так лежу я себе, лежу-полеживаю—и не думаю; чую, что жива, дышу—и вся я тут. Смотрю, слушаю. Пчелы на пасеке жужжат да гудят; голубь на крышу сядет и заворкует; курочка-наседочка зайдет с цыплятами крошек поклевать; а то воробей залетит или бабочка—мне очень приятно...» [243]).

Petr Petrovich's pity and smiles: "You are very sorry for me," she says, "But you mustn't be too sorry, really!"<sup>120</sup>

Like Maxim in "Death," Lukeria also denies medical treatment. She admits that the doctors who treated her and who were unable to cure her objectified her in the name of scientific progress.<sup>121</sup> Lukeria tells Petr Petrovich, who continues to insist that she be moved to a hospital, that the doctor "mauled me about, told me the name of my disease—some wonderful long name—and with that he went away; and all my poor bones ached for a week after."<sup>122</sup> Thus, Lukeria does not wish for a cure, but for peace—for death. She tells Petr Petrovich of a dream she had ("or maybe it was a vision?" she adds) of her being greeted by the angel of Death. Lukeria admits that instead of being frightened, she was relieved and glad to see her, but the angel of death tells Lukeria that she cannot take her with her. "Good God! how sad I was then!" Lukeria admits, 'Take me,' said I, 'good mother, take me, darling!' And my death turned to me and began speaking to me...I knew that she was appointing me my hour, but indistinctly, incomprehensibly."<sup>123</sup> Lukeria identifies a theme that will reoccur in twentieth-century Russian literature regarding death and dying—that death is preferable to a diminished quality of life.

Thus, peasants in Turgenev's fiction are privileged to experience good deaths because of their connection to nature, which they see themselves as inextricably part of, and are therefore able to accept the event of death as a law of nature. A good death, a decent death, then, is

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid, 416. («Как погляжу я, барин, на вас,—начала она снова,—очень вам меня жалко. А вы меня не слишком жалейте, право!» [242]).

<sup>121</sup> "I'm doing this for science, I am a servant of Science" (ibid, 415). («Это я для учености делаю; на то я служащий человек, ученый!» [243]).

<sup>122</sup> Ibid. («Потормошил, потормошил меня, назвал мне мою болезнь—мудрено таково,—да с тем и уехал. А у меня потом целую неделю все косточки ныли» [246]).

<sup>123</sup> Ibid, 418. («Господи! как мне тут грустно стало!...«Возьми меня, говорю, матушка, голубушка, возьми!» И смерть моя обернулась ко мне, стала мне выговаривать...Понимаю я, что назначает она мне мой час, да непонятно так, неясвенно...После, мол, петвок...И с этим я проснулась...Такие-то у меня бывают сны удивительные!» [ibid]).

difficult to attain for those who are disconnected from nature. The upper-class characters in Turgenev's fiction spend their lives yearning for communion with nature but are instead either consumed by social distractions, like Chulkaturin, or in Bazarov's case, trying to deduce its secrets to no avail. And yet, Turgenev himself spent his life living in mortal fear, often writing about it in his diaries and communicating his despair in the face of death in his poetry. The question remains, how do we accept our death when we are taught our entire lives to fear it? How can we reconnect to nature when we ourselves are so removed from it? Turgenev keeps his silence on this front, most likely because, like his tortured protagonists, he spent his entire life trying to discover its secret.

#### “Dying Beautifully” in Tolstoy's Fiction

Much has been written about Tolstoy's views on death—by the author himself and by numerous scholars throughout the centuries who have attempted to discern the progression of his views regarding mortality, death, and dying. Tolstoy was a stark commentator on the nature of death and dying, and his story *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* is hailed as the emblematic example of confronting one's mortality by philosophers, physicians, and literary scholars alike. In a footnote in *Being and Time*, Heidegger singles out this novella as a prime example in presenting the phenomenon of having someone die.<sup>124</sup> Although Tolstoy died eighteen years before the

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<sup>124</sup> “L.N. Tolstoi hat in seiner Erzählung ‘Der Tod des Iwan Iljitsch’ das Phänomen der Erschütterung und des Zusammenbruchs dieses ‘man stirbt’ dargestellt.” [quoted in Zoltan Hajnady, “Ivan Ilič und das ‘Sein zum Tod,’” *Wiener Slavistisches Jahrbuch* 36 (1990), 25] As Brady Woods that this quote can be translated and understood in two ways: The first translation emphasizes the story in relation to the public: “In his story ‘The Death of Ivan Ilyitch’ Leo Tolstoi has presented the phenomenon of the disruption and breakdown of having ‘someone die’” (Brady Woods, “There is Power in Blood: Towards a Eucharystic Interpretation of Ivan Ilyich's Paradoxical Death and Life,” *Wheaton Writing: A Journal of Academic Essays* 2 [2017]: 34). The second translation, as rendered by Joan Stambaugh, emphasizes Ivan Ilich's conversion from Inauthenticity to Authenticity: “L.N. Tolstoi in his story ‘The Death of Ivan Ilyitch’ has portrayed the phenomenon of the disruption and collapse of this ‘one dies.’” For the purposes of my argument, I refer to Stambaugh's translation.

publication of *Being and Time*, I argue that the ideas of Inauthentic and Authentic modes that Heidegger takes as the foundation of his existential argument are already anticipated by Tolstoy, not just in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, but in earlier works as well such as *War and Peace*, *Anna Karenina*, and *A Confession*.<sup>125</sup> While William Irwin explores Heideggerian themes in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, I explore how Inauthentic and Authentic modes function in Tolstoy's other works of fiction. I also analyze certain metaphors and imagery employed by Tolstoy to convey the existential despair at *being-towards-death*, which he himself experienced and which he communicates through his fictional characters.<sup>126</sup>

What does it mean to “die beautifully” in Tolstoy's fiction? This idea of a beautiful death is intimated as early as 1858 in his work “Three Deaths” (Три смерти, 1859), a parable which features the deaths of a rich noblewoman, a *muzhik*, and a tree. The woman dies a bad death, for she struggles to accept her illness and impending death and is thus consumed by physical and emotional pain until the very end. While the peasant accepts his death—“My insides are all queer...I'm going to die, that's what it is”—he suffers during his last night because his concerns are still tied to the material world from which he is departing, mainly about his burial and headstone.<sup>127</sup> In a letter to his relative, the writer himself explained that

The muzhik dies calmly...his religion is nature, with whom he lived. He himself cut down the trees, sowed rye and mowed it, killed rams, and had rams born, and children were

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<sup>125</sup> For more information on this topic, see: William Irwin, “Death by Inauthenticity: Heidegger's Debt to Ivan Il'ich's Fall.” *Tolstoy Studies Journal*, no. 25 (2013): 15–21. Walter Kaufmann argues that “Heidegger[’s views] on death is for the most part an unacknowledged commentary on *The Death of Ivan Ilyitch*.” (Walter Kauffman, *Faith of a Heretic* [New York: Anchor Books, 1963], 355).

<sup>126</sup> Some scholars have noted that a religious reading of Authenticity (for example, seeing religion as a way to experience Authenticity) is incompatible with Heidegger's idea of Authenticity. However, Brady Woods argues that the figure of Gerasim, in his obvious religious stance and orientation of Authentically being-towards-death, allows for a religious reading of Heideggerian Authenticity (Woods, “There is Power in Blood”: 34). For the purposes of my argument, I content that Gerasim's religious arguments in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (“it's God's will”) serve as a conduit for Ivan Ilyich to experience Authenticity.

<sup>127</sup> «Нутро все изныло. Бог его знает что» (Л. Н. Толстой, *Избранные повести и рассказы*, том 1 (Москва: Государственное издательство художественной литературы, 1945), 349).

born, and old men died, and he knew this law well; this law, from which he never turned away, like the noblewoman did, he directly and simply looked it in the face.<sup>128</sup>

The tree, however, Tolstoy wrote “dies quietly, honestly, and beautifully. Beautifully, because it does not lie or break; it is not scared or sorry.”<sup>129</sup> The tree does not lament its own death, unlike the muzhik, but more so unlike the noblewoman. Here, we see one’s attitude to death divided along the lines of social standing. For both Turgenev and Tolstoy, the different social spheres in which their characters operate has an enormous influence on how they process their Anxiety and whether or not they can accept death.<sup>130</sup>

Throughout his life, Tolstoy was tormented by existential dread and an immobilizing fear of death. In *A Confession*, written in the throes of his famous spiritual crisis, Tolstoy laments “I cannot help seeing the days and nights rushing toward me and leading me to death. I see only this [existential truth], and this alone is truth. Everything else is a lie.”<sup>131</sup> It is interesting that while Turgenev sees death as a lie, for the existentially troubled Tolstoy, life itself is a lie because death negates its meaning. Tolstoy is overwhelmed by a sense of futility and wonders “is there any meaning in my life that will not be destroyed by my inevitably approaching death?”<sup>132</sup> Konstantin Levin in *Anna Karenina* wonders the same thing: in realizing the severity of his brother’s illness, Levin realizes that “in reality, looking upon life, he had forgotten one little

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<sup>128</sup> “Дерево умирает спокойно, честно и красиво. Красиво—потому что не лжёт, не ломается, не боится, не жалеет” (Л. Н. Толстой, *Собрание сочинений в 22 т*, том 18 [Москва: Художественная литература, 1984], 513–15).

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Turgenev, however, critiqued Tolstoy’s ending to “Three Deaths,” writing in a letter to the author that “I very much enjoyed the story...although I know that many readers find the ending to be strange and the connection between the two preceding deaths to be confusing, and even for those who do understand it, do not find it satisfying.” («Три смерти» здесь вообще понравились, но конец находят странным и даже не совсем понимают связь его с двумя предыдущими смертями, а те, которые понимают, недовольны” [И. С. Тургенев, *Полное собрание сочинений и писем*, том 3 (Москва: Художественная литература, 1951), 270—271]).

<sup>131</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *A Confession*, trans. David Patterson (New York: W.W. Norton & Company. 1983), 29.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid, 35.

fact—that death will come, and all ends; that nothing was even worth beginning, and that there was no helping it anyway. Yes, it was awful, but it was so.”<sup>133</sup>

As Tolstoy shows in his works, reason declares life to be irrational: “Reason is the fruit of life, and yet this reason denies that very life,” Tolstoy writes in *A Confession*.<sup>134</sup> The answer to this predicament, which Tolstoy identifies, is recovering faith, an idea that has been internalized and practiced by peasants-*muzhiki*. Tolstoy understands that faith is not logical, and yet, it is also life-affirming: Tolstoy explains, in an ironic attempt at logical deduction, that

Faith is the force of life. If a man lives, then he must have faith in something. If he did not believe that he had something he must live for, then he would not live. If he fails to see and understand the illusory nature of the finite, then he believes in the finite; if he understands the illusory nature of the finite, then he must believe in the infinite. Without faith it is impossible to live.<sup>135</sup>

This idea of faith as life affirming in the face of death is one to which Tolstoy continuously returns in his works, starting from his first published work *Childhood* (*Детство*, 1852). The novel is a semi-autobiographical account of Tolstoy’s childhood and is told from the first-person perspective of Nikolai, who in a similar way to Turgenev’s Chulkaturin, recalls his innocent childhood as Nikolenka—one full of splendor and revelation in nature that is lost forever after the death of his beloved mother. At the beginning of the novella *Nikolenka*, in a grasp for childlike attention, invents a nightmare of burying his mother, a seemingly harmless act that foreshadows what occurs at the very end of the narrative. *Nikolenka* leaves his estate to be educated in Moscow but returns after receiving news that his mother is deathly ill.

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<sup>133</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, 317. («Но чем более он напрягал мысль, тем только яснее ему становилось, что это несомненно так, что действительно он забыл, просмотрел в жизни одно маленькое обстоятельство—то, что придет смерть и все кончится, что ничего и не стоило начинать и что помочь этому никак нельзя. Да, это ужасно, но это так» [Толстой, *Анна Каренина*, 349]).

<sup>134</sup> Tolstoy, *A Confession*, 53.

<sup>135</sup> Tolstoy, *A Confession*, 61.

Stupefied by grief from his mother's death, Nikolenka finds solace in the company of his mother's servant Natalia Savishna to whom he addresses his metaphysical questions about death: "Did you expect this?" Nikolenka implores her, without specifying what 'it' really means.<sup>136</sup> Natalia Savishna understands, however, and replies, "It has been God's will. He took her away because she is worthy to be taken, and because He needs the good ones."<sup>137</sup> Nikolenka is mollified by this thought, and looking at Natalia Savishna, he notes her "eyes expressive of a deep, but resigned sorrow. In her soul was a sure and certain hope that God would not separate her from the one upon whom the whole strength of her love had for many years been concentrated."

Tolstoy upholds Natalia Savishna as an emblem—almost that of an icon or saint—of a person who successfully faces death without fear, and who, as a result, dies a good death. Her faith in God allows her to feel connected to the soul of Nikolenka's departed mother—she explains to Nikolenka, who is crushed by the feeling that his mother has left him forever, of the Russian Orthodox belief that her soul continues to roam the earth for forty days after her death: Natalia Savishna "went on speaking in this strain speaking with the same simplicity and conviction as though she were relating common things which she herself had witnessed, and to doubt which could never enter into any one's head," Nikolenka recalls, "I listened almost breathlessly, and though I did not understand all she said, I never for a moment doubted her words."<sup>138</sup> Natalia Savishna dies a few months after Nikolenka's mother, consumed by the pain of losing her, whom she had raised since infancy and loved as though she were her own child. He

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<sup>136</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *Childhood, Boyhood, Youth* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, Co, 1899), 105. («Наталья Савишна,—сказал я, помолчав немного и усаживаясь на постель,—ожидали ли вы этого?» [92]).

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.* («Его святая воля! Он затем и взял ее, чуть она достойна была, а ему добрых и там нужно» [93]).

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 106. («Долго еще говорила она в том же роде, и говорила с такою простотою и уверенностью, как будто рассказывала вещи самые обыкновенные, которые сама видала и насчет которых никому в голову не могло прийти ни малейшего сомнения. Я слушал ее, притаив дыхание, и, хотя не понимал хорошенько того, что она говорила, верил ей совершенно» [94]).



hears of her death not long afterward, that “although Natalia’s last illness lasted two months, she bore her sufferings with Christian fortitude.”<sup>139</sup> In comparing Natalia Savishna to a saint, and here Tolstoy continues the tradition of creating an icon out of the image of the peasant-serf (started, in part, by Turgenev’s Lukeria):

never did [Natalia Savishna] fret or complain, but, as usual, appealed continually to God...She quit life without a pang, and, so far from fearing death, welcomed it as a blessing. How often do we hear that said, and how seldom is it a reality! Natalia Savishna had no reason to fear death for the simple reason that she died in a sure and certain faith and in strict obedience to the commands of the Gospel...She accomplished the highest and best achievement in this world: she died without fear and without repining.<sup>140</sup>

In this novel—Tolstoy’s very first—the idea of a good death as one in which the dying person is immersed in faith without fear of death is one to which the writer continuously returns. As we have already seen, Tolstoy continues the thought intimated by Turgenev of the idealized Russian peasant as more Authentically able to face death. However, many of Tolstoy’s upper-class protagonists—just like Turgenev’s—cannot escape their fear of death, whether it be their own deaths or the deaths of their loved ones, and here we think of both Prince Andrei and Pierre from *War and Peace*, Konstantin Levin from *Anna Karenina*, and Ivan Ilyich.

There is, however, an evident discomfort with this idea on Tolstoy’s part, for he repeatedly questions this faith and whether it is sufficient to extinguish the mortal fear that was his constant companion. It is important here to note the tradition in Tolstoy literary criticism to separate his works into two distinct periods—one before his spiritual crisis of the late 1870s in which his philosophy on life upholds the ideals of family and a rather vitalist idea of life and

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid, 112. («Наталья Савишна два месяца страдала от своей болезни и переносила страдания с истинно христианским терпением» [98]).

<sup>140</sup> Ibid, 113. («не ворчала, не жаловалась, а только, по своей привычке, беспрестанно поминала Бога...Она оставляла жизнь без сожаления, не боялась смерти и приняла ее как благо. Часто это говорят, но как редко действительно бывает! Наталья Савишна могла не бояться смерти, потому что она умирала с непоколебимую верою и исполнив закон Евангелия...Она совершила лучшее и величайшее дело в этой жизни—умерла без сожаления и страха» [99]).

death, and one after his crisis in which he concentrates of a spiritual understanding of life, and particularly death. In recent scholarship, however, many have contested this view and have insisted upon reading Tolstoy's work as a whole rather than two distinct halves, and as Liza Knapp argues, such a reading allows for a more nuanced analysis of Tolstoy's views.<sup>141</sup> Sarah Hudspith also argues that certain underlying themes and concerns can be read in both Tolstoy's fiction and nonfiction works across his lifetime that remain relatively constant in essence—themes that Tolstoy refines and elaborates rather than transfigures.<sup>142</sup> I am in favor of this view, for as we will see, Tolstoy's ideas about death and dying from the beginning of his literary career in *Childhood* to *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* in his late career are not two separate ideas but are rather one idea that has deepened in significance.

In *War and Peace*, dying is at the novel's center, whether it occurs on the battlefield (in Petya Rostov's case), in captivity (in Platon Karataev's case), or in the presence of one's loved ones (as is the case for Prince Andrei and his father Prince Bolkonskii). Sergei Nikol'ski observes that Tolstoy's themes of war and peace in this novel are in fact metaphors for death and life.<sup>143</sup> He argues that for Tolstoy war is representative of nonlife, which is depicted by characters' fears at the certainty of death and their immersion in unnatural and artificial social relations. It is evident that inauthentic attitudes in attempting to avoid thoughts of death by losing oneself in the They are motivating factors for characters immersed in 'war' such as Andrei, (although Nikol'ski does not connect these themes to Heidegger). In describing the thoughts and feelings of his juxtaposing characters, Tolstoy shows that the struggle with death can either

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<sup>141</sup> Liza Knapp, "The Development of Style and Theme in Tolstoy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Tolstoy*, ed. Donna Tussing Orwin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 161.

<sup>142</sup> Sarah Hudspith, "Life in the Present: Time and Immortality in the Works of Tolstoy." *The Modern Language Review* 101, no. 4 (2006): 1055.

<sup>143</sup> Sergei Nikol'ski, "Meanings and Values of the Russian World Outlook in the Work of Leo Tolstoy," *Russian Studies in Philosophy* 50, no. 2 (2012): 19.

affirm one's desire to live (as is the case for Natasha and especially for Pierre) or can deepen the desire to flee from life (as is mostly the case for Andrei).

While much has been written about Prince Andrei's death—for it is the first example of end of life in Tolstoy's work in which the dying person's internal world is disclosed to the reader (the second example being Ivan Ilyich)—my aim is to compare this much-discussed death scene with another one that has not been adequately explored: the death of Platon Karataev. Platon's death is more in line with the scope of my analysis since he is dying from an unspecified illness while Andrei dies as a result from his battlefield wounds, not a terminal illness. Nonetheless, it is important to note that an intimate portrayal of a dying man's thoughts is only presented from the perspective of Andrei and not from the perspective of Platon. Indeed, all the reader ever learns of Platon is from what he chooses to communicate (most of which is contradictory) and from what Pierre perceives of his character. Platon's thoughts—perhaps because he is a peasant and of a different, more simple faith—are opaque to the upper-class characters and even to the narrator. Like Turgenev's narrator who is stunned by the peasants' attitudes regarding death, Tolstoy's narrator does not understand the worldview or the “mysterious significance” of Platon's views on death.

It seems that in the context of *War and Peace*, Platon's function in the novel is to inspire Pierre away from ‘death’—from his suicidal, violent, and nihilistic sufferings—and to bring him back to life. Platon's complete immersion in the current moment inspires Pierre to recover his faith and love of life. Platon is not afraid of dying, and even less is he afraid of death: on the contrary, he is prepared for death at any moment and welcomes it gladly. This idea is communicated in the story Platon tells at the campfire on the eve of his death, a story that Tolstoy would rewrite and publish as “God Sees the Truth but Waits” in 1872: In the parable, a

merchant is sentenced to life imprisonment for a murder he did not commit, and spends his sentence “pray[ing] to God for death.”<sup>144</sup> When the actual murderer joins the merchant at the penal colony and admits to his crimes, a pardon is sent to release the wrongly-accused merchant but arrives only after the merchant has died. Platon tells this story “smiling joyously as he gazed into the fire...and continued [with] his face brightening more and more with a rapturous smile.”<sup>145</sup> After listening to this parable and seeing Platon’s radiant expression, “Pierre’s soul was dimly but joyfully filled not by the story itself but by its mysterious significance: by the rapturous joy that lit up Karataev’s face when he told it, and the mystic significance of that joy.”<sup>146</sup> The next day, Pierre sees Platon sitting by the side of the road by a birch tree: “on his face, beside [кроме] the look of joyful emotion it had worn yesterday while telling the tale of the merchant who suffered innocently, there was now an expression of quiet solemnity.”<sup>147</sup> Pierre does not realize it yet, but Platon’s illness has taken its course and marks him for death: this knowledge, however, is not lost on Platon.<sup>148</sup> Yet, the mix of joy and solemnity on his face shows that Platon does not fear death, but in fact, awaits it.

Platon’s influence on Pierre’s character development cannot be dismissed, for Platon essentially resurrects Pierre’s faith after it is shattered during his brush with death at his almost-execution. Despite the sounds of screams that fill the night, Pierre feels “listening to the regular

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<sup>144</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1143. («Только у Бога смерти просит» [Л. Н. Толстой, *Война и мир* (Ленинград: Государственное издательство художественной литературы, 1937), 599]).

<sup>145</sup> Ibid. («Каратаев замолчал, радостно улыбаясь, глядя на огонь и поправил поленья» [ibid]).

<sup>146</sup> Ibid, 1144. In the Russian original, both ‘mysterious’ and ‘mystic’ in this sentence are translated from the word “таинственный.” («Не самый рассказ этот, но таинственный смысл его, та восторженная радость, которая сияла в лице Каратаева при этом рассказе, таинственное значение этой радости, это-то смутно и радостно наполняло теперь душу Пьера» [ibid]).

<sup>147</sup> Ibid. («В лице его, кроме выражения вчерашнего радостного умиления при рассказе о безвинном страдании купца, светилось еще выражение тихой торжественности» [600]).

<sup>148</sup> Platon does not actually die from his illness but is shot by French soldiers when it is apparent he can no longer keep up with the other prisoners.

snoring of Platon, who lay beside him [that] the world that had been shattered was once more stirring in his soul with a new beauty and on new and unshakable foundations.”<sup>149</sup> The narrator states Platon’s influence on Pierre plainly: Pierre “had found that peace and inner harmony only through the horror of death, through privation, and through what he recognized in Platon.”<sup>150</sup>

Despite the profound effect Platon has had on him, however, Pierre still separates himself from the dying man, and it is implied that the certainty of Platon’s approaching death is too painful for Pierre to acknowledge:

Karataev again fell ill with fever...and as he grew generally weaker Pierre kept away from him. Pierre did not know why, but since Karataev had begun to grow weaker it cost him an effort to go near him. When he did and heard the subdued moaning with which Karataev generally lay down at the halting places, and when he smelt the odor emanating from him which was now stronger than before, Pierre moved further away from him and did not think about him.<sup>151</sup>

Pierre is fully aware of Karataev’s closeness to death, yet his newfound hope and affirmation of life seems not to include an acceptance of death. Pierre, here, is in a state of Inauthenticity, as opposed to Platon, who is in a state of Authenticity: Pierre may have shed his existential despair, yet he still cannot face death. Pierre detaches completely from the reality of death instead of confronting it and “did not see and did not hear how they shot the prisoners who lagged behind, though more than a hundred had perished in that way. He did not think of Karataev, who grew

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid, 1045. («Пьер долго не спал и с открытыми глазами лежал в темноте на своем месте, прислушиваясь к мерному храпению Платона, лежавшего подле него, и чувствовал, что прежде разрушенный мир теперь с новою красотой, на каких-то новых и незыблемых основах, двигался в его душе» [548]).

<sup>150</sup> Ibid, 1089. («И он, сам не думая о том, получил это успокоение и это согласие с самим собою только через ужас смерти, через лишения и через то, что он понял в Каратаеве» [571]).

<sup>151</sup> Ibid, 1140. («С Каратаевым, на третий день выхода из Москвы, сделалась та лихорадка, в которой он лежал в Московском гошпитале, и, по мере того как Каратаев ослабевал, Пьер отдалялся от него. Пьер не знал отчего, но с тех пор, как Каратаев стал слабеть, Пьер должен был делать усилие над собой, чтобы подойти к нему. И подходя к нему и слушая те тихие стоны, с которыми Каратаев обыкновенно на привалах ложился, и, чувствуя усилившийся теперь запах, который издавал от себя Каратаев, Пьер отходил от него подалее и не думал о нем» [597]).

weaker every day and evidently would soon have to share that fate.”<sup>152</sup> Seconds before Platon is killed, Pierre sees an imploring look in Platon’s eyes, as if he wished to communicate something to him, but Pierre is evidently not ready to receive his wisdom. He hears a shot from where Platon is sitting, and in employing his signature device of *остранение* (making-strange), the narrator relays the next moments as if they were completely unrelated. Pierre sees the officers running from the spot where they killed Platon, a smoking gun, and the grievous howling of Platon’s faithful dog, and still he cannot connect the events in a meaningful way.

It is evident, though, that Pierre has internalized aspects of Platon’s philosophy—he is living entirely in the moment, and once Platon dies, Pierre continues to live without much thought to him and only remembers him when recalling his time in captivity. Pierre had once observed that Platon who “had no attachments, friendships, or love...but loved and lived affectionately with everything life brought him in contact with, particularly with man...would not have grieved for a moment at parting with [Pierre].”<sup>153</sup> So Pierre has become the very same—at least for a short while. It is clear that Pierre does not *entirely* internalize Platon’s views, for in marrying Natasha at the conclusion of the novel, Pierre discards the detached divine love practiced by Platon for an earthy love that brings him family happiness. In other words, Platon represents an Authentic existence, yet the secret to attaining and maintaining this existence is never communicated by either Platon or the narrator. Pierre, on the other hand, represents the very real existential experience of oscillating between Inauthentic and Authentic states. Platon,

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid, 1141. («Он не видал и не слышал, как пристреливали отсталых пленных, хотя более сотни из них уже погибли таким образом. Он не думал о Каратаеве, который слабел с каждым днем и очевидно скоро должен был подвергнуться той же участи» [598]).

<sup>153</sup> Ibid, 1047. («Привязанностей, дружбы, любви, как понимал Пьер, Каратаев не имел никаких; но он любил и любовно жил со всем, с чем его сводила жизнь, и в особенности с человеком...но Пьер чувствовал, что Каратаев, несмотря на всю свою ласковую нежность к нему (которую он невольно отдавал должное духовной жизни Пьера), ни на минуту не огорчился бы разлукой с ним» [549]).

like Natalia Savishna before him, is essentially an icon and a saint; Pierre, on the other hand, is a complicated and flawed human.

Prince Andrei serves as a foil to Platon in his views regarding death and dying<sup>154</sup>. While it is true that Andrei accepts death when it finally comes, he does not do so in the same way as Platon, for his acceptance of death is less an act of faith but more a symptom of his inability—or rather, refusal—to live. Andrei, I argue, represents the Inauthentic existence more starkly than any other major character in the novel (with the exception of Napoleon, whose character analysis lies outside the scope of this dissertation). Indeed, Andrei’s entire life is occupied by the concerns of the They. He yearns for social acceptance, most notably presented as glory on the battlefield, even at the cost of forsaking his own family: before the Battle of Austerlitz, Andrei ponders the possibility of him dying:

‘but death and suffering?’ suggested a voice [from within]. Prince Andrei however did not answer that voice and went on dreaming of his triumphs... ‘I don’t know what will happen and don’t want to know, and can’t, but if I want this—want glory, want to be known to men, want to be loved by them, it is not my fault that I want it and want nothing but that and live only for that...Death, wounds, the loss of family—I fear nothing...I would give them all at once for a moment of glory, of triumph over men, of love from men I don’t know and shall never know.’<sup>155</sup>

Just like Ivan Ilyich who is also concerned with matters of social propriety and yearns to be venerated by his peers, Andrei is consumed by earthly, social matters. Only after he is wounded for the first time at Austerlitz does he have his first Authentic moment under the blue sky. In looking at the sky, he is aware of the Eternal—the “lofty, infinite sky,” and of his fragile

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<sup>154</sup> Andrei is fatally wounded on the battlefield, but his death occurs when his wounds become infected.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid, 282. («А смерть и страдания? говорит другой голос. Но князь Андрей не отвечает этому голосу и продолжает свои успехи... Я не знаю, что будет потом, не хочу и не могу знать; но ежели хочу этого, хочу славы, хочу быть известным людям, хочу быть любимым ими, то ведь я не виноват, что я хочу этого, что одного этого я хочу, для одного этого я живу...Смерть, раны, потеря семьи, ничто мне не страшно. я всех их отдам сейчас за минуту славы, торжества над людьми, за любовь к себе людей, которых я не знаю и не буду знать, за любовь вот этих людей») [150]).

mortality.<sup>156</sup> He realizes that “all is vanity, all is falsehood, except that infinite sky.”<sup>157</sup> Even Napoleon, his hero, “seemed to him such a small insignificant creature compared with what was passing now between himself and the lofty infinite sky...he only wished that [the medics] would bring him back to life, which seemed to him so beautiful now that he had today learned to understand it so differently.”<sup>158</sup> As he is being treated, Andrei thinks of his sister Marya and her steadfast religious faith. “There is nothing certain, nothing at all except the unimportance of everything I understand, and the greatness of something incomprehensible but all-important,” he realizes.<sup>159</sup> Here, Andrei is in an Authentic state in that he realizes the falseness of his earthly, social desires—in other words, the world is made strange (Heidegger’s term for this is *Unheimlichkeit*), yet he is unable to articulate the lesson he has gleaned from his near brush with death.

Andrei proves time and time again that while he has glimpses of Authenticity (or rather, of his being called back to life and reclaiming himself from the grips of Anxiety and Inauthenticity), he cannot internalize these moments in a meaningful way, but often retreats into the world of Inauthenticity. When he returns to his father’s estate after Austerlitz, he is greeted once more with death, but this time it is the death of his wife. He is forced to reckon with the unkind way he treated her during their marriage and this guilt weighs on his soul. To distract himself from his pain, Andrei loses himself in politics (a clear manifestation of the They), more specifically in social reform, and leads a self-imposed isolated existence until Pierre visits him at

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid 311. («высокое и вечное небо» [164]).

<sup>157</sup> Ibid, 299. («Да! всё пустое, всё обман, кроме этого бесконечного неба») [159]).

<sup>158</sup> Ibid, 310. («...но в эту минуту Наполеон казался ему столь маленьким, ничтожным человеком в сравнении с тем, что происходило теперь между его душой и этим высоким, бесконечным небом с бегущими по нем облаками...и желал только, чтоб эти люди помогли ему и возвратили бы его к жизни, которая казалась ему столь прекрасною, потому что он так иначе понимал ее теперь») [ibid, 162]).

<sup>159</sup> Ibid, 313. («Ничего, ничего нет верного, кроме ничтожества всего того, что мне понятно, и величия чего-то непонятого, но важнеего») [166]).



his estate. Pierre is immediately struck by Andrei's eyes that "were dull and lifeless and in spite of [Andrei's] evident wish to do so he could not give them a joyous and glad sparkle."<sup>160</sup> Andrei tells Pierre that his mission in life is to "live for myself avoiding those two evils [remorse and illness]...I have become calmer since I began to live only for myself."<sup>161</sup> Evidently, Andrei has not truly grasped the secret to an Authentic existence if he continues to fear death. His near-death experience taught him to turn away from the They, but what Andrei does not realize is that his self-absorption and rumination on death leads him further away from an Authentic existence. Andrei and Pierre's discussion turns to the possibility of a future life, and Andrei tells Pierre, obviously wrought with guilt over his relationship with his late wife, that "when you go hand in hand with someone and all at once that person vanishes, *there, into nowhere*, and you yourself are left facing that abyss, and look in. And I have looked in..."<sup>162</sup> Pierre cuts him short and, in an attempt to inspire his old friend into happiness, preaches to him about the existence of God and the possibility of a future life that necessitates that "we must live, we must love, and we must believe that we live not only today on this scrap of earth but have lived and shall live forever, there in the Whole," said Pierre, and he pointed at the sky."<sup>163</sup> Pierre succeeds in inspiring Andrei back to life, even if for a moment, for while looking at the sky, Andrei felt "something that had long been slumbering, something that was best within him, suddenly awoke, joyful and youthful."<sup>164</sup> Here, Andrei once again experiences a glimpse of an Authentic existence.

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid, 408. («Его поразила происшедшая перемена в князе Андрее. Слова были ласковы, улыбка была на губах и лице князя Андрея, но взгляд был потухший, мертвый, которому, несмотря на видимое желание, князь Андрей не мог придать радостного и веселого блеска») [217]).

<sup>161</sup> Ibid, 411. («Так я жил для других, и не почти, а совсем погубил свою жизнь. И с тех пор стал спокойнее, как живу для одного себя») [219]).

<sup>162</sup> Ibid, 416. («когда идешь в жизни рука об руку с человеком, и вдруг человек этот исчезнет там в нигде, и ты сам останавливаешься перед этою пропастью и заглядываешь туда. И я заглянул...») [221]).

<sup>163</sup> Ibid. («Надо жить, надо любить, надо верить,—говорил Пьер—что живем не нынче только на этом клочке земли, а жили и будем жить вечно там во всем (он указал на небо») [ibid]).

<sup>164</sup> Ibid, 417. («он увидел то высокое, вечное небо, на который указал ему Пьер, и в первый раз, после Аустерлица, он увидел то высокое, вечное небо и...вдруг радостно и молодо проснулось в его душе») [222]).

Andrei's second brush with death proves to be his last, and while he is again able to experience moments of Authenticity in accepting his death, he does so more out of a desire to flee from life than to rejoin it in a meaningful way. On the eve before the Battle of Borodino, Andrei, who is crushed by heartbreak over his failed engagement to Natasha, is consumed by thoughts of death. "Tomorrow I shall be killed," he thinks, "new conditions of life will arise, which will seem quite ordinary to others and about which I shall know nothing. I shall not exist...to die...to be killed tomorrow...that I should not exist...that all this should still be, but not me..."<sup>165</sup> On the battlefield, it seems unclear whether Andrei puts himself purposefully in danger: as a bomb drops at his feet, Andrei does not move out of its way, despite yells of warning from other soldiers, but hesitates and thinks, "can this be death?...I cannot, I do not wish to die. I love life—I love this grass, this earth, this air..."<sup>166</sup> Seconds later, the bomb explodes and Andrei is fatally wounded. However, as he lies in the medical tent, Andrei thinks, "why was I so reluctant to part with life? There was something in this life I did not and do not understand."<sup>167</sup> He experiences a moment of divine love and compassion when he sees his enemy, Anatole Kuragin, suffering beside him in the medical tent, a moment which begins his detachment from the earthly, mortal world for the world beyond—the spiritual world after death. "Compassion, love for our brothers...love of our enemies; yes, that love which God preached on earth and which Princess Marya taught me and I did not understand," Andrei thinks feverishly,

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid, 826. («А завтра меня убьет...и сложатся новые условия жизни, которые будут также привычны для других, и я не буду знать про них, и меня не будет...Умереть, чтобы меня убили завтра, чтобы меня не было...чтобы всё это было, а меня бы не было») [435]).

<sup>166</sup> Ibid, 870. («Неужели это смерть?... Я не могу, я не хочу умереть, я люблю жизнь, люблю эту траву, землю, воздух...») [458]).

<sup>167</sup> Ibid, 872. («Отчего мне жалко было расстаться с жизнью? Что-то было в жизни, чего я не понимал и не понимаю») [ibid]).

“That is what made me sorry to part with life, that is what remained for me had I lived. But now it is too late. I know it!”<sup>168</sup>

When he finally dies, Andrei is in the care of his beloved Natasha, but even his love for her cannot convince him to return to life. He detaches from life completely after having a premonition of his death, communicated to him through the image of a door. Ilya Vinitzky shows the significance of the opening and closing door in the narrator’s descriptions of Andrei’s pivotal moments that represent Andrei’s battle and ultimate surrender to death.<sup>169</sup> In the dream, he is confronted with a closed door “and a single question, that of the closed door, superseded everything else. He rose and went to the door to bolt and lock it. Everything depended on whether he was, or was not, in time to lock it. He went and tried to hurry, but his legs refused to move and he knew he would not be in time to lock the door though he painfully strained all his powers.”<sup>170</sup> Through this premonition, Andrei realizes his closeness to death and “was seized by an agonizing fear. And that fear was the fear of death. It stood behind the door. But just when he was clumsily creeping toward the door, that dreadful something on the other side was already pressing against it and forcing its way in. Something not human—death—was breaking in the door and had to be kept out.”<sup>171</sup> The sense of Anxiety that grips Andrei is quintessential (in Heidegger’s formulation) of the move from Inauthenticity to Authenticity. The door in his dream

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid, 874. («Сострадание, любовь к братьям, к любящим, любовь к ненавидящим нас, любовь к врагам, да, та любовь, которую проповедывал бог на земле, который меня учила Марья и который я не понимал; вот отчего мне жалко было жизни, вот оно то, что ещё оставалось мне, ежели бы я был жив. Но теперь уже поздно. Я знаю это!») [460].

<sup>169</sup> Ilya Vinitzky, “Behind the Door: A Few Remarks Concerning the Direction of Prince Andrei’s Gaze,” *Tolstoy Studies Journal* 19 (2007): 80–86.

<sup>170</sup> Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 1059. («и всё заменяется одним вопросом о затворенной двери. Он встает и идет к двери, чтобы задвинуть задвижку и запереть ее. От того, что он успеет или не успеет запереть и всё заменяется одним вопросом о затворенной двери. Он встает и идет к двери, чтобы задвинуть задвижку и запереть ее. От того, что он успеет или не успеет запереть») [555].

<sup>171</sup> Ibid. («И мучительный страх охватывает его. И этот страх есть страх смерти: за дверью стоит оно. Но в то же время, как он бессильно-неловко подползает к двери, это что-то ужасное, уже надавливая с другой стороны, ломится в нее. Что-то не человеческое—смерть—ломится в дверь, и надо удержать ее. Он ухватывается за дверь, напрягает последние усилия—запереть уже нельзя—хоть удержать ее») [ibid].

finally bursts open; Andrei's lack of physical strength in the dream is evidently his lack of emotional and spiritual strength to return to life:

It entered, and it was *death*, and Prince Andrei died. But at the instant that he died, Prince Andrei remembered he was asleep [and upon awakening he realized that] yes, death is an awakening! And all at once it grew light in his soul, and the veil that had until then concealed the unknown was lifted from his spiritual vision. He felt as if powers till then confined within him had been liberated, and that strange lightness did not again leave him.<sup>172</sup>

When Marya comes to visit Andrei on his deathbed, Natasha, who is already aware of the spiritual and existential change taking place within Andrei, tells her that “suddenly *this* happened...he cannot live, because...” but she does not have an answer.<sup>173</sup> Andrei's last days are passed “in an ordinary and simple way,” and in the presence of his sister and Natasha, Andrei dies. The symbol of the door as death stays with Natasha after Andrei has died.<sup>174</sup> She is consumed with sadness and with the “simple and solemn mystery of death.”<sup>175</sup> Looking at a corner of “the door...she was gazing in the direction in which he had gone—to the other side of life.”<sup>176</sup>

While it is true that Andrei's dream leads to his acceptance of death, it is more a death as a result of spiritual impotence. He is not present in the moment as Platon is, but completely detached from his surroundings. Even Marya notices that Andrei is “indifferent, because

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid. («Оно вошло, и оно есть смерть. И князь Андрей умер. Но в то же мгновение как он умер, князь Андрей вспомнил, что он спит, и в то же мгновение как он умер, он, сделав над собою усилие, проснулся. «Да, это была смерть. Я умер — я проснулся. Да, смерть — пробуждение», вдруг просветлело в его душе, и завеса, скрывавшая до сих пор неведомое, была приподнята перед его душевным взором. Он почувствовал как бы освобождение прежде связанной в нем силы и ту странную легкость, которая с тех пор не оставляла его») [ibid]).

<sup>173</sup> Ibid, 1052. («...вдруг это сделалось... он не может, не может жить, потому что...») [552]).

<sup>174</sup> Ibid, 1060. («...обыкновенно и просто») [555]).

<sup>175</sup> Ibid, 1061. («...простого и торжественного таинства смерти») [ibid]).

<sup>176</sup> Ibid, 1159. («Она смотрела туда, куда ушел он, на ту сторону жизни») [607]).

something else, something much more important, had been revealed to him.”<sup>177</sup> The doctor attending Andrei even confirms a positive prognosis, but after the dream, Andrei’s health takes an irreversible turn for the worse. It seems that Tolstoy is implying that Andrei chooses to die, or rather, that he instinctively realizes that his newfound spiritual knowledge of divine love cannot thrive in the social realm (in the *They*) to which Andrei inherently belongs. His cognizant detachment from life lies in his certainty that “he still valued life as presented to him in the form of his love for Natasha” and that this “love for a particular woman again crept unobserved into his heart and once more bound him to life.”<sup>178</sup> However, Andrei understands that the divine love he felt for Anatole “freed him from the bondage of life that had restrained [his soul, which allowed him to] no longer fear death, and [he] ceased to think about it.”<sup>179</sup> For Andrei, eternal divine love is simply incompatible with earthly existence and “the more imbued he became with that principle of love, the more he renounced life and the more completely he destroyed that dreadful barrier which...stands between life and death.”<sup>180</sup> This understanding of life is the polar opposite of Platon’s, who greets his death with joy. While Andrei accepts his death as Platon does, he does so more as a result of his impotence than from an Authentic orientation.

In *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy presents two examples of death: Anna’s by suicide—quick, impulsive, and emotional, and Nikolai Levin’s from tuberculosis—slow, painful, and full of dread. In the context of this discussion, I focus specifically on Nikolai’s dying and death, as

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid, 1054. («...дно объяснение только могло быть этому, это то, что ему было всё равно, и всё равно от того, что что-то другое, важнейшее, было открыто ему») [552]).

<sup>178</sup> Ibid, («...любовь к одной женщине незаметно закралась в его сердце и опять привязала его к жизни») [554]).

<sup>179</sup> Ibid, 1056. («Когда он очнулся после раны и в душе его, мгновенно, как бы освобожденный от удерживавшего его гнета жизни, распустился этот цветок любви вечной, свободной, не зависящей от этой жизни, он уже не боялся смерти и не думал о ней») [ibid]).

<sup>180</sup> Ibid, 1056. («И чем больше он проникался этим началом любви, тем больше он отрекался от жизни и тем совершеннее уничтожал ту страшную преграду, которая, когда у нас нет любви, стоит между жизнью и смертью») [ibid]).

Anna's death is one in which she does not contemplate the meaning of death but like Andrei sees it as a way to end her earthly pain.<sup>181</sup> As Hugh McLean shows in his book *In Quest of Tolstoy*, the character of Nikolai Levin is based almost entirely on Tolstoy's real brother Dmitrii, who also died from tuberculosis as a young man. Like Dmitrii, Nikolai is taciturn, politically radical, and prone to outbursts of anger and cruelty. Tolstoy even endows Nikolai with Dmitrii's physical quirks, such as a tic of the neck in moments of discomfort and agitation.<sup>182</sup> McLean argues that Dmitrii not only serves as a model for Nikolai, but that Tolstoy's complicated relationship with his brother is also written into the novel to accentuate Levin's complex and often contradictory feelings at his brother's deathbed. As McLean asserts, Nikolai's only role in the novel is to be sick and then to die.<sup>183</sup> In the process of doing so, Nikolai serves as a conduit through which Levin confronts his Anxiety at *being-towards-death*. In one of his visits to Levin's estate, Nikolai launches into a political tirade as a means of distracting both himself and his brother from a discussion of Nikolai's rapidly decreasing health: his political arguments—which are, as in the case of Prince Andrei, an indication of his entrenchment in the They—fall on deaf ears in his discussion with Levin, for as Nikolai talks of his plans for a social project, Levin “scarcely heard him. He looked more and more into [Nikolai's] sickly, consumptive face, and he was more and more sorry for him, and he could not force himself to listen to what his brother was telling him about the association.”<sup>184</sup> As we shall see in chapter 4, Levin is overwhelmed in his dying brother's presence, precisely because Nikolai represents the nearness and inescapable nature of death.

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<sup>181</sup> For a more extensive discussion on suicide in Tolstoy's works, please see: G. W. Spence, “Suicide and Sacrifice in Tolstoy's Ethics.” *The Russian Review* 22, no. 2 (1963): 157–167.

<sup>182</sup> Hugh McLean, *In Quest of Tolstoy* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2017), 37.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid*, 36.

<sup>184</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, 80. («Он вглядывался в его болезненное, чахоточное лицо, и все больше и больше ему жалко было его, и он не мог заставить себя слушать то, что брат рассказывал ему про артель» (Толстой, *Анна Каренина*, 91).

The relationship between Nikolai and Levin is one of tenderness and love, but it is also of jealousy and guilt, and much of their interactions is marked more by what they *do not* say as to each other as opposed to what they do say. Nikolai enters into the discourse of the novel at key junctures in Levin's life as they relate to his relationship with Kitty, a relationship which reinforces Levin's involvement in life: the first time Levin sees his brother is on the day he proposes to Kitty for the first time, the second is during Levin's isolation as a result of Kitty's rejection, and the third is when Levin and Kitty discover that she is pregnant. As Nikolai's health declines and he draws closer to death, Levin and Kitty's relationship blossoms and Levin becomes more attached to life. This juxtaposition between the two brothers—in which one is on the path towards death and the other towards life—is not lost on Nikolai, as he is clearly envious of his brother's vitality and happiness. In their first meeting in the novel, Nikolai is at first delighted to see Levin but then “a quite different expression, wild, suffering, and cruel rested on his emaciated face.”<sup>185</sup> It is important to note here that in a similar way the reader of *War and Peace* does not have access to Platon's internal world and thoughts on death, so too does the reader of *Anna Karenina* lack access to Nikolai's thoughts.<sup>186</sup> All that the reader knows about Nikolai is through what he chooses to say, and through what is filtered through Levin's own eyes, thoughts, and memories.

Nikolai's relationship with his own death is complicated, for there are times when he seems to acknowledge the seriousness of his disease and other times when he shrugs it off completely, even maintaining that he is cured or on the mend. In the brothers' first meeting,

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid, 78. («А, Костя! —вдруг проговорил он, узнав брата, и глаза его засветились радостью. Но в ту же секунду он оглянулся на молодого человека и сделал столь знакомое Константину судорожное движение головой и шеей, как будто галстук жал его; и совсем другое, дикое, страдальческое и жестокое выражение остановилось на его исхудалом лице» [89]).

<sup>186</sup> In only one instance, the reader has access to Nikolai's reasons for leaving Marya Nikolaevna via the narrator.

Nikolai admits that “for me...everything is now at an end” and their discussion turns to the “other world.”<sup>187</sup> Nikolai admits that he is terrified by the thought of what lies after death: “ah, I don’t like the other world!” the sick man says passionately, and “letting his scared eyes rest on his brother’s...[continued] ‘here one would think that to get out of all the baseness and the mess, one’s own and other people’s, would be a good thing, yet I’m afraid of death, awfully afraid of death.’ He shuddered.”<sup>188</sup> Nikolai readily admits his disdain for the They, but unlike the peasants whose lives are so difficult, he does not consider death to be a form of salvation. Levin eventually persuades his brother to go to abroad to Bad Soden, and there he is sighted by Kitty who is also staying there.

The brothers’ second meeting is at Levin’s estate and proves to be the most informative on Nikolai’s thoughts about his declining health and impending death. Levin recognizes that Levin is filled with dread at this meeting and although he “loved his brother...being with him was always a torture.”<sup>189</sup> The narrator implies that this disdain comes from Nikolai’s unpleasant and volatile temperament, but I argue that it is because Levin is deeply uncomfortable with the idea of death which his brother now represents. Upon seeing Nikolai, Levin is distressed at the obvious signs of death: “Terrible as his brother Nikolai had been before his emaciation and sickness, now he looked even more emaciated, still more wasted. He was a skeleton covered with skin. He stood in the hall...and smiled a strange and pitiful smile. When he saw that smile, submissive and humble, Levin felt something clutching at his throat.”<sup>190</sup> Despite his obvious ill-

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<sup>187</sup> Ibid, 82. («Отчего? Мне —кончено! Я свою жизнь испортил» [93]).

<sup>188</sup> Ibid, 83. («На том свете? Ох, не люблю я тот свет! Не люблю, —сказал он, остановив испуганные дикие глаза на лице брата. —И ведь вот кажется, что уйти изо всей мерзости, путаницы, и чужой и своей, хорошо бы было, а я боюсь смерти, ужасно боюсь смерти. —Он содрогнулся» [94]).

<sup>189</sup> Ibid, 315. («Левин любил своего брата, но быть с ним вместе всегда было мученье» [347]).

<sup>190</sup> Ibid. («Как ни страшен был брат Николай своей худобой и болезненностью прежде, теперь он еще похудел, еще изнемог. Это был скелет, покрытый кожей...Он стоял в передней, дергаясь длиною, худую шей и срывая с нее шарф, и странно жалостно улыбался. Увидав эту улыбку, смиренную и покорную, Левин почувствовал, что судороги сжимают его горло» [ibid]).



health, Nikolai maintains that “‘now, I’m even so much better.’ ‘Yes, yes!’ answered Levin and he felt still more frightened when, kissing him, he felt with his lips the dryness of his brother’s skin and saw close to him his big eyes, full of strange light.”<sup>191</sup> I will return to this discussion of light as a metaphor for death in my discussion of *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, for Tolstoy plays with metaphors of light and darkness, just like Turgenev, in portraying death, yet Tolstoy complicates the image of light into false, glittering “strange” light (representative of Inauthenticity) and true, inner light (representative of Authenticity). In Nikolai’s case, the strange light reflects his Inauthenticity and metaphysical denial of death.

Nikolai’s behavior at Levin’s estate is a mix of performance and denial of his closeness to death, and Levin is heartbroken and overwhelmed by his brother’s pain. After hearing of the death of a servant that he had known since childhood which “made a painful impression on him... a look of fear crossed [Nikolai’s] face, but he regained his serenity immediately.”<sup>192</sup> It is evident here that Nikolai is struggling between the modes of Inauthenticity and Authenticity but cannot commit to either side. He confronts death, but immediately distracts himself by fleeing into the They by talking of trivial matters and how he will “arrange his life quite differently.”<sup>193</sup> He admits to Levin that he parted ways with his common-law wife, Marya Nikolaevna, but he cannot confess the true reason for this parting, which was that “she would look after him, as though he were an invalid.”<sup>194</sup> Again, Nikolai denies the reality of his situation, even detaching

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<sup>191</sup> Ibid. («—Теперь же я очень поправился, —говорил он, обтирая свою бороду большими худыми ладонями.— Да, да! —отвечал Левин. И ему стало еще страшнее, когда он, целуясь, почувствовал губами сухость тела брата и увидал вблизи его большие, странно светящиеся глаза» [348]).

<sup>192</sup> Ibid, 316. («Известие о смерти Пармена Денисыча неприятно подействовало на него. На лице его выразился испуг; но он тотчас же оправился» [ibid])

<sup>193</sup> Ibid. («Теперь я устрою свою жизнь совсем иначе» [ibid]).

<sup>194</sup> Ibid. («Он не мог сказать, что он прогнал Марью Николаевну за то, что чай был слаб, главное же за то, что она ухаживала за ним, как за больным» [ibid]). This is the only glimpse into Nikolai’s thoughts in the entire novel.

himself from the one person in his life who loves him unconditionally because she refuses to deny the seriousness of his disease. The narrator reveals that the brothers

now had one thought—the illness of Nikolai and the nearness of death—which stifled everything else. But neither of them dared to speak of it, and so whatever they said—not uttering one thought that had filled their minds—was all falsehood...Never...had [Levin] been so unnatural and false as he had been that evening. And the consciousness of this unnaturalness, and the remorse he felt at it, made him even more unnatural. He wanted to weep over his dying, dearly loved brother, and he had to listen and keep on talking of how he meant to live.<sup>195</sup>

The rest of Nikolai's visit weighs heavily on Levin's heart and mind. He is possessed by fear and Anxiety—the Anxiety that makes the world strange and unrecognizable to the individual—and here Tolstoy underscores the nature of another's death as a mirror of one's own mortality. Levin is horrified at this realization, that “if not today, tomorrow, if not tomorrow, in thirty years, wasn't it all the same! And what was this inevitable death—he did not know, and had never thought about it, and what was more, had not the power, had not the courage to think about it.”<sup>196</sup> Levin realizes that in fleeing into the They, he had distracted himself from the very essence of his existence—*being-towards-death*: “I work, I want to achieve something, but I had forgotten it must all end; I had forgotten—death...The question how to live hardly began to grow a little clearer to him when a new, insoluble question presented itself—death.”<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid. («Теперь у них обоих была одна мысль —болезнь и близость смерти Николая, подавлявшая все остальное. Но ни тот, ни другой не смели говорить о ней, и потому все, что бы они ни говорили, не выразив того, что одно занимало их, —все было ложь. Никогда Левин не был так рад тому, что кончился вечер и надо было идти спать. Никогда ни с каким посторонним, ни на каком официальном визите он не был так ненатурален и фальшив, как он был нынче. И сознание и раскаяние в этой ненатуральности делало его еще более ненатуральным. Ему хотелось плакать над своим умирающим любимым братом, и он должен был слушать и поддерживать разговор о том, как он будет жить» [349]).

<sup>196</sup> Ibid, 317. («Левин долго не спал, слушая его. Мысли Левина были самые разнообразные, но конец всех мыслей был один: —смерть. Смерть, неизбежный конец всего, в первый раз с неотразимой силой представилась ему. И смерть эта, которая тут, в этом любимом брате, спросонков стонущем и безразлично по привычке призывавшем то бога, то черта, была совсем не так далека, как ему прежде казалось. Она была и в нем самом—он это чувствовал. Не нынче, так завтра, не завтра, так через тридцать лет, разве не все равно? А что такое была эта неизбежная смерть, —он не только не знал, не только никогда и не думал об этом, но не умел и не смел думать об этом.» [ibid])

<sup>197</sup> Ibid. («Я работаю, я хочу сделать что-то, а я и забыл, что все кончится, что—смерть» [ibid]).

In the following days, Levin understands that the root of his and Nikolai's discomfort with one another lies in their refusal to discuss death in plain terms. Levin "felt that if they had both not kept up appearances, but had spoken, as it is called, from the heart...they would have simply looked into each other's faces, and Konstantin would have said 'you're dying, you're dying,' and Nikolai could only have answered, 'I know I'm dying, but I'm afraid, I'm afraid, I'm afraid!'...but life like that was impossible...[everything he said] had a ring of falseness to it, that his brother detected in him, and was exasperated by it."<sup>198</sup> After Nikolai leaves, Levin slips further into the *They* by losing himself in his work, for "he saw nothing but death or the advance of death in everything...darkness had fallen upon everything for him, but just because of this darkness he felt that the one guiding clue in the darkness was his work, and he clutched at it and clung to it with all his strength."<sup>199</sup>

The third and final scene in which Nikolai appears is the one in which he dies, and it is not he who communicates his nearness to death to Levin, but Marya Nikolaevna, who hopes that Levin's presence at his brother's deathbed will help ease his physical sufferings and existential dread. This scene is particularly relevant to my discussion of caregivers as it relates to Kitty's character development which I discuss in chapter 4, but this scene provides clues to understanding Nikolai's existential orientation before death. This chapter—the only one to be

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid, 318. («Левин чувствовал себя виноватым и не мог поправить этого. Он чувствовал, что если б они оба не притворялись, а говорили то, что называется говорить по душе, то есть только то, что они точно думают и чувствуют, то они только бы смотрели в глаза друг другу, и Константин только бы говорил: —«Ты умрешь, ты умрешь, ты умрешь!» —а Николай только бы отвечал: —«Знаю, что умру; но боюсь, боюсь, боюсь!») И больше бы ничего они не говорили, если бы говорили только по душе. Но этак нельзя было жить, и потому, Константин пытался делать то, что он всю жизнь пытался и не умел делать, и то, что, по его наблюдению, многие так хорошо умели делать и без чего нельзя жить: —он пытался говорить не то, что думал, и постоянно чувствовал, что это выходило фальшиво, что брат его ловит на этом и раздражается этим» [351]).

<sup>199</sup> Ibid, 321. («Темнота покрывала для него все; но именно вследствие этой темноты он чувствовал, что единственную руководительную нитью в этой темноте было его дело, и он из последних сил ухватился и держался за него» [353]).

named in the entire novel, and appropriately titled “Death”—is narrated from the point of view of the observing narrator who has access to Levin’s intimate thoughts and feelings, but not to Nikolai’s. Thus, much of what the reader knows about Nikolai’s death is mediated by Levin’s concerns, and once again, Nikolai’s inner world is as opaque as it has ever been. Upon arriving at the hotel where Nikolai lies dying, Levin is immediately repulsed by the “impression of falsity made by the hotel”—a clear indication of Inauthenticity that ties Levin and Nikolai to their last conversation at Levin’s estate.<sup>200</sup> Once again, Levin and Nikolai’s final meeting is marked less by what they say than by what they *do not* say, and it is imperative to search for meaning in their actions, as subtle and insignificant as they may seem. Levin, upon entering his brother’s room, expects to see Nikolai at death’s door and prepares himself to be enveloped by a wave of despair, but instead experiences something different altogether. He does not even recognize Nikolai at first but instead sees “a body. One arm above was above the quilt, and the wrist, huge as a rake-handle, was attached, inconceivably it seemed, to the thin, long bone of the arm smooth from beginning to end.”<sup>201</sup> This device of *остранение*, just as it was in the case of Pierre not understanding Platon’s death, communicates Levin’s inability to accept death to the point where he cannot recognize his own flesh and blood. “It cannot be that that fearful body was my brother Nikolai?” Levin thinks in panic. Inching closer, Levin indeed comprehends “the terrible truth that this death-like body was his living brother.”<sup>202</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid, 445. («...произвели на Левиных после их молодой жизни самое тяжелое чувство, в особенности тем, что фальшивое впечатление, производимое гостиницей, никак не мирилось с тем, что ожидало их» [487]).

<sup>201</sup> Ibid, 447. («Одна рука этого тела была сверх одеяла, и огромная, как грабли, кисть этой руки непонятно была прикреплена к тонкой и ровной от начала до середины длинной цевке. Голова лежала боком на подушке» [488]).

<sup>202</sup> Ibid. (««Не может быть, чтоб это страшное тело был брат Николай», —подумал Левин...Левину стоило взглянуть в эти живые поднявшиеся на входившего глаза, заметить легкое движение рта под слипшимися усами, чтобы понять ту страшную истину, что это мертвое тело было живой брат» [ibid]).

What binds the two brothers together, however, is their glance, and again, Tolstoy draws particular attention to the strange light in Nikolai's eyes: "the glittering eyes looked sternly and reproachfully at his brother as he drew near. And immediately this glance established a living relationship between living men."<sup>203</sup> It is only when their eyes meet that the brothers seem to recognize each other on a deep, intimate level. This is also the case in their two prior meetings. Also, Tolstoy's use of the word "glittering" is of particular importance, and as David Danaher astutely identifies, Tolstoy's adjectives in describing different forms of light are significant to his overall ideas of falsity and inner truth—in my analysis, Authenticity and Inauthenticity—particularly in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. I draw attention to Nikolai's glittering eyes because, as we shall see, Tolstoy's description of the dying Nikolai anticipates the more detailed portrayal of a dying man in *Ivan Ilyich*.

Levin's discomfort in the presence of his dying brother complicates Nikolai's final days, for it contributes to Nikolai's fervent denial of the reality of his situation. Levin is uneasy, fumbling for words to conceal the mortal fear that Nikolai's condition inspires within him, and meanwhile Nikolai "simply stared without dropping his eyes, and evidently penetrated to the inner meaning of each word...suddenly Nikolai stirred and began to say something. Levin expected something of particular gravity and importance from the expression on his face, but Nikolai began speaking of his health...Levin saw that he still hoped."<sup>204</sup> Nikolai's disconnect from reality evokes the noblewoman from "Three Deaths," who dies a bad death because she

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<sup>203</sup> Ibid. («Блестящие глаза строго и укоризненно взглянули на входившего брата. И тотчас этим взглядом установилось живое отношение между живыми» [ibid]).

<sup>204</sup> Ibid. («...брат ничего не отвечал, а только смотрел, не спуская глаз, и, очевидно, вникал в значение каждого слова. Левин сообщил брату, что жена его приехала с ним. Николай выразил удовольствие, но сказал, что боится испугать ее своим положением. Наступило молчание. Вдруг Николай зашевелился и начал что-то говорить. Левин ждал чего-нибудь особенно значительного и важного по выражению его лица, но Николай заговорил о своем здоровье. Он обвинял доктора, жалел, что нет московского знаменитого доктора, и Левин понял, что он все еще надеялся» [489])

cannot accept her impending death but insists on finding a cure. In the filthy hotel room, Nikolai spirals into a state of angst and despair that is only alleviated by Kitty's presence and her exceptional caregiving skills, yet even she cannot extinguish his fear of death. Levin knows that "nothing could be done to prolong his brother's life or to relieve his suffering...[and] a sense of his regarding all aid was felt by the sick man, and exasperated him."<sup>205</sup> While both Kitty and Levin pity Nikolai, Kitty's pity is benevolent and compassionate, while Levin's is tortuous and painful. Nikolai's death does not remind Kitty of her own death, as it does Levin, and Nikolai is painfully aware of his brother's discomfort.

Nikolai dies a bad death—or so it would seem—and nothing that Kitty can do or that Levin can say changes that, particularly because he himself denies it until almost the last moment. After Kitty convinces him to receive the sacrament, "Nikolai prayed fervently" although the contents of his prayers are never revealed. Could they have been a repentance for his sins or rather, begging God to spare him? Based on the evidence presented by the narrator, it is likely that it is the latter. The narrator admits in accessing Levin's thoughts and his pain at seeing Nikolai's "great eyes...[which] expressed such passionate prayer and hope [that] Levin knew that [it] would only make him feel more bitterly parting from the life he so loved."<sup>206</sup> However, this admission from the narrator seems to be incongruent with Nikolai's earlier statements about hating society and those around him—it does not seem that he loves his life, but rather that he is afraid of death. Levin understands that Nikolai's "temporary, interested return to

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid, 449. («Он был убежден несомненно, что ничего сделать нельзя ни для продления жизни, ни для блегчения страданий. Но сознание того, что он признает всякую помощь невозможною, чувствовалось больным и раздражало его» [490]).

<sup>206</sup> Ibid, 453. («В больших глазах его, устремленных на поставленный на ломберном, покрытом цветною салфеткой столе образ, выражалась такая страстная мольба и надежда, что Левину было ужасно смотреть на это. Левин знал, что эта страстная мольба и надежда сделают только еще тяжелее для него разлуку с жизнью, которую он так любил» [497]).

faith [was] a desperate hope of recovery.”<sup>207</sup> After receiving the sacrament, Nikolai’s spirits are lifted and it seems like he will make a miraculous recovery, yet this hope proves to be unfounded. “He’s just one of those people of whom they say they’re not for this world,” Levin admits to Kitty mournfully, and this quote harkens back to the very same thing that Natalia Savishna says of Nikolenka’s mother in *Childhood*.<sup>208</sup>

Nikolai’s thoughts while he is “setting off”—a euphemism he uses for dying which he repeats over and over—is not revealed to the reader and we must therefore look to the narrator’s minute descriptions to catch a glimpse of what the dying man must have been thinking. Nikolai gruffly yells at Kitty to leave the room as he does not want to die in her presence. Levin takes over Kitty’s duties at the deathbed, laying “his brother down on his back...the dying man lay with closed eyes, but the muscles twitched from time to time on his forehead, as with one thinking deeply and intensely.”<sup>209</sup> The impenetrable expression of Nikolai’s face, as well as his silence and stillness cause Levin deep distress and push him deeper into his existential despair: “Levin involuntarily thought with him of what it was that was happening to him now, but in spite of all his mental efforts to go along with him he saw by the expression of that calm, stern face that for the dying man all was growing clearer and clearer that was still as dark as ever for Levin.”<sup>210</sup> Nikolai exclaims from time to time “yes, yes, so” and “wait a little” and “Right!” as if he is seeing existential truths clearly for the first time. It seems as if Nikolai is experiencing a similar

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<sup>207</sup> Ibid., 454. («...он знал, что теперешнее возвращение его не было законное, совершившееся путем той же мысли, но было только временное, корыстное, с безумною надеждой исцеления» [ibid]).

<sup>208</sup> Ibid, 453. («Вот именно один из тех людей, о которых говорят, что они не для этого мира» [ibid]).

<sup>209</sup> Ibid, 455. («Левин положил брата на спину, сел подле него и, не дыша, глядел на его лицо. Умиравший лежал, закрыв глаза, но на лбу его изредка шевелились мускулы, как у человека, который глубоко и напряженно думает» [498]).

<sup>210</sup> Ibid. («Левин невольно думал вместе с ним о том, что такое совершается теперь в нем, но, несмотря на все усилия мысли, чтоб идти с ним вместе, он видел по выражению этого спокойного строгого лица и игре мускула над бровью, что для умирающего уясняется и уясняется то, что все так же темно остается для Левина» [ibid])

dream to Andrei's, but unlike Andrei who awakens from the dream prepared to die, the next morning Nikolai continues to hope for recovery.

When his death finally arrives, Nikolai's life has grown so hateful to him that he welcomes it, and in this way, he mirrors aspects of Andrei's longing for death. While Andrei may have been too morally weak to return to life, Nikolai's wish for death is mixed with anger, loathing, and at the same time, indifference. His eyes "had still the same reproachful look."<sup>211</sup> After receiving the priest's blessing for the dying, Nikolai "stretched, sighed and opened his eyes," and when the priest declares him dead, Nikolai quietly asserts, "not quite...soon."<sup>212</sup> Immediately after, he dies. What is particularly interesting about Nikolai's actual death and dying process is that his death is not announced by the narrator. Unlike in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, in which the narrator explains that "Ivan Ilyich inhaled a breath, stopped halfway, stretched out and died" the narrator of *Anna Karenina* carefully describes the process of dying to death as such: "a minute later the face brightened [просветело], a smile came out from under the moustaches, and the women who had gathered round began carefully laying out the corpse."<sup>213</sup> Just like Ivan Ilyich's famous realization that "death is finished, death is no more" Nikolai's goes from being a body (in Levin's eyes), to being a troubled and restless soul, to being a corpse—there is no death in the narrative sense. Nikolai's death is also communicated not in terms of darkness, but in terms of light, happiness, and peace—an implied sense of enlightenment that is only experienced and understood by Nikolai, which is inaccessible to the reader (and to the living). This choice of words on Tolstoy's part weakens the argument that Nikolai dies a bad

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid, 459. («Взгляд его был все тот же укоризненный и напряженный» [501]).

<sup>212</sup> Ibid, 458. («...умирающий потянулся, вздохнул и открыл глаза...—Не совсем... Скоро...» [502]).

<sup>213</sup> Ibid, 459. («И через минуту лицо просветлело, под усами выступила улыбка, и собравшиеся женщины озабоченно принялись убирать покойника» [ibid]).



death, for it is implied that he has reached some sort of existential enlightenment in the last seconds of his life.

This move of portraying death as light and darkness as falsity is typical for Tolstoy, but as Danaher shows, there are multiple dimensions to the metaphor of light used by Tolstoy's narrators. While Danaher only analyzes the motifs of light and darkness as they are portrayed in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, I argue that we already see an established pattern of this discussion of light in Tolstoy's portrayal of Nikolai in *Anna Karenina*. Additionally, I assert that Tolstoy's use of these motifs in his later works is an extension of this idea already intimated in his novels before his crisis. My goal here is not to rehash Danaher's entire argument, but rather to draw parallels between his analysis of light and dark motifs and Heideggerian ideas of Inauthenticity and Authenticity as they appear in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. Danaher argues that while darkness consistently denotes falsity and untruth in Tolstoy's fiction, the writer establishes two forms of light: a 'false' light portrayed as glittering and shimmering [блестящий свет] and 'true' light signaling enlightenment and existential Authentic awareness. As Danaher asserts, the Russian word for light—свет—is versatile enough to allow for an interpretation of both a light at the end of Ivan Ilyich's black bag, which represents true light, and also false glittering light, which represents the pernicious influence of high society.<sup>214</sup>

The sparkling light, I assert, is used to denote the Inauthenticity of Ivan Ilyich's existence before and after he realizes the seriousness of his illness: it is mentioned in regards to Ivan Ilyich's profession as a judge, his marriage to the pernicious Praskovya Fedorovna, his doctor's empty words, and his game nights with friends. Danaher astutely observes that as Ivan Ilyich's illness worsens, the sparkling light to which he was drawn in his healthy days dims; as a result,

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<sup>214</sup> David S. Danaher, "Tolstoy's Use of Light and Dark Imagery in the *Death of Ivan Il'ich*." *Slavic and Eastern European Journal* 39, no. 2 (1995): 227.

he is plunged into darkness to the point where even the light of day becomes an emblem of untruth. The night, on the other hand, during which Ivan Ilyich suffers from existential dread and Anxiety, represents his first step out of the false light into the true light; darkness, while representing ignorance, is the beginning of the encounter with truth.<sup>215</sup> It is during the night that Ivan Ilyich, in looking at Gerasim's slumbering face, realizes that his entire life was false: "What if my whole life has been wrong?"<sup>216</sup> This darkness envelops Ivan completely as he contemplates the errors of his life, leaving him hopeless and in despair.

Danaher's discussion of darkness is particularly illuminating in that he associates this darkness with Ivan's realization of death-in-life, and one can connect this experience to the Anxiety inspired by confronting the fact that death is not a case of others, but an individual and solitary experience. Before his illness, Ivan Ilyich is able to seamlessly blend into the They by distracting himself from his mortality—he busies himself with his work, friends, and apartment decorating, and here Danaher makes the interesting point that Ivan's illness begins when he falls from the ladder while he is hanging curtains, a clear indication of his attempt to drown out the light of truth and his general refusal to confront death.<sup>217</sup> Ivan Ilyich's journey toward the true light is not linear in the slightest because he is distracted by both the darkness he finds himself in and the glittering false light of societal expectations and norms. With the help of Gerasim, who represents the true light and who is never associated with any dark imagery, Ivan Ilyich reconfigures himself in his relationship with family and friends, and ultimately, with his mortality. He pities his family for the suffering that his illness must cause them, and this pity

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<sup>215</sup> Ibid, 231.

<sup>216</sup> Tolstoy, *Death of Ivan Ilyich*, 98. («вся моя жизнь, сознательная жизнь, была "не то"» [Толстой, *Избранные повести и рассказы*, 146]).

<sup>217</sup> Danaher, "Tolstoy's Use of Light and Dark Imagery in the *Death of Ivan Il'ic*": 106.

allows him to part with life more easily: “it will be better for them when I die,” he thinks.<sup>218</sup>

Ivan’s knowledge of his own mortality, attained only once he sheds his desire to be entrenched in the They, allows him to see the true light. Thus, the text structurally moves from Ivan’s entrenchment in false light to darkness, and from darkness to true light. Ivan’s journey is one of unlearning and disentangling himself from the They in his quest to achieve Authenticity.

Because so much has been written about *Death of Ivan Ilyich*, I conclude my discussion of the novella by contrasting Ivan Ilyich’s dying experience to Nikolai’s, particularly because the narratives share so much in common. On the surface, however, it might seem that Nikolai and Ivan as characters could not be more different and are only united in the fact that they both die from incurable illness. Nikolai is a former political activist who wants to reform his society—Ivan Ilyich is a judge enforcing the very laws that Nikolai hopes to dismantle. Nikolai is a loner who has few friends, while Ivan Ilyich is at the center of a lively friend group with a family. Nikolai is a man in search of something to invest in and to believe in (as is evidenced by his former life as a devout observer and his desperate praying during his last days); For Ivan Ilyich, on the other hand, faith only factors into his life when he is at death’s door. Nikolai dies a seemingly bad death, a death consumed by fear of death and anger at his circumstances, or so it seems to the reader who does not have insight into his intimate thoughts, while Ivan dies a good death because he is able to see the true light in his very last minutes.

There is, however, quite a bit that these two narratives of dying have in common, particularly once we examine the minute details and descriptions employed by Tolstoy’s narrators.<sup>219</sup> Here, it is important to refer back to Tolstoy’s definition of dying beautifully in

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<sup>218</sup> Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, 105. («Им жалко, но им лучше будет, когда я умру» [147]).

<sup>219</sup> As mentioned earlier, the narrator of *Anna Karenina* has limited access to certain character’s thoughts—only the details of the inner workings of Anna and Levin’s mind are presented to the reader. In *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, the

regards “Three Deaths”: to Tolstoy, a good death is one devoid of falsity, pity, fear, and one in which the dying person does not “break.”<sup>220</sup> In this parable, it is the tree that experiences a good death, and it seems that Tolstoy implies that a good death is not possible for human beings, for they cannot experience death without either fear or attachment to the living world. In his later works, Tolstoy has revised his stance in this regard—a good death for the individual is indeed achievable. Ivan Ilyich is granted a good death, despite the falsity of his former healthy life because he sheds his fear of death in his very last hours. Whether Nikolai experiences a good death is ambiguous, for as I have shown, the absence of insight into his thoughts precludes any certainty of this fact. On the surface, it seems Nikolai dies a bad death: he admits to fearing death, he lies to himself about his prognosis, and he regrets his departure from life until he is consumed by unbearable physical pain. The fact that Nikolai’s face brightens once he dies, however, and Tolstoy’s intentional mentioning of “цвет” in this scene allows for a possibility that Nikolai, like Ivan Ilyich, has gained a sense of acceptance of his death.

Let us examine in more detail the similarities between these two dying men, for such an analysis will show that Nikolai serves as a prototype for Ivan Ilyich. Both men envy the living and feel that their vitality accentuates the nearness of their deaths, and this is evident in the description of their glances: Nikolai’s “glittering eyes looked sternly and reproachfully” at Levin;<sup>221</sup> Ivan Ilyich’s glance is also filled with anger, and in looking at his wife, “he turned his eyes towards her with a such a look that she did not finish what she was saying; so great an animosity...did that look express.”<sup>222</sup> Both men suffer intolerably from physical symptoms, yet it

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narrator has access not only to Ivan Ilyich’s thoughts, but also to Petr Ivanovich’s, who serves as a conduit for the narrator to explore ideas of Inauthenticity in the beginning of the novella.

<sup>220</sup> The word he uses in his letter is “ломается.”

<sup>221</sup> Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, 447. («...блестящие глаза строго и укоризненно взглянули на входившего брата» [Толстой, *Анна Каренина*, 488]).

<sup>222</sup> Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, 97. («Она не договорила того, что начала: такая злоба...выражалась в этом взгляде» [Толстой, *Избранные повести и рассказы*, 144]).

is their mental anguish at having to die that causes them the most pain. In both narratives, there are significant biblical allusions, particularly in regards to Nikolai and Ivan Ilyich receiving the sacrament, and of the biblical significance of their last three days of suffering, a significant number that signifies a move from death to resurrection. After receiving the sacrament, Nikolai once more hopes for recovery: “He did not cough once in the course of an hour, smiled, kissed Kitty’s hand, thanking her with tears, and said he was comfortable, free from pain, and that he felt strong and had an appetite.”<sup>223</sup> Ivan Ilyich, too, after receiving extreme unction hopes for recovery: “When the priest came and heard his confession, Ivan Ilyich was softened and seemed to feel a relief from his doubts and consequently from his sufferings, and for a moment there came a ray of hope. He again began to think of the vermiform appendix and the possibility of correcting it. He received the sacrament with tears in his eyes.”<sup>224</sup> Both men’s hopes for recovery are their final moments of Inauthenticity, or rather non-life and death, and the three days that follow are significant as both men internalize Authentic existential truths. Thus, when they die, their deaths are less about the physical end of life and more about spiritual awakening and resurrection.

Another interesting detail, which has not been adequately discussed in Tolstoy scholarship, is the mentioning of the word “кончиться” (to end) in relation to both Nikolai and Ivan Ilyich’s death, and here we see one of the clearest ties between the ideas intimated in *Anna Karenina* and *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. After having the prayer for the dying read over him, Nikolai lies silent and unmoving and the priest incorrectly pronounces him dead: “Кончился,”

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<sup>223</sup> Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, 454. «После помазания больному стало вдруг гораздо лучше. Он не кашлял ни разу в продолжение часа, улыбался, целовал руку Кити, со слезами благодаря ее, и говорил, что ему хорошо, нигде не больно и что он чувствует аппетит и силу» (Толстой, *Анна Каренина*, 496).

<sup>224</sup> Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, 100. («Когда пришел священник и исповедовал его, он смягчился, почувствовал как будто облегчение от своих сомнений и вследствие этого от страданий, и на него нашла минута надежды. Он опять стал думать о слепой кишке и возможности исправления ее. Он причастился со слезами на глазах» [Толстой, *Избранные повести и рассказы*, 145].

he says, using the word in accordance with the Russian euphemism to mean “he is dead.” In Ivan Ilyich’s case, he hears someone above him say “Конченно”—translated often into English as “it is over”—and at the mention of this word, Ivan Ilyich realizes that “death is finished, it is no more.” In examining the grammatical difference between these two forms of the verb “to end,” we can see the progression of Tolstoy’s view on death. In Nikolai’s case, “кончился”—the active form of the verb кончиться—allows for a reading in which Nikolai himself is “finished”; with his death, he ceases to be. In Ivan Ilyich’s case, “конченно”—the intransitive version of the verb кончиться—implies an inanimate process, where death is finished, not Ivan Ilyich himself. The slight difference in these two verb tenses implies that the late Tolstoy’s views on death have shifted from a more straightforward reading of death as the end of life, to a more spiritual one, in which the process of death can be finished without it meaning the end of the person himself.

Thus, in Tolstoy’s fiction, the meaning of a beautiful death—or rather, dying a good death—depends on the dying person’s orientation to his or her own mortality. For characters who die good deaths, like Platon Karataev, Ivan Ilyich, and maybe even Nikolai Levin, death is not seen as an escape from the earthly world (as it is for Andrei), nor is it feared and lamented (as it is by the noblewoman of “Three Deaths”). Instead, death is seen as a source of light and truth, just as it is for Ivan Ilyich in the very last moments of his life. Unlike Turgenev who portrays death in the traditional form of darkness and silence and life as light and noise, Tolstoy inverts this formulation to show that darkness represents the world of ignorance, while sparkling light represents untruth and falsity—the world of society and the They—and true light represents epiphany and truth. Thus, death has something incredibly important to teach us, and according to Tolstoy, it is only in confronting death and staring into its abyss that brings true enlightenment and understanding. This truth is usually communicated and represented by peasant characters,

such as Platon Karataev and Gerasim who understand that death is nothing to be feared, but must in fact be embraced. In Dostoevsky's formulation, as we shall see, peasants do not factor into his idea of a good death, and whether a good death is even achievable is perpetually questioned by his narrators and dying characters.

### “Dying Virtuously” in Dostoevsky's Fiction

Like his predecessors Turgenev and Tolstoy, Dostoevsky understood that the true existential significance of life can only be understood in moments when one is confronted with death.<sup>225</sup> Confronting death is traumatic—that we already know, and Dostoevsky perhaps internalized this idea more intimately than his literary predecessors. While it is true that both Turgenev and Tolstoy were consumed with thoughts of death (Turgenev being a self-proclaimed hypochondriac and Tolstoy constantly ruminating over suicidal thoughts and existential despair) it was Dostoevsky who confronted death in a far more personal way. His almost-execution for his involvement with the Petrashevsky Circle stands out in his biography as being his most transformative encounter with death. Additionally, his life-long battle with epilepsy also served as a constant reminder of his mortality. Dostoevsky himself states his nearness to death in a letter to Stepan Yanovskii, a trusted physician and close friend: “I have been sick and near death in the full sense of the word. I was ill to the most intense degree...Now I am out of danger, but just barely, because the illness has stayed with me.”<sup>226</sup> Thus, the theme of confronting death appears consistently throughout Dostoevsky's works.

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<sup>225</sup> М. О. Баруткина, “Книга «Откровение Иоанна Богослова» в творческом диалоге Волошин–Достоевский,” *Український філологічний вестник* 5 (2014): 56.

<sup>226</sup> James L. Rice, *Dostoevsky and the Healing Art: An Essay in Literary and Medical History* (Ann Arbor: Ardis Publishing, 1985), 3.

The focus of my discussion, however, is less about the transcendental and religious functions of death and even less is it about the various forms of violent deaths present in his novels (for example, murders and suicides, which comprise many characters' ends) and more about Dostoevsky's portrayal of the experience of dying from illness. As we shall see, Dostoevsky's idea of a good death is more nebulous than that of Turgenev and Tolstoy, and he explores bad deaths in much greater detail as a foil to the idea of the right way to die, and implicitly, of the right way to live. For Dostoevsky, a bad death is one marked not just by an absence of faith, as it is in Turgenev and Tolstoy's formulation, but by an adamant rejection of it. In other words, a steadfast and arrogant nonbeliever is guaranteed a bad death, and a good death is only possible if one finds inner strength from religious faith.

When we think of images of death in Dostoevsky's fiction, the one that stands out most clearly is the image of the dead body of Christ which transfixes and inspires horror in Prince Myshkin and Ippolit in *The Idiot*. In looking at Rogozhin's copy of the famous painting by Hans Holbein the Younger, Myshkin proclaims that the image of the decomposing body of Jesus—marred, skeletal, and hauntingly human—could make any person lose their faith. The painting is especially horrifying for Ippolit, a seventeen-year-old boy who is dying from tuberculosis. Ippolit remarks on the terror he felt after looking at this painting in his "Essential Statement," which he reads to a room of indifferent acquaintances. Ippolit, weak from coughing fits and immersed in self-pity, details the horror he feels at his inescapable death and reveals the hatred he harbors for those around him who are healthy but who are nevertheless miserable with their lives: "I knew I had a disease that spares no one, and I had no illusion," Ippolit explains, "[and] anyone into whose hands my 'Explanation' falls...may look upon me as a madman, or as a schoolboy, or, more likely still, as a man condemned to death, for whom it's natural to believe



that everyone else thinks too little of life and is apt to waste it too cheaply, and to use it too lazily, too shamelessly, that [none] of them [are] worthy of it!”<sup>227</sup> Ippolit is consumed by anger at the injustice of nature (and God) “sentencing” him to death. There is no hope for spiritual renewal for Ippolit, nor is there any hope of recovered faith in the face of death. His despondency, distress, and rejection of powers greater than himself root him in the material world in which God cannot exist. In rejecting any notion of faith as his death nears, Ippolit finds himself painfully alone and terrified.

The image of the dead body of Christ is particularly disturbing for Ippolit because it signifies the blind indifference of nature to the desires and will of the individual. In describing the effect the painting has on him Ippolit admits that “it produced a strange uneasiness in me...in [the painting] there is no trace of beauty...it is simply nature and the corpse of a man.”<sup>228</sup> This observation undercuts the very question he posed to Prince Myshkin earlier (“what sort of beauty will save the world?”), for there can be no beauty in the face of death, at least not for him. Ippolit plans to commit suicide so as to avoid expiring from his disease and says “when I read these lines, the sun will, no doubt, be rising and ‘resounding in the sky,’ and its vast immeasurable power will be shed upon the earth. So be it! I shall be looking straight at the source of power and life; I do not want this life!”<sup>229</sup> Ippolit rails against nature, and in doing so, articulates his

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<sup>227</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, trans. Constance Barnett (London: Wordsworth Editions, 1996), 356. («Пусть тот, кому попадется в руки мое «Объяснение» и у кого станет терпения прочесть его, сочтет меня за помешанного, или даже за гимназиста, а вернее всего, за приговоренного к смерти, которому, естественно, стало казаться, что все люди, кроме него, Федор Михайлович Достоевский Идиот слишком жизнью не дорожат, слишком дешево повадились тратить ее, слишком лениво, слишком бессовестно ею пользуются, а стало быть, все до единого не достойны ее!» [Ф. М. Достоевский, *Собрание сочинений*, том 6: *Идиот* (Москва: Государственное издательство художественной литературы, 1957), 447]

<sup>228</sup> Ibid, 369. («...она произвела во мне какое-то странное беспокойство...тут одна природа, и воистину таковы и должен быть труп человека...» [463])

<sup>229</sup> Ibid, 375. («Когда я дойду до этих строк, то, наверно, уж взойдет солнце и «зазвучит на небе», и польется громадная, неисчислимая сила по всей подсолнечной. Пусть! Я умру, прямо смотря на источник силы и жизни, и не захочу этой жизни!» [471]).

disbelief in God and religious salvation in a similar way to Ivan Karamazov. For Ivan, this question poses itself in the form of child suffering—how can a benevolent God enact and justify the suffering of the innocent, who have not yet had an opportunity to sin?—and indeed, Ippolit is such a child, although he admits that his experience at being-near-death has caused him to live “these six months as...living to grey old age.”<sup>230</sup> Similarly, Ippolit questions how one can have blind faith in “that infinite power, that dull, dark, dumb force” which does not discriminate in its enactment of suffering and death.<sup>231</sup> This is the very same feeling of dread felt by Turgenev’s narrator of “Journey to Poles'e,” who is similarly wrought with despair at confronting the certainty of death.

Ippolit’s “Essential Statement” has been unfairly glossed over in scholarship, and perhaps it is because of its chaotic and pontificating tone, or perhaps it is because Ippolit as a character seems one-dimensional—on the surface, he is an angry young man (or a child, depending on one’s interpretation) who is hated by virtually everyone he knows because of his unpleasant nature and dogmatic ideals. He haughtily defends his atheism (or rather, his refusal to believe in a higher power). However, what I hope to illuminate is the multi-dimensional structure of Ippolit’s character by uncovering the reasons behind the anger at his own demise. In doing so, I argue that Ippolit exhibits more of a theotropic orientation than rigid atheism: Ippolit *wants* to believe, he wants to have faith, but his rational dogma and cold intellectualism prevent him from doing so, just as they do for Ivan Karamazov.<sup>232</sup> For both Ippolit and Ivan, their refusal to discard their rationality for a leap of faith leads them both towards a bad death—Ivan loses himself in

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<sup>230</sup> Ibid, 356. («Ну, кто же не сочтет меня за сморчка, не знающего жизни, забыв, что мне уже не восемнадцать лет; забыв, что так жить, как я жил в эти шесть месяцев, значит уже дожить до седых волос» [ibid, 446]).

<sup>231</sup> Ibid, 370. («Но мне как будто казалось временами, что я вижу, в какой-то странной и невозможной форме, эту бесконечную силу, это глухое, темное и немое существо» [464]).

<sup>232</sup> Theotropic is defined as an inclination towards religion and the yearning to connect one’s mundane life to the beyond (<https://www.encyclo.co.uk/meaning-of-theotropic>).

madness, which for Dostoevsky is in itself is a type of death, and Ippolit dies a literal death “in a state of terrible excitement somewhat sooner than he had expected.”<sup>233</sup>

Ippolit’s “Essential Statement” is one of the clearest explorations of Anxiety at *being-towards-death* in Dostoevsky’s fiction, and more so, it is the only account in which the dying person analyzes and communicates their fear of death from a first-person perspective. There are, of course, other admissions from dying characters about their own deaths, but none of these characters go into as much detail about their existential dread as Ippolit does. For example, Katerina Ivanovna from *Crime and Punishment* (*Преступление и наказание*, 1864) barely acknowledges the severity of her illness or contemplates the existential dimensions of her nearness to death, most likely because she is so consumed by material and financial concerns. In her final moments, however, she aligns herself with Ippolit in her stark rejection of religion. As those around her discuss summoning a priest to read the final sacrament, Katerina Ivanovna adamantly refuses: “What, the priest? I don’t want him. You haven’t got a ruble to spare. I have no sins. God must forgive me without that. He knows how I have suffered.... And if He won’t forgive me, I don’t care!”<sup>234</sup> Like Ippolit, her death is painful and wretched—an unmistakably bad death: “She sank more and more into uneasy delirium. At times she shuddered, turned her eyes from side to side, recognized everyone for a minute, but at once sank into delirium again. Her breathing was hoarse and difficult, there was a sort of rattle in her throat.”<sup>235</sup> Her last moments are also filled with horror: “She was violently excited [отчаянно] and tried to sit up. At

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<sup>233</sup> Ibid, 557. («Ипполит скончался в ужасном волнении...» [693]).

<sup>234</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, trans. Constance Barnett (New York: Vintage Classics, 1993), 434. («Что? Священника?... Не надо... Где у вас лишний целковый?... На мне нет грехов!... Бог и без того должен простить... Сам знает, как я страдала!... А не простит, так и не надо!...» [Ф. М. Достоевский, *Преступление и наказание* (Санкт-Петербург: СЗЛЭО, 1973): 334])

<sup>235</sup> Ibid, 435. («Беспокойный бред охватывал ее более и более. Порой она вздрагивала, обводила кругом глазами, узнавала всех на минуту; но тотчас же сознание снова сменялось бредом. Она хрипло и трудно дышала, что-то как будто клочкотало в горле» [ibid]).

last, in a horribly hoarse, broken voice, she began, shrieking and gasping at every word, with a look of growing terror.”<sup>236</sup> Her final words show insight into the misery and distress she experiences as she dies: ““Enough! It’s over! Farewell, poor thing! I am done for! I am broken!” she cried with vindictive despair, and her head fell heavily back on the pillow. She sank into unconsciousness again, but this time it did not last long. Her pale, yellow, wasted face dropped back, her mouth fell open, her leg moved convulsively, she gave a deep, deep sigh and died.”<sup>237</sup> The narrator of *The Idiot*, however, does not describe Ippolit’s last moments, but we can assume they are also marked by despair.<sup>238</sup>

Ippolit details his struggle with accepting his terminal diagnosis in his “Essential Statement,” and in his retelling we notice certain Heideggerian themes. In confronting death, Ippolit’s fear of death takes the form of a scorpion-like creature, “an awful animal, a sort of monster...[but] more disgusting and much more horrible...because there was nothing like it in nature, and that it had come *expressly* to me.”<sup>239</sup> Ippolit admits that his first reaction at his terminal diagnosis was to cling ever more tightly to life as a way of avoiding the thought of death—a clear indication of his withdrawal into the They:

I knew for a fact that I had consumption and it was incurable. I did not deceive myself...but the more clearly I understood it, the more feverishly I longed to live: I clutched at life, I wanted to live whatever happened...why did I actually *begin* living,

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<sup>236</sup> Ibid. («—Довольно!...Пора!...Прощай, горемыка!...Уездили клячу!...Надорвала-а-ась! —крикнула она отчаянно и ненавистно и грохнулась головой о подушку. Она вновь забылась, но это последнее забытье продолжалось недолго. Бледно-желтое, иссохшее лицо ее закинулось навзничь назад, рот раскрылся, ноги судорожно протянулись. Она глубоко-глубоко вздохнула и умерла») [335].

<sup>237</sup> Ibid. («Она была в чрезвычайном волнении и усиливалась приподняться. Наконец, страшным, хриплым, надрывающимся голосом она начала, вскрикивая и задыхаясь на каждом слове, с видом какого-то возраставшего испуга») [ibid].

<sup>238</sup> It is important to note that the omniscience of the narrator of *The Idiot* dims significantly after Myshkin descends into madness. The narrator relies on gossip and unreliable information to piece together the final events of the narrative, and it may be because of this epistemological problem that the narrator cannot communicate the details of Ippolit’s final moments.

<sup>239</sup> Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 352. («Оно было вроде скорпиона, но не скорпион, а гаже и гораздо ужаснее, и, кажется, именно тем, что таких животных в природе нет, и что оно нарочно у меня явилось, и что в этом самом заключается будто бы какая-то тайна») [441].

knowing that I couldn't begin it now? Why did I try it, knowing that it was useless for me to try anything?"<sup>240</sup>

Here, Dostoevsky anticipates the very thoughts of Ivan Ilyich when he understands that he is dying: "What do I want?" Ivan Ilyich wonders, "to live! I want to live!"<sup>241</sup> Ippolit also admits his refusal to detach from the *They* as his illness progresses:

I remember now with what greedy interest I began, at that time, watching *their* life...I pried into every detail, and was so interested in every rumor that I believe I became a regular gossip. I couldn't understand, for instance, why people who had so much life before them did not become rich...I knew one poor fellow, who I was told afterwards, died of hunger, and I remember it made me furious: if it had been possible to bring the poor devil back to life, I believe I'd have had him executed.<sup>242</sup>

Instead of focusing on his own internal world and righting the error of his Inauthentic ways (as Tolstoy's dying characters do), Ippolit grows evermore hateful and jealous of the living, and this loathing distracts him from his own death.

Unbeknownst to his audience, Ippolit has decided to shoot himself at the break of dawn to exercise his self-determination which he feels has been robbed by death, nature, and God. "If death is so awful and the laws of nature so mighty, how can they be overcome?" Ippolit laments, "How can they be overcome if even He did not conquer them?"<sup>243</sup> He admits to his audience that the thought of having to die naturally and being at the mercy of nature is unbearable to him, and

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<sup>240</sup> Ibid, 355. («Я положительно знал, что у меня чахотка, и неизлечимая; я не обманывал себя и понимал дело ясно. Но чем яснее я его понимал, тем судорожнее мне хотелось жить; я цеплялся за жизнь и хотел жить во что бы то ни стало...Но чем яснее я его понимал, тем судорожнее мне хотелось жить; я цеплялся за жизнь и хотел жить во что бы то ни стало. Согласен, что я мог тогда злиться на темный и глухой жребий, распорядившийся раздавить меня как муху и, конечно, не зная зачем; но зачем же я не кончил одну злостью? Зачем я действительно начинал жить, зная, что мне уже нельзя начинать...» [445]).

<sup>241</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, 100. («Жить, жить хочу» [145]).

<sup>242</sup> Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 355. («Припоминаю теперь, с каким жадным интересом я стал следить тогда за ихнею жизнью... Я до того вникал во все мелочи, интересовался всякими слухами, что, кажется, сделался сплетником. Я не понимал, например, как эти люди, имея столько жизни, не умеют сделаться богачами. Я знал одного бедняка, про которого мне потом рассказывали, что он умер с голоду, и, помню, это вывело меня из себя: если бы можно было этого бедняка оживить, я бы, кажется, казнил его» [ibid]).

<sup>243</sup> Ibid, 369. («Тут невольно приходит понятие, что если так ужасна смерть и так сильны законы природы, то как же одолеть их? Как одолеть их, когда не победил их теперь даже тот, который побеждал и природу при жизни своей, которому она подчинялась...» [464]).

again he returns to the image of the dead Christ. Ippolit echoes the same sentiment as Myshkin, that

in looking at such a picture, one conceives of nature in the shape of an immense, merciless, dumb beast, or more correctly...in the form of a huge machine of the most modern construction which, dull and insensible, has aimlessly clutched, crushed, and swallowed up a great priceless Being, a Being worth all nature and its laws, worth the whole earth, which was created perhaps solely for the sake of the advent of that Being. This picture expresses and unconsciously suggests to one the conception of such a dark, insolent, unreasoning and eternal Power to which everything is in subjection.<sup>244</sup>

With this admission, Ippolit identifies the root of his existential dread: there is a power that is so much greater than himself that its overwhelming might crushes any rational meaning or purpose of his life. What is the point of doing good, of being moral, of bettering oneself if one is to be annihilated at any moment? Ippolit identifies an apparition of Rogozhin, who in many ways represents the angel of death throughout the novel, as what pushes him to suicide.<sup>245</sup> Indeed, Rogozhin's image has a particularly dark significance for Ippolit: it is, after all, at Rogozhin's house that Ippolit first sees the painting of the dead Christ. In the darkness and silence of Ippolit's room, Rogozhin stares at the dying boy and inspires in him not dread or fear, but fury. Ippolit's obvious discomfort and feverish countenance makes the Rogozhin-apparition "part his lips as though he were going to laugh; he stared at me persistently."<sup>246</sup> This laugh underscores Ippolit's certainty in nature's indifference towards his desires and will. The apparition goes even

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<sup>244</sup> Ibid, 370. («Природа мерещится при взгляде на эту картину в виде какого-то огромного, неумолимого и немого зверя, или, вернее, гораздо вернее сказать, хоть и странно, — в виде какой-нибудь громадной машины новейшего устройства, которая бессмысленно захватила, раздробила и поглотила в себя, глухо и бесчувственно, великое и бесценное существо — такое существо, которое одно стоило всей природы и всех законов ее, всей земли, которая и создавалась-то, может быть, единственно для одного только появления этого существа! Картиной этою как будто именно выражается это понятие о темной, наглой и бессмысленно-вечной силе, которой всё подчинено, и передается вам невольно» [ibid]).

<sup>245</sup> Natassya Filippovna, for example, also sees an apparition of Rogozhin before her death: "Nastassya Filippovna was in a terrible state. [Myshkin] found her in a condition approaching complete madness. She kept screaming, shuddering, and crying out that Rogozhin was hidden in the garden, in her house, that she had seen him just now, that he would kill her in the night, that he would cut her throat!" (ibid, 537).

<sup>246</sup> Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 371. («Рогожин...стал раздвигать свой рот, точно готовясь смеяться. он смотрел на меня в упор» [466]).

further that mere apathy: to Ippolit, it seems that death is laughing at him. This “final decision” to commit suicide he admits, “was not [brought upon by] logic...but [by] a feeling of repulsion. I could not go on living a life which was taking such strange, humiliating forms. That apparition degraded me. I am not able to submit to the gloomy power that takes the shape of a spider.”<sup>247</sup> The suicide, however, does not go according to plan. In a humiliating turn of events, Ippolit pulls the trigger and faints from fright but is left unscathed—it is revealed that he mistakenly forgot to put the cap in the gun.

Ippolit’s rejection of faith marks him for a bad death: at many junctures in his life and especially in his “Essential Statement,” Ippolit spurns any idea of religious salvation in the face of death. Much like Bazarov in *Fathers and Sons*, Ippolit’s dogmatic atheism isolates him from others and from a broader sense of human and spiritual community, for he cannot reconcile the fact that a benevolent God could allow one to expire in such an agonizing (and to him, shameful) way. “What use to me is your nature, your Pavlovsk park, your sunrises and sunsets, your blue sky...when all this endless festival has begun by my being excluded from it?” he demands, “what is there for me in this beauty when, every minute, every second I am obliged, forced, to recognize that even the tiny fly, buzzing in the sunlight beside me, has its share in the banquet and the chorus, knows its place, loves it and is happy; and I alone am an outcast...?”<sup>248</sup> In dying, Ippolit feels himself unbearably separate from the world (the world of the They, in Heidegger’s formulation), and here, Dostoevsky identifies the main problem of faith: what is one to do with

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<sup>247</sup> Ibid, 372. («Окончательному решению способствовала, стало быть, не логика, не логическое убеждение, а отвращение. Нельзя оставаться в жизни, которая принимает такие странные, обижающие меня формы. Это приведение меня унизило. Я не в силах подчиниться темной силе, принимающей вид тарантула» [367]).

<sup>248</sup> Ibid. 373. («Для чего мне ваша природа, ваш павловский парк, ваши восходы и закаты солнца, ваше голубое небо и ваши вседовольные лица, когда весь этот пир, которому нет конца, начал с того, что одного меня счел за лишнего? Что мне во всей этой красоте, когда я каждую минуту, каждую секунду должен и принужден теперь знать, что вот даже эта крошечная мушка, которая жужжит теперь около меня в солнечном луче, и та даже во всем этом пире и хоре участница, место знает свое, любит его и счастлива, а я один выкидыш, и только по малодушию моему до сих пор не хотел понять это!» [469]).

the crushing, unbearable loneliness and Anxiety associated with *being-towards-death*? There seem to be two solutions to this predicament: one is to reject the world and God with derisive pleasure: this is the path Ippolit takes; the other is to reconcile one's suffering with faith, which is the path which Zosima and his dying brother Markel take in *The Brothers Karamazov* (*Братья Карамазовы*, 1882) which I discuss shortly.

For Ippolit, such a leap of faith seems impossible, most likely because he is consumed by the seeming injustice of his situation; however, he does not completely rule out the existence of God, at least the existence of an omnipotent, benevolent divine power as do most atheists in Dostoevsky's fiction. Instead, he maintains that he cannot *allow* himself—out of spite and anger—to reconcile himself with God, religion, and faith: “What need is there for my humility? Can't I simply be devoured without being expected to praise what devours me?” he asks.<sup>249</sup> As G. L. Cheryukina argues, “Ippolit, in contrast to Raskolnikov and Ivan Karamazov, has a strictly personal complaint against God, connected to the inevitability of his early death.”<sup>250</sup> Ippolit's rejection of humility, as we shall see, excludes him from the possibility of a good death. Although he does not adamantly deny the possibility of a future world (or rather, the world after death), he cannot allow himself to comprehend the idea of fate (or Providence, as he calls it) through the lens of religious faith, but instead, only through the lens of determinism. Ippolit admits that he cannot place blind faith in God because his human mind—and with it, rationality—can never understand nor reconcile God's mysterious ways: “it's impossible to understand Him...how shall I be judged for being unable to understand the will and laws of

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<sup>249</sup> Ibid, 375. («для чего при этом понадобилось смирение мое? Неужто нельзя меня просто съесть, не требуя от меня похвал тому, что меня съело?») [470].

<sup>250</sup> «У Ипполита, в отличие от Раскольникова и Ивана Карамазова, претензии к Богу сугубо личные, связанные с неизбежностью ранней смерти» (Г. Л. Черюкина, ««Жизнь есть рай» Маркел и Ипполит к вопросу о типологическом диапазоне в художественной антропологии Ф. М. Достоевский»: 31).



Providence? No, we'd better leave religion on one side."<sup>251</sup> Whatever the mind cannot comprehend must necessarily be discounted, according to Ippolit.

There is, however, an interesting moment between Ippolit and Prince Myshkin that occurs in one of Ippolit's final appearances in the novel and which points to his secret and repressed desire to recover his faith. As Ippolit and Myshkin discuss Ippolit's failed suicide attempt and the humiliation he has endured from others as a result, Ippolit relays a hurtful comment from Ganya, that "a decent man would die in silence, and that it's all egoism on my part."<sup>252</sup> The discussion turns to the historical figure Stepan Glebov who died "with extraordinary grandeur."<sup>253</sup> "God grants such deaths to men, but not to us!" Ippolit says, "You think, perhaps, I'm not capable of dying like Glebov?"<sup>254</sup> As the conversation turns to the idea of a noble, virtuous death, Ippolit inquires of Myshkin: "well now, come, tell me, what do you think would be the best way for me to die...to make a virtuous ending of it as far as may be, that is?"<sup>255</sup> Ippolit is desperate for an antidote to his suffering and hopes to meet his end with "virtue." Myshkin's answer to his plea, however, is terribly disappointing: "Pass us by, and forgive us our happiness," Myshkin says and Ippolit answers: "ha, ha, ha. Just as I thought! I knew it was sure to be something like that! But you...but you...well...You are eloquent people! Good bye! Good bye!"<sup>256</sup> This hesitation on the part of Ippolit is especially telling. What is it that he meant to say?

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<sup>251</sup> Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 375. («Мы слишком унижаем провидение, приписывая ему наши понятия, с досады, что не можем понять его. Но опять-таки, если понять его невозможно, то, повторяю, трудно и отвечать за то, что не дано человеку понять. А если так, то как же будут судить меня за то, что я не мог понять настоящей воли и законов провидения? Нет, уж лучше оставим религию» [471]).

<sup>252</sup> Ibid, 472. («...он теперь просто ругается, говорит, что порядочный человек умирает в таком случае молча и что во всем этом с моей стороны был один только эгоизм!» [590]).

<sup>253</sup> Ibid, 473. («...[он] умер с чрезвычайным великодушием» [591])

<sup>254</sup> Ibid, 472. («Дает же бог такие смерти людям, а нам таки нет! Вы, может быть, думаете, что я не способен умереть так, как Глебов?» [591])

<sup>255</sup> Ibid, 474. («Ну, хорошо, ну, скажите мне сами, ну, как по-вашему: как мне всего лучше умереть? Чтобы вышло как можно... добродетельнее, то есть?» [ibid]).

<sup>256</sup> Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, 474. («Ха-ха-ха! Так я и думал! Непременно чего-нибудь ждал в этом роде! Однако же вы...однако же вы...Ну-ну! Красноречивые люди! До свиданья, до свиданья!» [ibid]).

I contend that Ippolit, in posing such a question to Myshkin, hopes to hear a religious argument for the necessity of faith in order to die virtuously. It is interesting that Ippolit, who claims to hate Myshkin more than anyone in the world, asks him for his advice on how to die. Myshkin, more than any other character in the novel, is marked by his simple faith in God and in humanity. Myshkin does not offer a religious solution to Ippolit's existential suffering and Ippolit is visibly perturbed. Thus, I argue that Ippolit is more theotropic in his metaphysical orientation than he is traditionally atheist. It is not *just* pride that prohibits him from believing in God; it is also anger and a sense of injustice. By rejecting faith at this pivotal moment in his life, Ippolit is consumed by Anxiety that can only be alleviated, in his eyes, by the radical act of suicide. He cannot accept his death, and thus, he cannot accept God (and vice versa). Thus in Dostoevsky's formulation, Ippolit's hubris marks him for a bad death—one that is lonely, terrifying, and painful.

Before delving into a discussion of good deaths in Dostoevsky's works, it is important to consider certain metaphors employed by Ippolit to communicate his fear of death, and particularly, his agonizing experience of terminal illness, for this imagery provides significant insight into the emotional turmoil and existential horror which mark Ippolit's last few months. In his discussions with Myshkin and especially in his "Essential Statement," Ippolit continuously returns to images of imprisonment, condemnation, and execution to describe his internal world. This imagery of execution is pertinent to the discussion of free will within the novel, which for Dostoevsky, as for Ippolit, is a matter of great importance. However, while a fuller discussion of free will is outside the scope of this dissertation, I would like to shine light on how free will functions in relation to death and dying within the novel.

*The Idiot* is a novel with death very much at its center—Ippolit dies from illness, Nastassya Filippovna dies at the hands of Rogozhin, Myshkin, like Ivan Karamazov, loses his mind at the end of the novel—as mentioned before, this is a metaphorical death. But while the novel revolves around this theme of mortality, Dostoevsky extends the theme of death past the metaphysical and existential realm into the moral realm. In the beginning of the novel, Prince Myshkin discusses an execution that he witnessed in France a month prior to his arrival in St. Petersburg. This story, almost like the parable of the Great Inquisitor in *The Brothers Karamazov*, is the center of gravity around which the entire plot revolves. In his retelling of the event, Myshkin identifies the certainty of death—represented as the death sentence read over a prisoner—to be the worst kind of torture imaginable to a human being. “The chief and worst pain may not be in our bodily suffering but in one’s knowing for certain that in an hour, and then in ten minutes, and then in half a minute, and then now, at the very moment, the soul will leave the body and that one will cease to be a man,” Myshkin explains, “the worst part of it is that it’s *certain*.”<sup>257</sup> He continues to discuss the agony associated with certain death, arguing that

anyone murdered by brigands, whose throat is cut at night in the woods...must surely hope to escape till the very last minute...but in the other case, all that last hope, which makes dying ten times as easy, is taken away *for certain*. There is the sentence, and the whole awful torture lies in the fact that there is certainly no escape, and there is no torture in the world more terrible.<sup>258</sup>

In his “Essential Statement,” Ippolit continuously incorporates these themes of imprisonment and condemnation to describe his experience of terminal illness and to rationalize his decision to kill

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<sup>257</sup> Ibid, 19. («А ведь главная, самая сильная боль, может, не в ранах, а вот, что вот знаешь наверно, что вот через час, потом через десять минут, потом через полминуты, потом теперь, вот сейчас – душа из тела вылетит, и что человеком уж больше не будешь, и что это уж наверно; главное то, что *наверно*» [26]).

<sup>258</sup> Ibid. «Тот, кого убивают разбойники, режут ночью, в лесу или какнибудь, непременно еще надеется, что спасется, до самого последнего мгновения. Примеры бывали, что уж горло перерезано, а он еще надеется, или бежит, или просит. А тут, всю эту последнюю надежду, с которой умирать в десять раз легче, отнимают наверно; тут приговор, и в том, что наверно не избежешь, вся ужасная-то мука и сидит, и сильнее этой муки нет на свете» [ibid].

himself. He refers to himself as a man condemned to death on multiple occasions: “Why did I leave my room then?” he asks, “a man condemned to death ought not to leave his corner.”<sup>259</sup> He also mentions that he “was a man whose days were numbered” and that in attempting to forget the severity of his illness, many times Ippolit “forgot my death sentence.”<sup>260</sup> Even the menacing brick wall outside Ippolit’s window, which Ippolit continuously references evokes images of a prison, and he imagines himself as a prisoner who hopes to make one last “defense.” In outlining the reasons why he wrote his “Essential Statement,” Ippolit echoes the words of Katerina Ivanovna: “I don’t want to go away without leaving some word of defense—a free defense, not forced out of me, not to justify myself—oh no! I have no one’s forgiveness to ask, and nothing to ask forgiveness for.”<sup>261</sup> For Ippolit, just like for the condemned prisoner in Myshkin’s story, there is no hope of escaping death. “Nature has so limited my activity by its *three weeks’ sentence*, that perhaps suicide is the only action I still have time to begin and end by my own will,” Ippolit explains to his audience amidst a chorus of laughs and mockery, “I still have the power to die.”<sup>262</sup>

In writing this defense and planning to commit suicide, Ippolit hopes to take back some autonomy from nature (and from God although he does not explicitly mention this), whom he blames for his illness. “I am dying [at sunrise] not because I am not equal to bear these three weeks,” Ippolit insists, but in recalling Myshkin’s story it seems that his decision to kill himself is *precisely* because he is terrified of the moment when nature (or God) will end his life.<sup>263</sup> If the

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<sup>259</sup> Ibid, 350. («Приговоренный к смерти не должен оставлять своего угла» [439]).

<sup>260</sup> Ibid, 368, 357. («...я был человек, уже сосчитавший дни свои» «я забывал о моем приговоре» [461, 449]).

<sup>261</sup> Ibid, 373. («Не хочу уходить, не оставив слова в ответ, — слова свободного, а не вынужденного, —не для оправдания, —о нет!» [469]).

<sup>262</sup> Ibid, 375. («...природа до такой степени ограничила мою деятельность своими тремя неделями приговора, что, может быть, самоубийство есть единственное дело, которое я еще могу успеть начать и окончить по собственной воле моей» [471]).

<sup>263</sup> Ibid. («...я умираю вовсе не потому, что не в силах перенести эти три недели» [ibid]).

“Essential Statement” proves anything, it is that Ippolit is consumed with fear of death and of powers greater than himself that mercilessly enact his fate. His failed suicide is but an ironic and cruel manifestation of this very idea: Ippolit—or rather, the individual—is impotent in the face of powers greater than himself that he cannot and will never understand nor conquer. Myshkin’s advice to Ippolit, that “submissive faith is needed. That one must obey without reasoning, simply from piety...[in order to be] rewarded in the next world for...humility” serves as a blueprint for Dostoevsky’s idea that a good death is only possible for those who have internalized this very idea.<sup>264</sup> However, this understanding of terminal illness as a death sentence and as an ultimate execution is incredibly important for my later discussion of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *Cancer Ward* published almost a century after *The Idiot*. As we shall see, Solzhenitsyn inherits this discussion of external forces acting upon the will of the individual in the form of terminal illness, as well as the importance of self-determination at the end of life.

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky’s final novel, the dying Elder Zosima who in his recollections of his long-dead brother Markel most starkly articulates arguments for humility and faith that allow for a good death. It is important to mention that while humility and faith at the end of life are also necessary qualities for a good death in the works of Turgenev and Tolstoy, Dostoevsky extends this idea even further: the acceptance of death is no longer an internal, opaque process, but one that is inherently communal. It is imperative for Dostoevsky that the dying person exemplify humility and faith as an example for the living, many of whom are marked by their wickedness, hubris, and ignorance. Dostoevsky’s idea of a good death is possible only if the memory of the dead person becomes a beacon of righteousness, love, and

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<sup>264</sup> Ibid. («Правда, они говорят, и, уж конечно, князь вместе с ними, что тут-то послушание и нужно, что слушаться нужно без рассуждений, из одного благонравия, и что за кротость мою я непременно буду вознагражден на том свете» [ibid]).

strength for the living. In other words, death is a shared experience instead of a personal, individual one as it is for Turgenev and Tolstoy. Thus, death becomes an opportunity to reinforce ideals of faith, love, and community in the living, as opposed to a form of annihilation of the individual, as it is for Ippolit. In the final pages of the novel, Alyosha communicates this idea to a group of boys gathered around the grave of their recently departed friend Ilyusha: “Who has united us in this kind, good feeling which we shall remember and intend to remember all our lives?” Alyosha asks, “Who, if not Ilyusha, the good boy, the dear boy, precious to us forever! Let us never forget him. May his memory live forever in our hearts from this time forth!...Boys, my dear boys, let us all be generous and brave like Ilyusha...”<sup>265</sup>

In many ways, the themes and problems presented in *The Brothers Karamazov* as they relate to death are a continuation of the ideas explored in *The Idiot*. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky again returns to the image of the dead body—or rather, the image of a saint’s dead body—in order to continue his discussion of death and dying. Just as the painting of the dead Christ reinforces Ippolit’s rejection of faith, so too does the body of Zosima cause those around him to question their faith: Father Ferapont, for example, takes his decomposing body as evidence of Zosima’s unworthiness during life.<sup>266</sup> Even Alyosha, who until Zosima’s death was a fervent believer in his teachings, begins to doubt his steadfast faith: how could a merciful God allow his mentor and cherished friend to be the object of such humiliation after death? Zosima’s dying process and death are in many ways a catalyst for Alyosha’s spiritual rebirth, which allows him to reconnect with the world and with others in a deeper, more meaningful way. Furthermore,

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<sup>265</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: The Lowel Press, 1976), 1004. («Ну, а кто нас соединил в этом добром хорошем чувстве, о котором мы теперь всегда, всю жизнь вспоминать будем и вспоминать намерены, кто как не Илюшечка, добрый мальчик, милый мальчик, дорогой для нас мальчик на веки-веков!» [Ф. М. Достоевский, *Братья Карамазовы* (Москва: Издательство «Художественная литература» 1973), 783].

<sup>266</sup> Medieval belief surrounding saints’ deaths upheld the notion that a rotting body implies moral and spiritual corruption.

Zosima's death teaches Alyosha the invaluable lesson of the necessity of faith and humility, which he then teaches to others.

On the eve of his death, Zosima gives a brief account of his life to his devotees, in which he identifies his long-dead brother Markel (who, like Ippolit, died from tuberculosis at the young age of seventeen) as one of the most profound influences in his life. "Had he not come into my life, I should never perhaps, so I fancy at least, have become a monk and entered on this precious path," Zosima admits.<sup>267</sup> The elder also acknowledges that while he had never spoken of his brother before, he finds it telling that "here, at the end of my pilgrimage, he seems to have come to me over again."<sup>268</sup> In discussing the story of his brother and his recovered faith in the face of death, Zosima asserts that "there has been no presence in my life more precious, more significant and touching."<sup>269</sup> Indeed, the narrator admits that "on that evening of his life after his deep sleep in the day [Zosima] seemed suddenly to have found new strength."<sup>270</sup>

Only a few scholars have noted the similarities between Markel and Ippolit, and I argue that these two characters serve as foils to one another to illustrate a "right" orientation towards mortality (in Markel's case) and a "wrong" one (in Ippolit's case). As discussed earlier, Ippolit dies a bad death because of his adamant rejection of faith, not just by his lack of it. Before his terminal diagnosis, Markel aligns himself with Ippolit in this sense—Zosima recalls his brother laughing at the idea of religion: "It was the beginning of Lent, and Markel would not fast, he was rude and laughed at it. 'That's all silly twaddle, and there is no God,' he said, horrifying my

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<sup>267</sup> Ibid, 359. («...этот брат мой в судьбе моей как бы указанием и предназначением свыше, ибо не явись он в жизни моей, не будь его вовсе, и никогда-то, может быть, я так мыслю, не принял бы я иноческого сана и не вступил на драгоценный путь сей» [307]).

<sup>268</sup> Ibid. («...вот уже на склоне пути моего явилось мне воочию как бы повторение его» [ibid]).

<sup>269</sup> Ibid, 360. («...не было в жизни моей явления драгоценнее сего, более пророческого и трогательного» [ibid]).

<sup>270</sup> Ibid, 360. («...в этот последний вечер жизни своей он, после глубокого дневного сна, вдруг как бы обрел в себе новую силу» [ibid]).

mother, the servants, and me too.”<sup>271</sup> After this incident, Markel’s health takes a turn for the worse and he is diagnosed with advanced tuberculosis. Zosima’s mother, distraught by the news of her eldest son’s incurable illness, begs him to confess and take the sacrament, to which Markel “was angry, and said something profane about the church.”<sup>272</sup> In a similar way to Ippolit, Markel’s first reaction to his diagnosis is one of fury and spite. After internalizing the certainty of his death, however, Zosima recalls a notable change in his brother: “He grew thoughtful, however. He guessed at once that he was seriously ill, and that that was why his mother was begging him to confess and take the sacrament,” and a few days later, he decides to follow his mother’s advice, which he claims at the time, he does only for her sake.<sup>273</sup> This declaration, however, seems to be the last of Markel’s resistance against religion. When his nurse comes to light the lamp before the holy image, he does not blow it out as he had once done, but says, “‘Light it, light it, dear, I was a wretch to have prevented you doing it. You are praying when you light the lamp, and I am praying when I rejoice seeing you. So we are praying to the same God.’ Those words seemed strange to us.”<sup>274</sup>

It is evident that Markel, as opposed to Ippolit, sees his terminal diagnosis as his last chance to right himself before he dies an untimely death. Zosima recalls his brother’s face “sweet and gentle, smiling, his face bright and joyous, in spite of his illness.”<sup>275</sup> He realizes that “life is paradise, and we are all in paradise, but we won’t see it, if we would, we should have heaven on

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<sup>271</sup> Ibid, 361. («Начался великий пост, а Маркел не хочет поститься, бранится и над этим смеется: «все это бредни, говорит, и нет никакого и бога», так что в ужас привел и мать и прислугу, да и меня малого, ибо хотя был я и девяти лет всего, но, услышав слова сии, испугался очень и я» [310]).

<sup>272</sup> Ibid, 361. («Услышав рассердился и выбранил храм божий» [311]).

<sup>273</sup> Ibid. («...однако задумался: догадался сразу, что болен опасно и что потому-то родительница и посылает его, пока силы есть, поговеть и причаститься» [ibid]).

<sup>274</sup> Ibid, 363. («—Зажигай, милая, зажигай, изверг я был, что претил вам прежде. Ты богу лампадку зажигая молишься, а я на тебя радуясь молюсь. Значит одному богу и молимся». Странными казались нам эти слова...» [312]).

<sup>275</sup> Ibid, 362. («Так и запомню его: сидит тихий, кроткий, улыбается, сам больной, а лик веселый, радостный» [ibid]).



earth the next day.”<sup>276</sup> Markel revels in his abundant joy and love towards his friends and family, but is saddened by his blindness to certain religious truths in his arrogant adolescent days. He discards any sense of social hierarchy and claims that he is not worthy to be waited upon by his servants and wishes instead to wait upon them: “there must be servants and masters, but if so I will be the servant of my servants, the same as they are to me,” Markel says to his mother, “and another thing, Mother, every one of us has sinned against all men, and I more than any.”<sup>277</sup>

Markel ultimately articulates one of the starkest lessons and themes in Dostoevsky’s fiction, that we are all responsible for one another’s sins: “everyone is really responsible to all men for all men and for everything. I don't know how to explain it to you, but I feel it is so, painfully even. And how is it we went on living, getting angry, and not knowing?”<sup>278</sup> This sudden change in Markel’s personality is confusing to all who know him and attribute his newfound revelations to his illness. Even his doctor claims that “the disease is affecting his brain.”<sup>279</sup>

What differentiates Markel and Ippolit is their attitude towards others as they find themselves on the brink of death. Ippolit is filled with fury at the injustice of his “death sentence” and it is Myshkin who articulates the need for forgiveness (albeit it, *of* others) at this pivotal moment in his life. Markel, on the other hand, begs forgiveness *from* others. While Ippolit’s dying days are inspired by anger and hate in staring at the oppressive brick wall, Markel’s last days are spent observing the garden outside his window, which is filled with birds and the early buds of spring. In looking at the birds, Markel is overwhelmed by a need to apologize before

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<sup>276</sup> Ibid, 363. («...говорит, бывало, много еще жить мне, много веселиться с вами, а жизнь-то, жизнь-то веселая, радостная!» [311]).

<sup>277</sup> Ibid, 364. («...нельзя чтобы не было господ и слуг, но пусть же и я буду слугой моих слуг, таким же, каким и они мне. Да еще скажу тебе, матушка, что всякий из нас пред всеми во всем виноват, а я более всех» [ibid]).

<sup>278</sup> Ibid. («...знай, что воистину всякий пред всеми за всех и за все виноват. Не знаю я, как истолковать тебе это, но чувствую, что это так до мучения. И как это мы жили, сердились и ничего не знали тогда?» [ibid]).

<sup>279</sup> Ibid. («...он от болезни впадает в помешательство» [ibid]).

them: “‘Birds of heaven, happy birds, forgive me, for I have sinned against you too.’ None of us could understand that at the time, but he shed tears of joy, [Zosima explains]. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘there was such a glory of God all about me: birds, trees, meadows, sky; only I lived in shame and dishonored it all and did not notice the beauty and glory.’”<sup>280</sup> This quote reminds us of Chulkaturin during his illness, in which he too recalls the beauty and glory of nature that he had once felt so acutely. Like Chulkaturin and Bazarov, Markel also entreats others to live and enjoy life: “run and play now,” Markel says to Zosima, “enjoy life for me too.”<sup>281</sup>

Ippolit and Markel’s death scenes, which are communicated by the novels’ respective narrators, also shed light on the restorative and mighty power of faith at the end of life. While Ippolit expires alone and in agony, Markel’s death is peaceful and in the presence of community. Zosima remembers how his brother was “fully conscious though he could not talk; up to his last hour he did not change. He looked happy, his eyes beamed and sought us, he smiled at us, beckoned us.”<sup>282</sup> Thus, Markel’s recovery of faith allows him to accept death and experience a good death. Years after his brother’s death, Zosima recalls Markel’s strength in the face of death and his insistence on the goodness of others. Markel thus serves as a call away from Inauthenticity for Zosima when he finds himself immersed in the Inauthentic world of the They. During his days in the army, Zosima remembers how he challenged the husband of his lover to a duel out of spite and pride. The night before the duel, however, Zosima is overcome by memories of his brother’s words about one’s responsibility for the rest of humanity and then discard the world of the They for a more Authentic life which he finds within the monastery.

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<sup>280</sup> Ibid, 364. («—Птички божие, птички радостные, простите и вы меня, потому что и пред вами я согрешил. Этого уж никто тогда не мог понять, а он от радости плачет: —да, говорит, была такая божия слава кругом меня: птички, деревья, луга, небеса, один я жил в позоре, один все обесчестил, а красы и славы не приметил вовсе» [ibid]).

<sup>281</sup> Ibid, 365. («...ступай теперь, играй, живи за меня!» [313]).

<sup>282</sup> Ibid. («...но [он] не изменился до самого последнего своего часа: смотрит радостно, в очах веселье, взглядами нас ищет, улыбается нам, нас зовет» [ibid]).

Markel serves as a beacon of hope and truth for Zosima until the very end of his life, and as he is at death's door, Markel's presence once again comforts him. Dostoevsky's brand of faith is different than that which is practiced by Turgenev and Tolstoy's peasant characters.

Dostoevsky's idea of faith is one in which the seeker struggles to find: only through the battle with doubt can one find true faith.

It is also interesting to note that in Zosima's retelling of Markel's last days, Markel makes many allusions and references to beauty, and in this way, Dostoevsky's narrators of *The Idiot* and *The Brothers Karamazov* engage in a conversation with one another: in answer to Ippolit's question "is it true beauty can save the world?" Markel's experience shows that yes, beauty can indeed save the world. By immersing himself in beauty, even in the face of certain death, Markel saves himself and others: Zosima lives with the memory of his brother in his heart, which propels him to do good deeds and to live in accordance with humility and universal love. On his deathbed, Zosima communicates these same lessons to Alyosha, who internalizes Zosima's teachings and acts as a mentor to others, particularly to the boys who grieve Ilyusha's death. It is implied that, with the memory of Ilyusha's kindness and humility in their hearts, these boys will go out into the world and teach this lesson to others.

### Concluding Remarks

I undertake this extensive discussion of the idea of good and bad deaths through terminal illness in the works of nineteenth century Realist authors Turgenev, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky—which comprises the majority of this chapter on patient's perspectives on terminal illness—to show how these authors essentially introduced the existential problem of confronting death in Russian literature. Turgenev's treatment of death, with its allusions to nature, echo aspects of

Romanticism in portraying death as fate that announces itself through the changing seasons, natural disasters, and illness. Tolstoy inherits this discussion, particularly of the Anxiety at confronting death, and while he explores this Anxiety in greater detail, he focuses on the importance of spiritual rebirth during the dying process. Dostoevsky extends this conversation on confronting one's death by arguing for the need for humility and faith in the face of 'annihilation,' for these traits can inspire acts that perpetuate beauty and moral responsibility in the living.

In my analysis, I have identified certain metaphors employed by these authors in order to show the nuances in each author's philosophy, as well as the progression of their ideas. For example, while both Turgenev and Dostoevsky allude to nature's indifference to human wills and desires, Turgenev's answer to this problem lies in the mystery of Russian peasant's acceptance and communion with nature, while the peasant is relatively absent from Dostoevsky's discussion of death. Similarly, Turgenev and Tolstoy's treatment of peasants *being-towards-death* illuminates the shortcomings of upper-class characters' values, but Tolstoy's peasant characters Natalia Savishna and Gerasim are more than just periphery characters (as they are for Turgenev), but are instead significant mentors and guides for his protagonists. Finally, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky identify faith as a necessary aspect of a good death, but for Tolstoy, faith does not need to be communicated to others (and here we think of Prince Andrei's opaque thoughts after his prophetic dream immediately before death, as well as Ivan Ilyich's last words in which he says "пропусти" (let me through) instead of "прости" (forgive me) and "waved his hand, knowing that He whose understanding mattered would understand;" for Dostoevsky, however,

an articulation of faith is a necessary part of ensuring a good death, for death becomes a communal act instead of a mystifying, personal experience.<sup>283</sup>

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<sup>283</sup> Tolstoy, *Death of Ivan Ilyich*, 105. («...он махнул рукою, зная, что поймет тот, кому надо» [152]).

## Chapter 2

### Dying on Their Own Terms: Twentieth Century Patients' Perspectives

If Russian writers of the nineteenth century identify a good death as one approached with courage, faith, and acceptance, then in the twentieth century Russian writers add onto this idea to declare a good death to be one in which the dying person also asserts their right to self-determination. Bioethicists define self-determination in the medical context as the patient's right to decide whether to accept suggested treatment or care.<sup>284</sup> In *Cancer Ward*, Solzhenitsyn's protagonist Oleg Kostoglotov argues with his doctors Liudmila Dontsova and Vera Gangart on this front, asserting furiously that it is his right to forego the rounds of radiation therapy which will cure his cancer but will deplete his virility. Self-determination can also extend further to other areas of decision making, such as the patient asserting their right to decide where they want to die (at home, in the hospital, or in hospice) and under what conditions (for example, who will be with them or which forms of palliative care they would like administered, and so on). In Ulitskaya's *The Funeral Party*, the émigré Russian artist Alik chooses to die at home as opposed to in an American hospital, wishes to be surrounded by an entourage of friends and lovers, and refuses any aggressive treatment that would prolong his physical suffering.

Choosing how one wants to die, or in other words, dying on one's own terms, is the manifestation of one's self-determination. Yet what does dying on one's terms truly mean? The answer varies from person to person and depends on their values, desires, and personal histories. While many patients desperately want to live and are willing to undergo aggressive treatment, Kostoglotov and Alik do not. The problem remains, however, that self-determination implies the possibility of radical freedom, which is called into question in the face of a terminal diagnosis.

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<sup>284</sup> Jenny Lindberg, Mats Johannsen, and Linus Broström, "Temporising and respect for patient self-determination," *Journal of Medical Ethics* 45 (2019): 161.

Heidegger's idea of *thrownness* (the determined aspect of our being, for example, that we cannot control where we were born, to whom, and so on) already complicates this idea of freedom.

While Heidegger maintains that our existential starting point of thrownness is determined, we still have the freedom to choose certain actions that influence the course of our lives. In other words, our freedom is limited and constrained by our own finitude. Nevertheless, Heidegger's understanding of freedom can be applied to self-determination in end-of-life decision making in a way that allows for both individual autonomy and a recognition of the greater social and ethical context in which these decisions occur, particularly by recognizing the importance of informed consent. Informed consent involves giving patients the information they need to make decisions about their care and respecting their right to make choices that reflect their own values and beliefs.<sup>285</sup> To break down the idea of limited freedom even further, there is a tension between *freedom from* (extricating oneself from a situation, for example, refusing unwanted medical interventions and treatment) and *freedom to* (our freedom to perform an action, such as making positive choices about our own medical care). In the context of end-of-life decision making, these concepts are linked to the idea of patient autonomy and self-determination. Medical paternalism, however, which characterizes the Soviet healthcare system, refers to a situation where medical professionals make decisions about a patient's care without their input and consent.

In twentieth-century Russian literature, Solzhenitsyn and Ulitskaya illuminate the ways in which one still has agency and choice at the end of life. Both authors critique the biomedical tradition of denying patient self-determination in favor of aggressively battling death, thereby

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<sup>285</sup> It is important to note that not every patient can assert their self-determination at the end of life, especially in the cases where informed consent cannot be given (for example, if the patient is in a coma or in an altered psychological state, such as dementia). These situations deserve more attention in scholarly debates but are outside the scope of my study.

identifying self-determination as a necessary quality in achieving a good death. While Solzhenitsyn denounces Soviet doctors' disregard of patients' wishes, Ulitskaya criticizes the American practice of denying the reality of death. "Ever since I began traveling to America, I have never ceased to wonder that over there it is as if death does not exist," she argues, "It is concealed, like something unseemly."<sup>286</sup> Kostoglotov and Alik, in acknowledging their own mortality and finding themselves in Authentic states, consider the social and ethical contexts of Soviet and American medical systems respectively in deciding how they would like to die. Both characters, despite their differences in personality and history, agree on the importance of self-determination in end-of-life decision making. For Kostoglotov, asserting this right is impossible within the Soviet medical system, but for Alik it is possible because he dies in the United States where this right is protected.

Because self-determination is rooted in ideas of freedom and autonomy, it is a natural step then to evoke metaphors of imprisonment and exile in its literary representation. While Dostoevsky introduced the idea of terminal illness as imprisonment and execution into Russian literature in the nineteenth century, Solzhenitsyn and Ulitskaya extend it into the Soviet context by comparing illness to exile and emigration. Like Dostoevsky, Solzhenitsyn appeals to metaphors of incarceration in discussing terminal illness, but he uses the metaphor of exile to explore self-determination in end-of-life decision making. While Ippolit's way of asserting self-determination in the face of death is by committing suicide, Kostoglotov's is by refusing aggressive treatment. Both characters would rather die on their own terms than submit to a greater power—for Ippolit, the greater power is a God he professes to not believe in; for Kostoglotov, the greater power is the Soviet state. Following in Kostoglotov's footsteps, Alik

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<sup>286</sup> Gosteva, "I Accept Everything That is Given: An Interview with Liudmila Ulitskaya": 81



denies aggressive treatment and prefers instead to live out the rest of his days on his own terms, at home surrounded by loved ones. As he loses the last of his motor functions, he watches the collapse of the Soviet Union on the television and contemplates his estrangement from his homeland and from his own body. The idea of exile, which is so prominent in *Cancer Ward*, is transmuted into a discussion of emigration in *The Funeral Party*. As Ulitskaya shows, emigrating from the Soviet Union is essentially choosing exile. Solzhenitsyn's focus on exile centers on the lack of choice, while Ulitskaya's discussion of emigration reinforces the right to choose. Her connection of emigration to illness contrasts with Solzhenitsyn's connection of illness to exile, and thus, she illuminates the ways one still has choice at the end of life.

While both novels deal extensively with self-determination, the concept manifests itself differently in each novel. Kostoglotov, for example, initially rejects biomedical treatment (hormone therapy) in favor of herbal treatment (a mandrake root and *chaga*) because he sees natural medicine as the path to actively participating in his own treatment. To undergo hormone therapy is to put his fate into the hands of doctors, who then conceal the details of his illness and treatment from their patient. To treat himself naturally, then, is Kostoglotov's way of asserting his self-determination. Alik, on the other hand, asserts this same right by refusing medical treatment all together. His challenge rests on maintaining his atheism in the face of death, ultimately having to maneuver around his wife's tenacious attempts to baptize him and manipulate him into taking the Christian Sacrament.

While both Solzhenitsyn and Ulitskaya uphold self-determination at the end of life as fundamental to achieving a good death, they also engage with and transpose Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. I argue that Solzhenitsyn's character Efrem Podduev functions as a double of Ivan Ilyich in the Soviet context, who serves as a moral example of Authentically accepting

death and challenging internalized “incorrect” values. I also contend that Ulitskaya inverts the character of Ivan Ilyich in her representation of Alik, ultimately showing the importance of a positive orientation towards death in bringing peace and fulfillment at the end of life.

End of Life in Solzhenitsyn’s *Cancer Ward*:  
Illness as Exile and the Right to Self-Determination

In Solzhenitsyn’s semi-autobiographical novel, the protagonist Kostoglotov learns of the consequences of his treatment of cancer which will cure him but will leave him sexually impotent for the rest of his life. At the young age of thirty-five, Kostoglotov considers the consequences of such a treatment worse than death. Incensed at the lack of communication and transparency in the hospital, Kostoglotov thinks of his doctor Vera (Vega), for whom he harbors a deep romantic love, and angrily dismisses her plans for him to continue the treatment. “So much for Vega,” he fumes, “she wanted to do the best for him, did she? So that was why she was trying to *lure* him towards this fate?”<sup>287</sup> This episode marks a major shift in the narrative, as Kostoglotov struggles to assert his right to self-determination in the face of death within a paternalistic Soviet healthcare system that overrides patients’ wishes.

Like his main character, Solzhenitsyn was also subjected to courses of radiation for testicular cancer, but unlike Kostoglotov, Solzhenitsyn went on to have two marriages and three children. In his autobiography *The Oak and the Calf* (*Бодался телёнок с дубом*, 1975), Solzhenitsyn details his experience with cancer only briefly: “right at the beginning of my exile [came] cancer. In autumn 1953 it looked very much as though I had only a few months to live. In December the doctors—comrades in exile—confirmed that I had at most three weeks left.”<sup>288</sup>

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<sup>287</sup> Solzhenitsyn, *Cancer Ward*, 245. («Вот так Вега! Она хотела ему добра?—и для этого обманом вела к такой участи?» [Солженицын, *Раковый корпус* [Санкт Петербург: Азбука, 2007], 253]).

<sup>288</sup> Solzhenitsyn, *The Oak and the Calf*, 3.

Less than a year later, however, Solzhenitsyn had made a full recovery, a phenomenon he attributes to divine intervention rather than to advancements in Soviet medicine: “With a hopelessly neglected and acutely malignant tumor, this was a divine miracle. I could see no other explanation,” the writer admits, “Since then, all the life that has been given back to me has not been mine in a full sense: it is built for a purpose.” The purpose was a noble but dangerous one: to write and share his experience as a political prisoner and exile to those within and outside of Russia. When he began to write the story of his experience being treated for cancer at a Soviet hospital, Solzhenitsyn admits that the work—which would be called *Cancer Ward*—soon became his “most cherished literary ambition.”<sup>289</sup>

The Union of Soviet Writers declared *Cancer Ward* to be a work “more dangerous than Svetlana [Stalina’s] memoirs,” and rejected the novel for publication.<sup>290</sup> *Cancer Ward* was labeled an “anti-humanitarian work,” as its main themes were “not medical but social, [which] is the unacceptable part” and its writer as treacherous for his “bold, militant, ideological temperament.”<sup>291</sup> In response to these accusations, Solzhenitsyn maintained that the novel was a study into the experience of being seriously ill and that the themes of medicine and politics were only superficially connected: “I am being criticized for the very title on the ground that cancer and cancer wards are not a medical subject but symbols of some sort. I reply that this is a handy symbol indeed, if it can be deciphered only by a person who has himself experienced cancer and all the stages of dying,” Solzhenitsyn asserted, admitting that “the texture is too dense, there are too many medical details for it to be a symbol.”<sup>292</sup> The novel, he insisted, is about “cancer, and

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<sup>289</sup> Ibid, 95.

<sup>290</sup> *Cancer Ward* was distributed in Russia via *samizdat* and was smuggled into the West and published in 1968—an act that contributed to Solzhenitsyn’s exile from the Union of Soviet Writers in 1969 and his ultimate expulsion from the Soviet Union in 1974.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid, 484.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid, 484.

nothing else; cancer as writers of light literature avoid showing it, but as it is discovered to be by sick people every day.”<sup>293</sup>

While Solzhenitsyn most likely had personal reasons for insisting that the themes of medicine and politics in his novel were only superficially related, it is evident that these two themes are closely intertwined. Throughout the novel, Solzhenitsyn makes heavy-handed (if not direct) connections between medicine and politics: in one scene, Kostoglotov—who is, like Solzhenitsyn, a former *zek* and exile—thinks, “a man dies from a tumor, so how can a country survive with growths like labor camps and exiles?”<sup>294</sup> In another scene, Kostoglotov writes to his fellow exiles in Ush-Terek and compares the hospital to a prison. He posits at the beginning of the letter: “Here’s a puzzle for you: what is it and where am I?” and proceeds to describe his surroundings: bars on the windows, bread, sugar and tea for breakfast, bath time, talks with officials referred to as “processing,” authorities’ random searches through personal belongings.<sup>295</sup> Kostoglotov reveals at the end of his letter that he is in a hospital, not in a prison, as the recipients of his letter might have assumed from his descriptions.

My purpose in elucidating Solzhenitsyn’s marriage of political and medical themes in *Cancer Ward* is not to contradict the author’s own words but to illuminate the negative implications of politicized medicine on a moral, personal, and social level, as well as the effect these implications have on various characters in the novel as they internalize their terminal diagnoses. Each character who resides with Kostoglotov in cancer ward No. 13 has a different understanding of death and dying, and their attitudes are colored by their political and personal experiences as citizens in Stalin’s Soviet Union. For example, Kostoglotov, who spent most of

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<sup>293</sup> Ibid, 477.

<sup>294</sup> *Zek* is prison-slang for “prisoner” (short for “заключённый канадоармеец”). Solzhenitsyn, *Cancer Ward*, 523. («Человек умирает от опухоли—как же может жить страна, проращенная лагерями и ссылками?» [ibid, 526]).

<sup>295</sup> Ibid, 296. («Вот вам загадочная картинка, что это и где?» [ibid, 300]).

his life in prison for perceived political transgressions, sees aggressive hormone therapy as depriving him of his last semblance of personal freedom. Vadim, an ambitious young man who begrudgingly accepts his terminal diagnosis, uses his last strength to finish his geology research so that he can “productively” contribute to society. Pavel Nikolayevich Rusanov, a haughty government official who is completely divorced from his professed communist ideology, fears illness and death because it isolates him from his formerly pampered life of political privilege and protection. Rusanov fearfully wonders, “how could he think about anything else?...His fate lay there, between his chin and his collarbone. There, justice was being done. And in answer to this justice he could summon no influential friend, no past services, no defense.”<sup>296</sup>

It is important to note that while *Cancer Ward* features many dying characters’ Authentic experiences at *being-towards-death*, these characters either die “off-screen” or are discharged from the hospital and forgotten about. There is no death in the cancer ward, which speaks directly to the Soviet practice of denying and dismissing death. Just as many political exiles were “diagnosed” with pervasive ideological sickness and sent away (in many cases) never to return, so too are terminally ill patients removed from society. In presenting medicine and politics side by side, Solzhenitsyn shows the detrimental effects of paternalism in crushing individual will and autonomy. As Kostoglotov’s returns to his place of exile at the end of the novel, his virility withered from multiple rounds of radiation, he knows his second chance at life will be one in which he is forever sequestered to the periphery.

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<sup>296</sup> Ibid, 199. («О чем он еще думал?!...Тут между челюстью и ключицей, была судьба его. Его правосудие. И перед этим правосудием он не знал знакомств, заслуг, защиты» [ibid, 206]).

Illness as Exile:  
Isolation from the Collective in *Cancer Ward*

Patients in the novel are marked by their isolation from one another and from their former and future lives resulting from their illness, an existential problem which Solzhenitsyn places into a political framework in his discussion of exile. Solzhenitsyn shows the effects of literal, political exile (in his treatment of Kostoglotov) and internal, figurative exile (in his treatment of other characters who must confront the existential and emotional implications of dying from an incurable disease). As bioethicist Daniel S. Goldberg asserts,

Kostoglotov's cancer exiles him from his own exile and into exile yet again. That is, because he is ill, Kostoglotov is permitted to leave the labor camp where he has been in official "internal exile" for years. So his cancer exiles him from his literal (and official) exile but exiles him to the cancer ward, and also exiles him in the metaphorical sense of illness exile.<sup>297</sup>

Goldberg identifies the many levels of exile that Kostoglotov (as well as other patients in the cancer ward) must face as a result of their illnesses. After Kostoglotov discusses different forms of treatment with his doctor Dontsova, he realizes that he does not have a choice in rejecting her prescribed life-saving treatment that will nevertheless leave him with a decreased quality of life. He understands that "as he left the room, it seemed to him that he was walking between two eternities, on one side a list of the living, with its inevitable crossings out, on the other—*eternal* exile. Eternal as the stars, as the galaxies."<sup>298</sup>

In his analysis of 'illness exile' in Solzhenitsyn's *Cancer Ward*, Goldberg links exile to the experience of pain, in that pain—with its characteristic destroying of language (as Elaine Scarry argues in *The Body in Pain*)—literally and figuratively separates certain characters from

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<sup>297</sup> Daniel Goldberg, "Exilic Effects of Illness and Pain in Solzhenitsyn's *Cancer Ward*: How Sharpening the Moral Imagination Can Facilitate Repatriation," *Journal of Medical Humanities: Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection* 30, no. 1 (2009): 31.

<sup>298</sup> Solzhenitsyn, *Cancer Ward*, 81. («Он шел и думал, что идет между двумя вечностями. С одной стороны— список обреченных умереть. С другой—в е ч н а я ссылка. Вечная, как звезды. Как галактики» [ibid, 87]).

one another and even from their own selves.<sup>299</sup> Goldberg asserts that illness, and particularly illness associated with pain, “is a liminal state, an existential hinterland.”<sup>300</sup> The patients in the cancer ward are all consumed by their physical pain—from the young Tatar Sharaf Sibgatov whose physical “suffering had been so prolonged that there was practically nothing left of his former self,” to the former Komsomol member Kolya Azovkin who “just sat there holding his stomach...his lips did not form the whole of a mouth: each lip expressed its own separate suffering. In his eyes there was no emotion except entreaty, a plea for help to those who could not hear.”<sup>301</sup> Kolya is ultimately discharged from the hospital when it is evident to his doctors that his condition is hopeless. Dontsova pities the young man who “six months ago had been striding along, a spade over his shoulder, at the head of a Young Communists’ Sunday working party, singing at the top of his voice. Now he could not raise his voice above a whisper, even when talking about his pain.”<sup>302</sup> Kolya asks if the doctors will take him in again if he were to return for further treatment, to which Dontsova responds, “of course we’ll take you in. You’re one of us now,” and prescribes him superficial treatment to hide her untruths.<sup>303</sup> The irony of her statement—that the dying boy is “one of us”—is not lost on Kostoglotov, who tells the ward after Kolya is discharged, “...what do we tell a man all his life? ‘You’re a member of the collective!...But only while he’s alive. When the time comes for him to die, we release him from the collective. He may be a member, but he has to die alone. It’s only he who is saddled with the

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<sup>299</sup> Pain as destroying language is a theory introduced by Elaine Scarry, which has already been discussed in this dissertation’s introduction.

<sup>300</sup> Goldberg, “Exilic Effects of Illness and Pain in Solzhenitsyn’s Cancer Ward”: 29.

<sup>301</sup> Solzhenitsyn, *Cancer Ward*, 27. («Каким Шараф Сибгатов был раньше—уж теперь нельзя было догадаться, не по чему судить: страдание его было такое долгое, что от прежний жизни уже как бы ничего и не осталось» [31]); *ibid*, 54. («Азовкин не ставал. Он сидел, держась за живот...Его губы не были сведены в один пот, в каждая губа выражала свое отдельное страдание. В его глазах не было никакого чувства, кроме мольбы—мольбы к глухим о помощи» [*ibid*, 59]).

<sup>302</sup> *Ibid*. («Полгода назад он шел с лопаткой через плечо во главе комсомольского воскресника и пел во всю глотку—а сейчас даже о боли своей не мог рассказать громче шепота» [*ibid*]).

<sup>303</sup> *Ibid*, 55. («Ну, конечно, примем. Ты ж теперь наш» [*ibid*]).

tumor, not the whole collective.”<sup>304</sup> This passage, I argue, is the foundation on which the novel rests. Kostoglotov identifies a terrifying truth, that dying is inherently isolating. In doing so, Solzhenitsyn engages in conversation with Turgenev and Dostoevsky on one hand—by showing the alienating nature of *being-towards-death*—and with Tolstoy on the other, by showing how the act of dying forces one to confront internalized social narratives in discovering genuine moral truths.

The theme of exile in *Cancer Ward* illuminates the many ways Solzhenitsyn’s characters are exiled even from each other, although they are connected in their shared cancer diagnoses. Goldberg upholds Kolya Azovkin as an example of the different levels of exile experienced by those suffering from cancer: as a patient in the cancer ward, Kolya is exiled from those who are healthy, but unlike many others with whom he resides in the ward, Kolya’s pain robs him of his ability to speak and to express himself, thereby exiling him even from his fellow patients. Additionally, Kolya’s pain exiles him from his own body, as he is so consumed with physical agony that he must contort his body in ways to alleviate his pain: “by the window, Azovkin had twisted himself into a new position [and finally he] was no longer groaning.”<sup>305</sup> Kolya is ultimately exiled from the cancer ward itself when he is discharged to prepare, in Goldberg’s words, “for the Eternal Exile which is death.”<sup>306</sup>

I extend Goldberg’s argument by adding that Kostoglotov serves as the quintessential example of the multiple temporal dimensions of exile: not only is he literally exiled and forbidden from returning to his former home in Leningrad, but his hormone therapy leaves him

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<sup>304</sup> Ibid, 140. («А то ведь, что мы всю жизни твердим человеку?—ты член коллектива! Ты член коллектива! Но это—пока он жив. В когда придёт час умирать—мы отпустим его из коллектива. Член-то он член, а умирать эму одному. А опухоль сядет на него одного, не на вест коллектив» [ibid, 147]).

<sup>305</sup> Ibid, 20. («Азовкин у окна еще по-новому извернулся, но не стонал» [ibid, 24]).

<sup>306</sup> Goldberg, “Exilic Effects of Illness and Pain in Solzhenitsyn’s *Cancer Ward*”: 35.



sexually impotent, which precludes him from having children or any future romantic relationships—a fate, for Kostoglotov, worse than death. At the end of the novel, Kostoglotov returns to his literal exile in Ush-Terek, a healed but nevertheless displaced man who is barred from meaningfully engaging with life. He knows that he will be forever trapped behind a metaphorical barbed wire, watching those around him fall in love and have families, aware that the path to intimate human connection are lost to him forever. Before Kostoglotov realizes the negative consequences of his treatment, however, he is excited to return from the existential hinterlands where he found himself in a few weeks prior. He

was seized and enveloped by a feeling that life had suddenly returned, the life with which just two weeks ago he had closed on all accounts. Though this life promised him nothing that the people...called good...neither apartment, property, social success nor money, there were other joys, sufficient in themselves, which he had not forgotten how to value: the right to move about without waiting for an order; the right to be alone; the right to gaze at the stars that were not blinded by prison-camp searchlights...and among them was the right to talk to women. His recovery was giving him back all these countless, wonderful rights.<sup>307</sup>

His hormone treatment, however, renders the last joy (and for Kostoglotov, the most important) invalid. His sexual relationship with his nurse Zoya, which inspires in him forgotten lust and passion, reminds Kostoglotov that happiness and human connection is not lost to him forever. He rejoices in the fact that “now that his body was healing, the passions of life were returning to it. All of them!”<sup>308</sup> After multiple rounds of radiation, however, Kostoglotov is once again exiled to the murky, wretched existence from which he had desperately hoped to escape. Therefore,

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<sup>307</sup> Solzhenitsyn, *Cancer Ward*, 153. («Его перехватило и обвило ощущение внезапно вернувшись жизни— жизни, с которой еще две недели назад он считал себя разочтенным навсегда. Правда, жизнь эта не обещала ему ничего того, что называли хорошим и...ни квартиры, ни имущества, не общественного успеха, ни денег, но—другие самосушие радости, которых он не разучился ценить: право переступить по земле, не ожидая команды, право побыть одному, право смотреть на звезды, не заслепленные фонарями зоны...[и] право разговаривать с женщинами. Все эти чудесные неисчислимые права возвращало ему выздоровление!» [160]).

<sup>308</sup> Solzhenitsyn, *Cancer Ward*, 173. («Все страсти жизни возвращались и выздоравливающее тело! Все!» [180]).

Kostoglotov is exiled from his past, from his present (in that his body, as a result of hormone therapy becomes foreign to him), and from his future. In attempting to heal him, the Soviet state (through its healthcare apparatus) has literally and metaphorically sterilized him. Like Ippolit who considered his terminal diagnosis to be an execution, Kostoglotov realizes that “his death sentence had been commuted to life imprisonment...He would live, only God knows for what purpose.”<sup>309</sup>

The discussion of exile in Solzhenitsyn’s work is particularly relevant considering my examination of Dostoevsky’s conception of illness as imprisonment and execution in chapter 1. Not only were both authors intimately familiar with the multiple dimensions of illness (having experienced serious illness themselves), but they were both political prisoners in the Russian penal system almost one hundred years apart. And while Solzhenitsyn identified Tolstoy as his literary authority, I argue that Dostoevsky’s influence on *Cancer Ward* is undeniable.<sup>310</sup> Both authors’ uses of political imagery in describing the experience of illness speaks to the importance of self-determination in the face of death. Ippolit, for example, laments nature’s “three week’s sentence” precisely because his terminal diagnosis has robbed him of his freedom. His attempted suicide is his final act of self-determination, and as we already saw, its humiliating conclusion undercuts not only Ippolit’s professed atheist-nihilist ideals, but his sense of dignity as well. In his “Essential Statement,” Ippolit starkly remarks: “perhaps suicide is the only action I still have time to begin and end by my own will...I still have the power to die.”<sup>311</sup>

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<sup>309</sup> Ibid, 390. («Как бы заменили Костоглотову вышкуна пожизненное. Оставался он жить, только неизвестно —зачем» [396])

<sup>310</sup> Елена А. Масолова, “Толстовский текст и интертекст в повести А. И. Солженицына «Раковый корпус»,” *Проблемы исторической поэтики* 16, no. 4 (2018): 196.

<sup>311</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, trans. Constance Barnett (Hertfordshire: UK, 1996), 375.

This quote has its echoes in Kostoglotov's experience of terminal illness, but Solzhenitsyn ironically inverts its meaning to show the importance of self-determination in both accepting or, in Kostoglotov's case, denying life-saving treatment. Dignity, respect, and self-determination (which happen to be the pillars of contemporary biomedical philosophy and practice) are of ultimate importance to both Ippolit and Kostoglotov. For the latter, however, the "power to die" takes on a passive rather than an active form: instead of shooting himself as Ippolit attempts to do, Kostoglotov states that he would rather be consumed by his disease than accept a treatment that would rob him of joy, passion, and ultimately, of his autonomy. In a heated argument with Dontsova, Kostoglotov demands that he be discharged from the hospital without undergoing radiation treatment: "just let me crawl away like a dog to my kennel, so I can lick my wounds...there's no such thing as a complete cure in cancer...I just want you to let me go."<sup>312</sup> For Kostoglotov, who has spent his life being at the mercy of others, particularly at the mercy of a corrupt state, making his own decisions is a matter of life or death. "I simply wanted to remind you of my right to dispose of my own life," Kostoglotov says to Dontsova, and in echoing the words of Ippolit, continues, "A man can dispose of his own life, can't he? You agree I have that right?"<sup>313</sup> After Dontsova vehemently rejects his plea to refuse treatment, Kostoglotov continues, "once again, I become a grain of sand, just as I was in the camps. Once again nothing *depends* on me."<sup>314</sup>

In the letter to his friends in exile, Kostoglotov underscores his hatred for the state, and particularly for the hospital as an extension of the state. He laments, "the most depressing thing

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<sup>312</sup> Solzhenitsyn, *Cancer Ward*, 79. («Дайте мне, как собаке, убраться к себе в конуру и там отлежаться и облизаться...потому что никакого конца у ракового лечение не бывает...так отпустите меня с остатками моей крови» [85]).

<sup>313</sup> Ibid, 76. («Я хотел только напомнить вам о своем праве распоряжаться своей жизнью, нет? Вы признаете за мной такой право?» [81]).

<sup>314</sup> Ibid. («И опять я—песчинка, как в лагере, опять от меня ничего не зависит» [ibid]).

is that I have no fixed term, I am in [the cancer ward] ‘at the pleasure of the state’...they don’t say a thing about when they are going to discharge me, they make no promises...what can a poor prisoner do?”<sup>315</sup> As a “prisoner” in the hospital, Kostoglotov is very much aligned with Ippolit, who also felt himself a prisoner in his dingy bedroom staring at Meyer’s wall. In the letter, Kostoglotov continues, “I’m not asking for a long life...first I lived under guard, then I lived in pain, and now I want to live just a little while without guards and without pain, simultaneously without one or the other. This is the limit of my ambition.”<sup>316</sup>

Ultimately, Kostoglotov’s rejection of treatment illuminates a pertinent tension in the end-of-life debate: which is worse—metaphorical imprisonment and execution (and death, as it is for Ippolit), or exile (and a life robbed of joy, as it is for Kostoglotov)? In both cases, the prisoner-patient is robbed of their self-determination. In one scene, Kostoglotov and Rusanov engage in a discussion about this very problem. Rusanov asks “yes, what on earth can one imagine worse than this...than this...oncological...in fact, cancer?” to which Kostoglotov barks, “what’s worse than cancer? Leprosy.”<sup>317</sup> Confused, Rusanov asserts that leprosy is a much slower process than cancer and therefore less dangerous. Kostoglotov responds, “it’s worse because they banish you from the world while you are still alive. They tear you from your family and put you behind barbed wire. You think that’s any easier to take than a tumor?”<sup>318</sup> In the event of execution (symbolized by cancer), one’s life is cut short; in the event of exile (symbolized by leprosy), one’s life continues but with the caveat of a radically decreased quality-

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<sup>315</sup> Ibid, 297. («Самое томительное то, что сижу—без срока, до *особого распоряжения*...ничего не говорят, когда выпишут, нечего не обещают...Что остается бедному арестанту?» [302]).

<sup>316</sup> Ibid, 299. («Ведь не прошу же я долгой жизни!...То я жил все время под конвоем, то я жил все время под болями,—теперь я хочу немножечко прожить и без конвоя, и без болей, одновременно без того и без другого,—и вот предел моих мечтаний» [304]).

<sup>317</sup> Ibid, 150. («Да! Что может быть на свете хуже...этих...онкологических...вообще рака?» «Что хуже рака? Проказа!» [157]).

<sup>318</sup> Ibid. («Хуже тем, что вас еще живого исключают из мира. Отрывают от родных, сажают за проволоку. Вы думаете, это легче, чем опухоль?» [ibid]).

of-life. For Kostoglotov, the latter is categorically worse. He questions the price one should pay for life, especially a life so marred by a corrupt, totalitarian state, and questions the maxim that “a man’s most precious possession is his life”: “what about this price?” Kostoglotov demands, “to preserve his life, should a person pay everything that gives it color, scent and excitement? Can one accept a life of digestion, respiration, muscular and brain activity—and nothing more? Become a walking blueprint: Is not this an exorbitant price? Is it not a mockery? Should one pay?”<sup>319</sup>

#### Natural Medicine as Metaphor for Self-Determination in *Cancer Ward*

Solzhenitsyn presents the hospital as a fundamentally political space—one that is ruled by official dogma, governed by power dynamics, and one that employs a specific mode of treatment to control Soviet bodies. Considering the discussion above of the importance of self-determination in end-of-life decisions, I argue that Solzhenitsyn presents two different forms of medicine as metaphors to illustrate the importance of this right to self-determination: the official Soviet biomedical model which overrides patients’ autonomy and the unofficial (and under Soviet law, illegal) natural medicine model which encourages patient participation in their treatment.<sup>320</sup>

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<sup>319</sup> Ibid, 300. («Какова все-таки верхняя цена жизни? Сколько можно за нее платить, а сколько нельзя?...Ну а вот такая цена: за сохранение жизни заплатить всем тем, что придает ей краски, запахи и волнение? Получить жизнь с пищеварением, дыханием, мускульной и мозговой деятельностью—и все? Стать ходячей схемой. Такая цена—слишком ли заломлена? Не насмешка ли она? Платить ли?» [305]).

<sup>320</sup> The terms ‘autonomy’ and ‘self-determination’ are often used interchangeably. According to the Mirriam-Webster dictionary, autonomy is the quality or state of being self-governing, while self-determination is the free choice of one’s own acts or states without external compulsion. While the difference in definition is slight, I am using ‘self-determination’ in my discussion to mean the ability to decide for oneself on a course of action without coercion from external sources. Furthermore, in the context of terminal illness, one’s illness may preclude autonomy (for example, the dying person may lose mobility) but may still preserve one’s self-determination (for example, the dying person’s ability to declare preferences).

What are biomedicine and natural medicine and what are the differences between them?<sup>321</sup> Biomedicine is traditionally defined as a branch of medical science that incorporates biological and physiological principles to the treatment of the human body, particularly in the context of clinical practice. Its goal is to treat the human body and to find new cures and treatments for disease, focusing particularly on developing new diagnostic tools and therapies. Some examples of biomedicine are chemotherapy, radiation therapy, and x-ray technology. Biomedicine is usually contrasted with natural medicine, in which the healing of illnesses results from a mix of natural herbs and plants, and is coupled in some cultures with incantations, rituals, and spells.<sup>322</sup> In the history of medicine, biomedicine is a relatively recent practice—before medicine became a modern profession and institution in the late eighteenth century, natural medicine was the primary form of treating illness and was based on ancient traditions. In the Soviet Union, natural medicine was outlawed in 1923 with the official institutionalization of socialized medicine, and many practitioners of natural medicine became targets of a vigorous propaganda campaign meant to drive the rural population into the hands of newly trained biomedical doctors.

In *Cancer Ward*, Solzhenitsyn shows that the Soviet hospital, as the setting for biomedical procedures, is a place *to be treated*: once a patient is admitted to a Soviet hospital, their right to self-determination is essentially stripped. Physicians, surgeons, and nurses have the final say in what treatment is prescribed, oftentimes concealing the patient's diagnosis and/or the consequences and side effects of biomedical treatment. On the other hand, Solzhenitsyn upholds natural medicine as a form of treatment in which one has the freedom to *treat oneself*, thereby

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<sup>321</sup> While a fuller discussion of medical models is presented in Part II, chapter 3, in this chapter, I only briefly discuss historical trends in medicine.

<sup>322</sup> Veronica Beranska and Zdenek Uherek, "The Defensive Strategies of Czech and Ukrainian Residents in the Ukraine Against the Effects of the Chernobyl Nuclear Accident," *Česky lid* 103, no. 1 (2016): 92.

allowing one to exercise their right to self-determination. Kostoglotov initially rejects Dontsova's proposed biomedical treatment—namely the radiation treatment, hormone therapy, and blood transfusion—in favor of *treating himself* with a natural medicine, more precisely, a mandrake root known to have poisonous effects if taken in large quantities. Unbeknownst to his doctors, Kostoglotov secretly treats himself with the mandrake root and attributes his miraculous improvement in health not to Soviet medical procedures, but to this coveted root, also associated with Russian peasant practices.

Once Kostoglotov learns of the consequences of his biomedical treatment from Zoya, he starkly identifies biomedicine as a form of abuse, particularly because the Soviet doctors' weaponizing of biomedical procedures invalidates any right to self-determination. In the letter to his friends in exile, Kostoglotov writes, “of course [the doctors'] medical instructions make them squeeze the patient of everything that can be squeezed, and they will not let him go until his blood can't take anymore.”<sup>323</sup> He continues, “my friends, isn't it a fine picture of our lives as prisoners? By some right, [the doctors] have decided, without my consent on my behalf, on a most terrible form of treatment—hormone therapy. It is a piece of red-hot iron with which they brand you just once and make you a cripple for the rest of your life. But what an everyday event that is in the routine of the clinic.”<sup>324</sup>

Solzhenitsyn highlights two vital scenes that illustrate the power of natural medicine in helping a person reclaim their self-determination. The first scene takes place early in the novel, when Kostoglotov holds court in the cancer ward and describes to his fellow ward-mates the

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<sup>323</sup> Ibid, 229. («Они по лечебной инструкции должны, очевидно, выжать из больного все, что выжимается, и отпустят только когда кровь уже будет совсем «не держать»») [301]).

<sup>324</sup> Ibid, 229. («...друзья! Разве это не образ наших арестантских жизней, которым ничего не дано сделать...По какому-то праву [врачи] без меня и за меня решаются на страшное лечение—такое, как гормонотерапия. Это же—кусочек раскаленного железа, которое подносят однажды—и делают калекой на всю жизнь. И так это буднично выгладит а будничном быте клиники!» [305]).

powerful healing effects of an herb called *chaga*. Referred to as “cancer of the birch tree,” *chaga* was historically used by Russian peasants in treating sickness and is still used today as treatment for some cancers, diabetes, and heart disease, although official science has yet to determine *chaga*’s effectiveness.<sup>325</sup> Lev Leonidovich, one of the doctors in the cancer ward, however, confirms *chaga*’s medical value: “some particular kinds of tumor react to it, stomach tumors for example. In Moscow they’re going crazy about it. They say the forests have been stripped of it for two hundred kilometers round the city.”<sup>326</sup> As Kostoglotov describes the miracle effects of *chaga*, the atmosphere in the ward is completely changed:

Everyone rushed about asking each other for pencil and paper...when they were ready, Kostoglotov began to dictate slowly...explaining how *chaga* should be [dried and drunk]. [The patients] asked him to repeat it, and warmth and friendliness spread through the ward...They all had the same enemy, death. What can divide human beings on earth once they are all faced with death?<sup>327</sup>

Despite the patients’ reliance on Soviet doctors and their expertise, Solzhenitsyn’s narrator starkly observes that “[all the patients] longed to find some miracle [healer], or some medicine the doctors here didn’t know about. Whether they admitted as much or denied it, they all without exception in the depths of their hearts believed there was an herbalist, or some old witch of a woman somewhere, whom you only had to find and get that medicine from to be saved.”<sup>328</sup>

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<sup>325</sup> n.a., “What are Chaga Mushrooms and are they Healthy?” <https://www.healthline.com/nutrition/chaga-mushroom>

<sup>326</sup> Solzhenitsyn, *Cancer Ward*, 388. («—Трудно сказать. Допускаю, что некоторые частные виды опухолей чувствительны к нему. Желудочные, например. В Москве сейчас с ним с ума сходят. Говорят, в радиусе двести километров весь гриб выбрали, в лесу не найдёшь» [Солженицын, *Раковый корпус*, 393]).

<sup>327</sup> Ibid, 147. («Засуетились, спрашивали друг у друга карандаш и листик бумажки...И когда собрались, Костоглотов медленно стал диктовать из письма...как чагу высушивать не до конца, как терпеть, какой водой заваривать...[пациенты] просили повторить—и стало особенно тепло и дружно в палате...Один у них был враг—смерть, и что может разделить на земле человеческие существа, если против всех них единожды уставлена смерть?» [154]).

<sup>328</sup> Ibid, 143. («Как всем им хотелось узнать о таком враче-чудодее, о таком лекарстве, неизвестном здешним врачам! Они могли признаваться, что верят, или отрицать, но все они до одного в глубине души верили, что такой врач, или такой травник, или такая старуха-бабка где-то живет, и только надо узнать—где, получить лекарство—и они спасены» [150]).



A second scene that demonstrates the power that natural medicine holds as a form of self-determination occurs in the middle of the novel. Vera Gangart, Kostoglotov's primary physician who reciprocates Kostoglotov's romantic feelings, discovers the bottle of highly concentrated mandrake root extract that Kostoglotov has been secretly using to treat himself. She is incensed to discover that the root extract is dangerous in high doses. An argument ensues between the patient and his doctor as Vera tries to dispose of the root extract, saying "Of course I don't [believe it works]. It's just a lot of dark superstition and playing games with death. I believe in systematic science, practically tested. That's what I was taught and that's the way all oncologists think. Give me the bottle!"<sup>329</sup> Already there is a power dynamic between the two—Vera holds the authority in the Soviet hospital, while Kostoglotov is a mere ward of the state. Refusing to disclose the biomedical treatment and its disastrous consequences for Kostoglotov, Vera insists that "[the injections] are absolutely necessary; your life depends on them. We're trying to save your *life!* Why should I be more precise? They'll cure you."<sup>330</sup> Kostoglotov, however, maintains that "There's something noble about treating oneself with a strong poison. Poison doesn't pretend to be a harmless medicine, it tells you straight out, 'I'm poison. Watch out! Or else!'"<sup>331</sup> Ultimately, Kostoglotov loses the battle: Vera forces him to pour out the tincture outside the hospital. He does so mainly out of affection for her, and as Kostoglotov watches the last drops leave the bottle, he laments that he has "poured [his] murky-brown liquid death—or recovery—into a small damp hole in the dark soil."<sup>332</sup>

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<sup>329</sup> Ibid. («Совершенно! Это темные суеверия и игра со смертью. Я только верю в научные схемы, испытанные на практике. Так меня учили. И так думают все онкологи. Дайте сюда флакон!» [ibid]).

<sup>330</sup> Ibid, 232. («Очень нужные! Очень важные для вашей жизни! Вам надо ж и з н ь спасти!...А зачем вам точней! Они вылечивают» [240]).

<sup>331</sup> Ibid, 300 («А вернусь в Уш-Терек и, чтоб опухоль никуда метастазов не кинула—прибью ее еще иссик-кульским корешком. Что-то есть благородное в лечении сильным ядом: яд не притворяется невинным лекарством, он так и говорит: я—яд! Берегитесь! И мы знаем, на что идем» [304]).

<sup>332</sup> Ibid, 235. («В сырую ямку на темную землю он вылил эту мутно-бурую чью-то смерть. Или мутно-бурое чье-то выздоровление» [242]).

What Solzhenitsyn ultimately shows is the truly detrimental power of Soviet healthcare, where the patient's choices and desires are categorically dismissed and rejected in favor of biopolitical control over his or her body. In the Soviet hospital, the patient has no voice and no choice. They have no autonomy. In this way, the Soviet hospital functions as an extension of the state, employing biomedicine as a form of control over individual choice. Natural medicine, as Solzhenitsyn shows in his novel, is more than just an alternative form of medicine: to treat oneself with natural medicine is to take back one's authority over one's body, to assert one's autonomy, and to reject the state's power over oneself. Treating oneself with natural medicine, for Solzhenitsyn, is a radical act of self-determination, a way of fighting for oneself and one's freedom of choice.

What Humans Live By:  
Solzhenitsyn's Conversation with Tolstoy in *Cancer Ward*

Throughout his life, Solzhenitsyn was profuse in his exaltation of Tolstoy, often referring to him as his literary authority.<sup>333</sup> In *Cancer Ward*, Solzhenitsyn enters into direct dialogue with the revered author on the nature of internal transformation in the face of certain death. In one particular scene, the misogynistic and self-assured Efrem Podduyev finds himself immersed in a tome of Tolstoy's late short stories and is especially gripped by "What Humans Live By" (*Чем люди живы*, 1885), a story which challenges his internalized ideas about his life and his place in the world, as well as his ideas about repentance and need for change before death. I contend that Efrem functions as Solzhenitsyn's double of Tolstoy's Ivan Ilyich but placed in the Soviet context. While on the surface the two characters seem to share little in common, a deeper reading

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<sup>333</sup> А. И. Солженицын, "Интервью с Дэвидом Эйкманом для журнала «Тайм» (23 мая 1989)" in Солженицын А. И. Публицистика: в 3 томах, том 3 (Ярославль: Верхняя Волга, 1997), 335.

into their existential reorientation in the face of terminal illness shows that these two characters are united in their struggle against death and subsequent spiritual and moral rebirth.

Efrem Podduyev is one of the only patients in the cancer ward who does not shy away from the truth that he is dying. In fact, he indignantly professes it to all the other patients in hopes of making them see the truth of their dire situations. “You’ve had it Professor, you’ll never go home again, see?” he maliciously informs the terrified Rusanov, “[And] even if you *do* go home, you’ll be back here pretty quick. The Crab [the Russian euphemism for cancer] loves people. Once he’s grabbed you with his pincers, he won’t let go until you’ve croaked.”<sup>334</sup> Efrem continues, rattling on about the certainty of death to anyone in the ward that will listen: “I guess it’ll be straight from the operating table onto the mortuary slab.”<sup>335</sup> At these words, everyone in the cancer ward is immobilized with fear. Kostoglotov, however, tells Efrem to stop whining and hands him a book of Tolstoy’s short stories.

This book of stories proves to be life changing for Efrem, as the morals he discovers while reading force him to reflect on his life, his choices, and his relationships, and bring him to the realization that, like Ivan Ilyich, Efrem lived his life “incorrectly.” Both Ivan Ilyich and Efrem are pertinent case studies for this discussion on “living correctly,” since both characters internalized and performed the expected narratives of their times. Ivan Ilyich goes through the motions expected from those of his class in the late nineteenth century: he finishes gymnasium and university, marries and fathers children, and climbs his way to the top of his career. At the age of forty-five, however, he is forced to reckon with the utter moral vapidness of his life and

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<sup>334</sup> Solzhenitsyn, *Cancer Ward*, 11. [«Теперь все, профессор. Домой не вернешься, понятно?...если и попадешь домой—ненадолго, а-опять сюда. Рак людей любит. Кого рак клешней схватит—то уж до смерти» [15)].

<sup>335</sup> *Ibid.*, 12. («Вот тут старик есть один...он внизу лежит, операция ему завтра. Так ему в сорок втором году рачок маленький вырезали и сказали—пустяки, иди гуляй...Тринадцать лет прошло, он и забыл про этот диспансер...а сейчас у него та-кой вырос!—Ефрем даже чмокнул от удовольствия.—прямо со стола да как бы не в морг» [16]).

only in his last minutes, does he finally internalize the Tolstoyan maxim on living correctly: he finally experiences true, selfless love for others, and with this existential and metaphysical rebirth, he is able to die peacefully.

Unlike Ivan Ilyich, Efrem is uneducated and without a stable family of which to boast, although he has fathered many children with many different women. Efrem is a successful Soviet citizen in that he is strong, masculine, and (seemingly) fearless. Like the idealized Soviet Man, Efrem “had never had a day’s illness in his life—nothing serious, no flu, no epidemic touched him, and he never even had a toothache,” evidence of his ability to function as a productive worker.<sup>336</sup> The narrator admits that “all Efrem’s life, wherever he’d been...he and everyone else had always known what was asked of a man. He had to have a good trade or a good grip on life...it was this sort of life, which he understood so well, that Podduev had seen in Vorkuta, on the Tenisei, in the Far East and in Central Asia.”<sup>337</sup> In his work and internalization of his society’s expectations, Efrem aligns himself with Ivan Ilyich. However, both characters are forced to reevaluate everything they hold dear and true once they are confronted with the seriousness of their illness. Efrem thinks—realizing that he is dangerously ill at the age of fifty—that “this [kind of life] was all right until [one] got cancer or something fatal like that...when [one] did, none of it was worth a kopek—their trade, their grip on life, their job, their pay. They all turned out so helpless, wanting to kid themselves to the end that they hadn’t got cancer, that they showed up like a lot of poor saps who miss out on life. But what was it they missed?”<sup>338</sup>

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<sup>336</sup> Ibid, 96. («[Ефрем] ничем никогда не болел—ни тяжёлым, ни гриппом, не в эпидемию, ни даже зубами» [102]).

<sup>337</sup> Ibid. («Сколько жил Ефрем и где ни бывал...и ему и другим всегда было ясно, что от человека требуется. От человека требуется или хорошая специальность, или хорошая хватка в жизни...и такую вполне понятную жизнь видел Поддуйев все годы на Воркуте, и на Енисее, и на Дальнем Востоке, и в Средней Азии» [105]).

<sup>338</sup> Ibid, 100. («И это сладко, это годилась, пока не заболели люди раком или другим смертельным. Когда ж заболели, то становится ничто и их специальность, и хватка, и должность, и зарплата. И по оказавшейся их тут беспомощности и по желанию врать себе до последнего, что у них не рак, выходило, что все они—слабаки и что-то в жизни уступили» [106]).

While a Gerasim-like figure is missing from Efrem's end-of-life experience, Efrem is nevertheless aware of the importance of peasant values, especially their ideas regarding death and dying. In considering his moral failures, Efrem remembers "the old folk" whom he erroneously considered to be weak, stupid, and useless:

when he was young Yefrem had heard...that they, the young people, were growing up smarter than the old folk...but now, as he paced up and down the ward, he remembered how the old folk used to die back home on the Kama...they didn't puff themselves up or fight against [death] or brag that they weren't going away, the prepared themselves quietly in good time, deciding who should have the mare, who the foal, who the coat, and who the boots. And they departed easily, as if they were just moving into a new house. None of them would be scared by cancer.<sup>339</sup>

This passage shows that, while the peasants have but virtually disappeared from Soviet society, the memory of their customs and beliefs about death permeates the lives of their descendants. Efrem admits to himself (and only to himself) that it is not sheer will power that kept him from returning to the hospital when his symptoms worsened but "sheer blind, cold terror...the whole of his life had prepared Podduev for living, not for dying."<sup>340</sup> Like Ivan Ilyich, in denying the seriousness of this condition, Efrem allows himself to return to the They, to immerse himself in Inauthenticity in hopes of distracting him from the truth that he is dying: "he kept pushing [the truth] away by staying on his feet, going to work every day as if nothing had happened, and listening to people praising his will power."<sup>341</sup> Once he finds himself back in the cancer ward with terminal cancer (after failing to show up for scheduled follow-up visits after his first

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<sup>339</sup> Ibid. («Смолоду слышал Ефрем да и знал...что они, молодые, росли умней своих стариков...Но вот сейчас, ходя по палате, он вспоминал, как умирали те старые в их местности на Каме...Не пыжились они, не отбивались, не хвастали, что не умрут—все они принимали смерть спокойно. Не только не оттягивали расчёт, а готовились потихоньку и загодя, назначали, кому кобыла, кому жеребёнок, кому зипун, кому сапоги. И отходили облегчённо, будто просто перебирались в другую избу. И никого из них нельзя было напугать раком» [ibid]).

<sup>340</sup> Ibid, 97. («А это была не сила воли а—упятерённый страх...Всей жизнью своей Поддудев был подготовлен к жизни, а не к умиранию» [103]).

<sup>341</sup> Ibid. («и отгонял его от себя тем, что был на ногах и каждый день, как ни в чем не бывало, шёл на работу и слышал похвалы своей воле» [ibid]).

operation), Efrem projects his anger at his own situation at his fellow patients in the cancer ward. Ironically, he chides those who cannot accept the reality that they are dying:

Efrem Podduyev could no longer kid himself, and he didn't. He knew he had cancer. Now, trying to even things up, he began to push it home to all his neighbors in the ward that they had cancer too. That no one would ever escape, that they would all come back [to the ward] in the end. It was not that he enjoyed crushing people...only why didn't they stop kidding themselves, why didn't they face the truth?<sup>342</sup>

We remember that Ivan Ilyich's anger at his wife, children, and doctors is rooted in his disgust at their dishonesty and inability to acknowledge that he is dying. The turning point in Ivan Ilyich's narrative is overhearing his brother-in-law referring to him as a dead man, and it is only after hearing the truth spoken from another's lips that Ivan Ilyich begins his Authentic Fall into despair at *being-towards-death*. Until that point, Ivan Ilyich was also complicit in hiding the truth of his terminal situation from himself. At first, Efrem, like Ivan Ilyich, tries to cling to life (by desperately trying to find *chaga* to cure his illness). His anger is like Ivan Ilyich's, for he is incensed at his doctors' refusal to communicate his diagnosis but directs his anger at the other patients who naively assume that they will live.

Ultimately, dying becomes a moral problem for both Ivan Ilyich and Efrem. The declining health of their bodies juxtaposed with the clearness of their minds forces both characters to confront the painful reality of dying. Indeed, Efrem wishes that he would just “drop dead. When he said it like that, maliciously, it didn't sound so bad. It wasn't dying, it was dropping dead.”<sup>343</sup> Indeed, dropping dead would preclude the need for any internal transformation, and as both Ivan Ilyich and Efrem come to find, this transformation is painful

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<sup>342</sup> Ibid, 99. («Ефрем Поддуйев больше не мог себе врать и не врал. Он сознался, что у него—рак. И теперь, порываясь к равенству, он стал и всех соседей убеждать, что рак у них. Что всем сюда вернуться. Не то чтоб он находил удовольствие давить и слушать, как похрущивают, а пусть не врут, пусть правду думают» [104]).

<sup>343</sup> Ibid. («...пора Ефрему подышать. Так, со злорадством, оно даже легче получалось: не умирать—подышать» [105]).

and terrifying. Despite the pain inherent in such an experience, it is the characters' moral duty to challenge internalized values and to separate themselves from the social narratives that entrench them in the Inauthentic mode. In this way, Solzhenitsyn echoes the very maxim furthered by Tolstoy in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* that dying is a moral issue, not just a physical, metaphysical, and spiritual one.

The story that grips Efrem and forces his moral reckoning is Tolstoy's "What Humans Live By." Written in the form of a fable, the story questions the idea of humans' idea of control over their lives, ultimately presenting the moral that it is imperative to live in accordance with God's will, which is to be guided by love. Love is what sustains and enriches human lives. While this moral may seem elementary to some, (Rusanov, in particular, scoffs at it), it is evident that its elemental nature challenges the very values that guided Efrem's life—mainly, selfishness, pride, and impartiality. In reflecting on his life, Efrem becomes aware of the dearth of love that characterized his relationships with himself and with others, most particularly, with women. The narrator lays bare Efrem's inability to love others: "One thing about women Yefrem had found out in his life: they cling. It was easy enough to get a woman, but difficult to see the back of her...deep down he never thought of women as fully fledged people—except for his first wife Amina, that is. And he'd been amazed if some other fellow had seriously tried to tell him he treated women badly."<sup>344</sup>

After reading Tolstoy's story, however, Efrem realizes that "according to this curious book it turned out that Efrem was the one to blame for everything. They put the lights on earlier

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<sup>344</sup> Ibid, 104. («И так, что увидел Ефрем в бабах за всю жизнь, это привязчивость. Добыть бабу—легко, а вот с рук скачать—трудно...но нутром никогда он женщин за полных людей не считал—кроме первой своей жёнки Амины. И удивился бы он, если б другой мужик стал ему серьёзно доказывать, что плохо он поступает с бабами» [110]).

than usual.”<sup>345</sup> I draw attention to the mention of lights, to echo the discussion in chapter 1 about the metaphorical function of light and darkness in Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*: Solzhenitsyn is evidently parodying this concept. After Efrem’s engagement with the story, the light is turned on, which implies a moment of epiphany and the beginning of a spiritual transformation. Indeed, the narrator implies that after reading the story, Efrem is a changed man: “Efrem, sinister as ever, was once again immersed in his mournful Tolstoy. Sometimes he would get up and stamp up and down the passageway, making the beds shake, but at least he was no longer picking on Pavel Nikolayevich, or anyone else for that matter.”<sup>346</sup>

Efrem’s engagement with Tolstoy’s story is infectious, in that he poses the question “what do humans live by?” to his fellow cancer ward patients, all of whom respond with a different answer. The answers provided by the patients range from rations and supplies to water and food, to professional skill and homeland, and ultimately to the interest of society. However, when Efrem reveals Tolstoy’s answer—love—he is ridiculed by Rusanov: “Love?” Rusanov scoffs, “No, that’s [got] nothing to do with our sort of morality.”<sup>347</sup> This ironic statement highlights the lack of moral clarity in Solzhenitsyn’s Soviet society, in that such a moral is not even perceived as a realistic possibility by Efrem’s fellow cancer ward patients. Efrem, however, is incensed that “the bald man had almost guessed the answer. It said in the book that people live not by worrying about their own problems but by the love of others. And the pipsqueak had said it was by ‘the interests of society.’”<sup>348</sup> In this passage, Solzhenitsyn masterfully plays with irony:

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<sup>345</sup> Ibid. («А вот по этой чудной книге так получилось, что Ефрем же во всём и виноват» [ibid]).

<sup>346</sup> Ibid, 176. («Зловещий Ефрем опять упёрся в заупокойного своего Толстого; иногда он поднимался топтать проход, трясая кровати, но уже хорошо, что к Павлу Николаевичу больше не цеплялся, и ни к кому вообще» [183]).

<sup>347</sup> Ibid, 107. («--Лю-бо-вью?!...Не-ет, это не наша мораль!—потешались золотые очки [Павла Николаевича]» [174]).

<sup>348</sup> Ibid, 106. («Ему и досаждало, что лысый едва ли не угадал. В книге написано было, что живые люди не заботой о себе, а любовью к другим. Хиляк же сказал: общественным благом» [113]).



it is evident that Efrem has only begun his quest for truth, while Rusanov remains painfully isolated from it. To live in accordance with the interests of society does not require any genuine feeling of love—and Rusanov exemplifies this idea perfectly. By the time Efrem is discharged from the hospital (and as we know, a discharge from a Soviet hospital occurs only in the instance of complete recovery or a terminal diagnosis), Efrem has conquered at least some of his fear of death. As his doctor Evgenia Ustinova approaches him, realizing that his disease is indeed now terminal, she notices that “his reddish eyes [had] gone through so much fear that now they were fearless.”<sup>349</sup>

Efrem is the one character in *Cancer Ward* who realizes what his discharge from the hospital truly means. In his conversation with Evgenia Ustinova, he demands to end the series of operations, arguing that they are torturous, and when she acquiesces, he understands that his illness cannot be cured: “He had demanded his discharge, yet he had desperately hoped she’d say ‘You’re out of your mind, Podduyev. What do you mean, discharge you? We’re going to give you treatment. We’re going to cure you.’ But she had agreed. Which meant he was a goner. He made a movement of his whole body to indicate a nod.”<sup>350</sup> In this scene, Solzhenitsyn foreshadows Kostoglotov’s tensions with Vera about self-determination regarding his treatment. Both Efrem and Kostoglotov wish to be discharged from the hospital to avoid more trauma and pain from biomedical procedures. However, each man’s diagnoses and prognoses are different: Kostoglotov has a chance of surviving cancer while Efrem does not. He knows that his discharge

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<sup>349</sup> Ibid, 114. («Смотрела она в его рыжие глаза, после многого страха перешагнувшие в бесстрашие...» [120]).

<sup>350</sup> Ibid, 114. («—Резать—надоело, —высказал Ефрем...—Выписывайте! [Евгения Устинова] думала: зачем? Зачем его мучить, если нож не успевал на метастазами?—В понедельник, Поддуев, размотаем—посмотрим. Хорошо? (Он требовал выписывать, но как ещё надеялся, что она скажет: «Ты с ума сошёл, Поддуев? Что значит выписывать? Мы тебя лечим будем! Мы вылечим тебя!») А она соглашалась. Значит, мертвяк.) Он сделал движение всем туловищем, означавшее кивок» [120]).

means that there is no more hope of recovery. Despite his wish to live (and we see evidence of this by his devout hope for procuring *chaga*), Efrem accepts Evgenia Ustinova's decision.

Considering his prognosis, Efrem begins to think about death, the afterlife, and the role of conscience during the end of life. When the conversation in the cancer ward turns to the mysterious *chaga* and the possibility of self-induced healing, Efrem morosely says, “I suppose for [the tumor to disappear on its own] you need to have...a clear conscience.’ It was not clear to everyone whether his words were linked to their conversation or were some thought of his own.”<sup>351</sup> Solzhenitsyn's narrator here underscores the metaphysical and spiritual change taking place in Efrem's soul. For a man whose thoughts prior to reading Tolstoy's story were consumed by his own hedonistic desires, this admission implies that Efrem is challenging his former values. Efrem admits to a fellow patient in the ward that “I mucked so many women about, I left them with children hanging round their necks. They cried...my [sins] will never resolve.”<sup>352</sup> In response to the dying geologist Vadim who continues his research in the hospital, Efrem barks, “you fool!...If you're dying, what do you need geology for? It won't do you any good. You'd be better off thinking about what [humans] live by!...You read this little book here and you'll see, you'll be surprised.”<sup>353</sup>

Efrem's final days in the cancer ward are filled with reminiscences and thoughts about the future, which will inevitably end in death. He remembers digging a gas pipe with a few soldiers after the war—1.8 meters, conveniently the size of a grave—and one soldier telling him after Efrem demanded a perfect job, “alright chief. It'll be your turn to die one day.”<sup>354</sup> The

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<sup>351</sup> Ibid, 136. («—Для этого надо наверно...чистое совесь. Не все даже поняли: это он—сюда, к разговору, или своё что-то» [142]),

<sup>352</sup> Ibid, 138. («Ефрем хрипло вздохнул:—Я—баб много разорил. С детьми бросал...Плакали...У меня не рассосётся» [144]).

<sup>353</sup> Ibid, 203. («—Ну и дурак!—приговорил Ефрем...—умирать будешь—зачем тебе геология? Она тебе не поможет. Задумался бы лучше—чем люди живы?...Ты вот эту книжицу прочти, увидишься!» [210]).

<sup>354</sup> Ibid, 207. («И ты будешь умирать, десятник!» [214]).

thought haunts him during his last day at the hospital, and he wonders, “did [he] have an iron will? Had he learned something new and did he want to live differently? The disease took no notice of any of this. It had its own ‘specifications.’”<sup>355</sup> It is clear that Efrem has confronted his death but that his true Tolstoyan acceptance of death is yet to be achieved. The pain shooting in his neck in the rhythm “Efrem—Podduyev—Dead—Stop” reminds him of his nearness to death, yet “the more he repeated [those words] to himself, the more remote he felt from the Efrem Podduyev who was condemned to die. He was getting used to the idea of his own death, as one does to the death of a neighbor. But whatever it was inside that thought of Efrem Podduyev’s death as a of a neighbor—this, it seemed, ought not to die.”<sup>356</sup> Efrem is evidently still stuck in the Inauthentic mode of denying death. However, as he leaves the hospital once and for all, Efrem and Kostoglotov share a moment of empathy. They each realize that it could have been themselves standing in the other’s shoes. Efrem’s parting words to Kostoglotov (and to the readers of the novel) are an old Russian proverb: “When you’re born, you wriggle; when you grow up, you run wild; when you die, that’s your lot.”<sup>357</sup> Like Ivan Ilyich, Efrem’s road to death is full of optimism: he has done the hardest part, and that is staring death in the face and accepting the errors of his former life. Now comes the part where he can accept death and find peace.

Efrem dies only a day after he is discharged from the hospital, at a train station, no less, just like his hero Tolstoy. In this way, Solzhenitsyn connects Efrem’s narrative to Tolstoy’s. As William Nickell writes in his book *The Death of Tolstoy: Russia on the Eve, Astapovo Station*

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<sup>355</sup> Ibid. («...Ефрем не мог от этого загородиться. Что он ещё жить хочет?...Что у Ефрема сильная воля? Что он понял новое что-то и хотел бы иначе жить? Болезнь этого не слушает, у болезни свой проект» [214]).

<sup>356</sup> Ibid. («Умер.—Ефрем.—Поддуев.—Точка...И чем больше повторял. Тем как будто сам отделялся от Ефрема Поддуева, обречённого умереть. И привыкал к его смерти, как к смерти соседа. А то, что в нём размышляло о смерти Ефрема Поддуева, соседа,—вот это вроде умереть бы было не должно» [ibid]).

<sup>357</sup> “Родится—вертится, растёт—бесится, помрет—туда дорога” (ibid, 210).

1910 (2011), Tolstoy's flight from Yasnaya Polyana ended in "an enigmatic departure for an unknown destination, a portentous journey cut short by death," and here we see a direct comparison in Efrem's death.<sup>358</sup> It is unclear to the reader to where Efrem was traveling (home? To visit his first wife Amina? To make amends with those he has hurt?), and here Solzhenitsyn departs from the narrative of *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*: while the reader is given access to Ivan Ilyich's thoughts in the last moment of his life, the narrator of *Cancer Ward* admits that the patients "had not seen Yefrem's last moment. He had left the clinic and so he remained alive in their memory. They had to picture someone who the day before had been treading the floorboards which they themselves trod, lying in the morgue, slit up the midline like a burst sausage."<sup>359</sup> This grotesque imagery of the dead Efrem seems fitting somehow, as he himself often spoke of death in disturbingly honest and frightful terms.

Solzhenitsyn's conversation with Tolstoy about accepting death is more than a parody. While it is true that both Ivan Ilyich and Efrem share many similarities—both being around the same age and performing the masculine behaviors demanded by their epochs—Efrem exemplifies more courage than Ivan Ilyich in confronting his death, precisely because he goes against the Soviet rejection and denial of death that permeates not only the hospital where Efrem resides, but the entire society of which he is a part. Even though the denial of death is present in Ivan Ilyich's narrative, in the Soviet context, a discussion of death at all is a form of courage and rebellion. Efrem and Kostoglotov are the only characters in the novel that confront death head on, and they find themselves in the Authentic mode precisely because they articulate the truth

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<sup>358</sup> William Nikell, *The Death of Tolstoy: Russia on the Eve, Astapovo Station, 1910* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 2.

<sup>359</sup> Solzhenitsyn, *Cancer Ward*, 260. («Но всё-таки последнего шага Ефрема они не видели, и уехав, он оставался у них в памяти живым. А теперь надо было представить, что тот, кто позавчера топтал эти доски, где они все ходят, уже лежит в морге, разрезанный по осевой передней линии, как лопнувшая сарделька» [269]).

that they are dying. Even though Efrem hopes to be saved from his illness—whether it is by eating *chaga*, by clearing his conscience, by reconfiguring his moral values—he does not deny its inevitability. “If we can’t talk about death *here*, where on earth can we?”<sup>360</sup> Kostoglotov demands of Rusanov, and here we can see how and why Solzhenitsyn upholds Efrem as a moral example. His gloomy and morbid pronouncements of death are in fact acts of moral courage, for only in articulating the certainty of death and beginning an internal transformation in order to meet it with dignity, does one begin one’s journey out of the world of the They into the mode of Authenticity.

Ulitskaya’s *The Funeral Party*:  
Agency and Choice at the End of Life

In Liudimila Ulitskaya’s novella *The Funeral Party*, the dying Russian artist Alik greets his death from an unspecified degenerative disease in a sweltering New York loft, surrounded by an eclectic entourage of émigré friends and lovers. Alik’s last days coincide with the last days of the Soviet Union, and as his friends gather around a dingy television watching news of the unfolding coup in their homeland, Alik feels the last of his conscious self dissolve into a pleasant dreamlike state, and he feels at peace knowing that everything is as it should be. Self-pitying pathos and existential ruminations are absent from Alik’s end of life: unlike other dying characters of the Russian literary tradition (for example, Bazarov, Ippolit, and Ivan Ilyich), Alik approaches his own death with humor and a slight air of mischief: he jokes about the physical

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<sup>360</sup> Ibid, 140. («—Если *здесь* о смерти не поговорить, где ж о ней поговорить?» [147]).

deterioration of his body, and starkly states the truth of his situation: “Irka,” he says to Irina, the estranged love of his life, “I’m dying.”<sup>361</sup>

Alik’s death stands sharply against the American background, in which death is concealed and denied at all costs, and indeed, his death stands against the sentimental Russian one as well. He alone is privileged to experience the good death upheld by Turgenev, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and even Solzhenitsyn: Alik departs from the world on his own terms: calmly and peacefully, and in turn, his unflinching confrontation with death is life-affirming and inspirational to those around him. In other words, Alik exercises his self-determination to have the death he wants, which is impossible for characters like Kostoglotov within the Soviet healthcare system.

As Russia’s premier contemporary realist writer, Ulitskaya presents death and particularly the period of end of life as “for the first time, perhaps, in the entire history...of Russian literature” (in the words of contemporary Russian writer Anastasia Gosteva) “without ululation, false pathos, hysteria, yet at the same time...[in a way that] balances the boundary between the sacral and the profane without stooping to the level of the latter.”<sup>362</sup> The experience of dying stands at the center of many of Ulitskaya’s works, which include the novella *The Funeral Party*, the novel *The Kukotsky Enigma* (*Казус Кукоцкого*, 2000), and the short-story collection *About the Body of the Soul* (*О теле души*, 2020).<sup>363</sup> The writer admits that dying occupies a central position in her own life, recalling her intimate involvement in caring for her grandfather, mother, and close friends at the end of their lives. She openly discusses her own

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<sup>361</sup> Liudmila Ulitskaya, *Funeral Party*, trans. Cathy Porter (New York: Schocken Books, 1999), 7. («—Ирка, я скоро помру» [Людмила Улицкая, *Веселые похороны* [Москва: ЭСКО-Пресс, 2001], 11).

<sup>362</sup> Anastasiia Gosteva, “Liudmilla Ultiskaya: ‘I Accept Everything that is Given’: An Interview with Liudmilla Ulitskaya,” *Russian Studies in Literature* 37, no. 2 (Spring 2001): 89.

<sup>363</sup> The title is officially translated into English as “Funeral Party,” but a more literal translation would be “Joyous Funerals.”

breast cancer diagnosis and subsequent treatment, often critiquing the Russian healthcare system and (in her view) the problematic Russian relationship to death and dying: "...our country is rooted in a careless attitude towards ourselves, a fear of doctors, a fatalistic attitude towards life and death, laziness, and the special Russian quality of 'pofigism' [roughly translated to indifference]," she explains.<sup>364</sup>

In this section, I analyze the experience of dying in *The Funeral Party*—Ulitskaya's first work to be translated into English—paying particular attention to her representation of a Russian émigré artist's terminal illness and dying process in the United States, the importance of self-determination in achieving a good death, her comparison of illness to emigration, and her inversion of Ivan Ilyich's narrative through the character of Alik. "The subject of *The Funeral Party* is indeed not only death, but dying," Ulitskaya admits.<sup>365</sup>

As the vivacious and charismatic painter Alik dies from an undisclosed disease in the presence of his friends, lovers, and family, he stands as the only dying character in Russian literature who achieves a good death. Alik dies decently (he allows his individualized idea of the "self" dissolve along with his consciousness, knowing that everything was "in the correct order of things, there was even a sense of old injustices being put right"<sup>366</sup>); beautifully (he dies without a fear of death: when his wife Nina begs him to take the Christian sacrament before death because she wants to spare him from a fear of death, he responds, "But I'm not afraid, my darling"<sup>367</sup>); virtuously (his death is life-affirming for those around him: during the funeral party

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<sup>364</sup> "...в нашей стране укоренено небрежное отношение к себе, страх перед врачами, фаталистическое отношение к жизни и смерти, лень и особое российское качество—пофигизм" (Ksenia Maksimova, "Людмила Улицкая: «Рак научил меня радоваться жизни»,» *liveberlin.ru*, November 3, 2015, <https://liveberlin.ru/interviews/2015/11/03/lyudmila-ulitskaya-about-breast-cancer/>).

<sup>365</sup> Anastasiia Gosteva, "Liudmilla Ulitskaya: 'I Accept Everything that is Given': 81.

<sup>366</sup> Ulitskaya, *Funeral Party*, 105. («И даже было такое чувство, что какието давние ошибки и неправильности исправлены...» [Улицкая, *Веселье похороны*, 135]).

<sup>367</sup> *Ibid*, 25. («—Да мне и не страшно, детка» [31]).

celebrating his life, his friends “each realized that they hadn’t lived all these years alone in vain”<sup>368</sup>); and finally, Alik dies on his own terms: although he cannot control the fact that he is dying, he is nevertheless able to dictate where and how he wants to die—at home surrounded by friends, not alone in a hospital bed. In this way, Alik’s death reflects the good deaths proposed by Turgenev, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Solzhenitsyn. Thus, in presenting Alik’s dying process as one of liberation, Ulitskaya responds affirmatively to the question: is a good death possible?

#### Illness as Emigration: Self-determination at the End of Life

Before the start of events in the novella, Alik has already exercised his self-determination in deciding his end-of-life medical care. Having spent stints in the hospital treating his undiagnosable illness, Alik is certain that he wants to die at home. “The question for Americans in these [terminal] cases—when to switch off the machine—had been settled by Alik himself,” the narrator reveals, “he had left the hospital just before the end, and in doing so had refused the pathetic makeweight of an artificially prolonged life.”<sup>369</sup> While few around Alik still hope of curing his illness (most notably Nina, who invites a practitioner of natural medicine Maria Ignatevna to heal her husband), others understand that Alik has but a few more days to live. Maria Ignatevna maintains that “It’s all in God’s hands. I’ve seen it for myself—someone’s going...but no, He won’t let them...A person’s bent right down to the ground, next minute they’re standing up right as rain!,” but Alik’s doctor-friend Fima knows that “there was no hope

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<sup>368</sup> Ibid, 146. («...к утру они...точно знали, что не напрасно так долго жили в одиночестве» [182]).

<sup>369</sup> Ibid, 11. («Местная проблема, которая вставала в таких случаях, — когда отключить аппарат, — была решена Аликом заблаговременно: он ушел из больницы под самый конец и отказался, таким образом, от жалкого доведка искусственной жизни» [15]).



for Alik's cursed illness...in the next few days, death from asphyxiation would surely follow...there was nothing to be done about it."<sup>370</sup>

The narrator frequently alludes to Alik's dire financial situation, implying that dying in the hospital would be a great monetary burden. What's more, Alik lacks adequate health insurance to even consider such an option: "Calling for an ambulance to take him to the hospital, as they had done twice before, was out of the question now, and finding more false papers for him would be risky and difficult."<sup>371</sup> When the illness robs Alik of his ability to communicate his wishes, his friends and family uphold his desires. Although Fima, in a moment of weakness (perhaps not wanting to administer the sedative "which would [depress Alik's] respiratory system...thereby killing him") calls the ambulance once more before Alik dies, Nina resolutely maintains her husband's wishes: she "tossed her hair and declared in Russian that she wasn't letting Alik go anywhere."<sup>372</sup>

Not all Alik's wishes, however, are respected during his end of life. Nina insists on performing a baptism before death in defiance to Alik's firmly areligious stance. To humor and please his wife, however, Alik entertains both the Orthodox priest Father Victor and the Jewish rabbi Reb Monashe on his deathbed. He refuses to undergo a conversion, knowing that doing so would be more for his wife's benefit than his own. Nina, however, performs a humorously botched baptism on an unconscious Alik before his death: "Alik!" Nina cries, "Please don't be angry or offended, I'm going to baptize you."<sup>373</sup> Yet something supernatural prevents the

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<sup>370</sup> Ibid. («...[он] знал также, что чертова Аликова болезнь никуда не денется: последняя работающая мышца, диафрагмальная, уже отказывает и в ближайшие дни наступит смерть от удушья» [14]).

<sup>371</sup> Ibid. («Но делать было нечего—положить Алика в госпиталь по «скорой помощи», как делали уже дважды, теперь вряд ли было возможно. А снова искать фальшивый документ хлопотно и опасно...» [15]).

<sup>372</sup> Ibid, 11, 109. («...в какой-то момент ввести Алику снотворное, которое снимет страдания удушья и своим побочным действием—угнетением дыхательного центра—убьет...Но Нинка качала головой, трясла волосами и говорила порусски, что никуда Алика не отдаст» [15, 137]).

<sup>373</sup> Ibid, 114. («—Алик, —позвала она мужа. —Не сердись и не обижайся: я тебя крещу» [144]).

baptism from succeeding: “one of the candles bent over the rim of the bowl, in defiance of the law of physics, fell inside the now holy vessel. It sputtered and went out.”<sup>374</sup> Inexplicable forces preserve the sanctity of Alik’s end-of-life wishes, thereby underscoring the importance of respecting patients’ desires regarding their own deaths.

In comparing Kostoglotov and Alik’s experiences of illness, Alik’s removal from the Soviet context allows him to experience death in a way that preserves his dignity. On the surface, it may seem that Kostoglotov and Alik’s personalities and situations are quite different. Kostoglotov is a cynical political prisoner exiled by force, while Alik is a spirited artist who emigrated by choice. Kostoglotov (it is implied) will die without ever again experiencing sexual pleasure, while Alik engages in sexual acts even on his deathbed—his lover Valentina “put her finger between his dry lips and he moved his tongue over it. It was the only touch left to him now; it looked as though this would be the last night they made love... ‘I shall die an adulterer,’ [Alik] said quietly.”<sup>375</sup> In terms of their illnesses, Kostoglotov is cured even as he stands at the brink of death and Alik’s disease is misunderstood to the point of lacking an official diagnosis or treatment plan. Yet both are connected in their bold Authentic acceptance of death. Kostoglotov, like Alik, values joy and passion above all else and is willing to die in order to preserve what little of them he has. Alik, like Kostoglotov, accepts death matter-of-factly. What connects their illness narratives, however, is Solzhenitsyn and Ulitskaya’s framing the illness experience as exile. In Alik’s case, Ulitskaya upholds the idea of emigration over exile, thereby implying the element of choice and freedom in the experience of illness.

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<sup>374</sup> Ibid, 115. («Одна из свечей прогнулась и, пренебрегая законом физики, упала не наружу, а внутрь ставшего священным сосуда. Зашипела и погасла» [145]).

<sup>375</sup> Ibid, 75. («Она положила палец ему между сухих губ — и тронул палец языком, провел по нему. Это было единственное прикосновение, которое у него еще оставалось. Похоже, это была последняя ночь их любви. Оба они об этом подумали. Он сказал очень тихо: — Умру прелюбодеем...» [95]).

Alik dies in a foreign land where death is shunned and considered shameful. To have Alik die in the United States is an intentional artistic decision on Ulitskaya's part, for she admits that the American tradition of concealing death and the dying process is peculiar from the Russian perspective. "In general, [Americans] view death as some kind of unpleasantness that can be avoided if you behave well: Eat right, don't smoke, and even, perhaps, engage in charity...Our Russian death stands out more vividly against an American background," Ulitskaya says.<sup>376</sup> For her, the American view of death is destructive and counter-intuitive, and in writing the story of Alik, she reconfigures death and the period of end of life from something terrifying and oppressive into something beautiful, intimate, and ultimately life affirming.

*The Funeral Party* tells of two deaths: the death of Alik and the death of the Soviet Union, both of which occur concurrently. As Alik's body loses its motor function and he drifts further and further into a dreamlike state, the TV blares of news of an unfolding coup drowned out by a "phantasmagoria from the dream sequence of *Evgenii Onegin*."<sup>377</sup> The emigres that sit transfixed around the television, different as they are in personality and history, are "united by the single act of leaving [Russia]."<sup>378</sup> Alik remembers "the heart-rending farewells of past years when [leaving Russia] was forever, until death."<sup>379</sup> Indeed, emigration from the Soviet Union was a form of exile, for those who left were in many cases forbidden from returning.<sup>380</sup> Alik and his émigré friends dream of closed doors that haunt them decades into their new lives in the

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<sup>376</sup> Gosteva, "Liudmilla Ulitskaya: 'I Accept Everything that is Given'": 81.

<sup>377</sup> Ulitskaya, *The Funeral Party*, 88. («...фантазмагория сна из *Евгения Онегина*» [Улицкая, *Веселые похороны*, 112]).

<sup>378</sup> Ibid, 91. («Все сидящие здесь люди, родившиеся в России, различные по дарованию, по образованию, просто по человеческим качествам, сходились в одной точке: все они так или иначе покинули Россию» [114]).

<sup>379</sup> Ibid. («...это уже совсем не похоже на душераздирающие проводы прошлых лет, когда всё навсегда и насмерть» [116]).

<sup>380</sup> Barbara Dietz, Uwe Lebok, and Pavel Polian, "The Jewish Emigration from the Former Soviet Union to Germany," *International Migration* 40, no. 2 (2002): 33.

United States. In assessing their relationship to their homeland, the emigres realize that “this country [Russia] sat in their souls, their guts, and that whatever they thought about it—and they all thought different things—their links with it were unbreakable. It was like some chemical reaction in the blood, something nauseating, bitter and terrible.”<sup>381</sup> Bitterness, in the novella, is directly connected to illness and death: in Alik’s final moments, his wife Nina realizes that “the smell of him was strange, his skin tasted bitter.”<sup>382</sup>

In describing one’s estranged relationship to Russia in terms of illness metaphors, Ulitskaya, like Solzhenitsyn before her, directly marries the experience of exile with illness. Goldberg, in his analysis of illness exile in *Cancer Ward*, asserts that “illness experiences prompt a fundamental metamorphosis of identity...the illness sufferer’s struggles are, in some ways, attempts to reconstitute the self.”<sup>383</sup> To be ill, whether chronically or terminally, propels one to reconstruct one’s sense of self—exile forces one to do the same. Drew Leder similarly argues that “the paradox of illness [is that] we are brought home to a heightened awareness of the body, but it is a body in which we are no longer at home.”<sup>384</sup> Ulitskaya statement that “Emigration is a place where everything is exacerbated: characters, illness, and relations...” speaks directly to Leder’s quote: to be ill is to (forcefully) emigrate from the land of the healthy to the foreign land of the sick.<sup>385</sup>

Yet while Solzhenitsyn’s (and Dostoevsky’s) idea of illness as exile implies the absence of free will, Ulitskaya’s understanding of illness as emigration (or emigration as comparable to

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<sup>381</sup> Ulitskaya, *The Funeral Party*, 91. («Но никто не мог предположить, что все происходящее теперь в этой далекой, бывшей, вычеркнутой из жизни стране —пропади она пропадом! —будет так больно отзываться...Оказалось, что страна эта сидит в печенках, в душе, и, чтобы они о ней ни думали, а думали они разное, связь с ней оказалась нерасторжимой. Какая-то химическая реакция в крови —тошно, кисло, страшно...» [Улицкая, *Веселые похороны*, 115]).

<sup>382</sup> *Ibid*, 119. («Запах тела показался чужим, вкус кожи—горьким» [150]).

<sup>383</sup> Goldberg, "Exilic Effects of Illness and Pain in Solzhenitsyn’s *Cancer Ward*": 30.

<sup>384</sup> Drew Leder, "Illness and Exile: Sophocles’ *Philoctetes*," *Literature and Medicine* 9 (1990): 4.

<sup>385</sup> Gosteva, "Liudmilla Ulitskaya: 'I Accept Everything that is Given'": 82.

the experience of illness) upholds the notion of choice. Alik's illness robs him of choice more so than Ippolit and Kostoglotov's—he is literally and physically immobilized. Alik's choice lies in his attitude and acceptance of his situation. In the United States, Alik rarely misses his homeland and is enthralled by “the highways of America, the patchwork crowds of New York's subway...the American street food and street music.”<sup>386</sup> On his deathbed, Alik shows the same positive attitude and acceptance: his last conscious thoughts accessed by the narrator are “blissful, almost drug-induced.”<sup>387</sup> For a man so full of life, his ready welcoming of death seems peculiar, but it is precisely this quality that makes Alik so special and inspiring. He shows that dying is but a journey from one land to another and death as a New World.

“Death is Finished”:

*The Funeral Party* as Ulitskaya's Inversion of Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*

Many critics have compared *The Funeral Party* to *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, arguing that Ulitskaya's aim in creating such a narrative parallel is to accentuate the effects of the Soviet experience on contemporary Russian life.<sup>388</sup> I have argued that Solzhenitsyn's portrayal of Efrem Podduyev more clearly articulates these changes once Ivan Ilyich's existential predicaments are placed within a Soviet context. I assert that Ulitskaya's engagement with Tolstoy in presenting Alik's end-of-life period can be read as more of an inversion of Tolstoy's novella than as a political commentary. While Solzhenitsyn's contrast of Efrem and Ivan Ilyich ultimately reveals their similarities more clearly than their differences, Alik stands in direct opposition to Ivan

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<sup>386</sup> Ulitskaya, *The Funeral Party*, 93. («Он обожал хайвеи Америки и разноцветную, самую красивую, как он полагал, в мире толпу — толпу нью-йоркской подземки, американскую уличную еду и уличную музыку» [Улицкая, *Веселые похороны*, 119]).

<sup>387</sup> *Ibid.*, 117. («В движении, по которому он так стосковался за последние месяцы, было блаженство, сравнимое разве что с наркотическим» [147]).

<sup>388</sup> M. G. Lord, “80 Percent Nudity.” *New York Times*. February 11, 2001.

Ilyich: indeed, the only thing the two protagonists share is that they are both dying from an undiagnosed terminal illness. Ivan Ilyich is a judge whose life is dictated by his adherence to social norms and expectations, while Alik is an artist whose life is defined by his subversion and rebellion against the Soviet state, which ultimately results in his exile (or emigration, depending on how one looks at it); Ivan Ilyich is consumed by fear of death while Alik accepts his death unquestionably; Ivan Ilyich's salvation comes from his acceptance of Orthodox faith and his internalizing abstracted love for others (modeled by his caregiver Gerasim), while Alik cheekily rejects faith (sardonically entertaining a rabbi and priest on his deathbed and prodding both with unanswerable questions about death) and practices individualized love for others. Ivan Ilyich spends most of his end-of-life period consumed with regret for the way he lived his life, while Alik cheerfully acknowledges that "life's excellent for me wherever I go."<sup>389</sup>

If *The Funeral Party* can be read as Ulitskaya's reinterpretation of *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, then the question of love as the antidote to the fear of death deserves further attention. Ivan Ilyich's final act of love is to let go of his grip on life, understanding that his dying is causing his family pain. Immediately after, his fear of death vanishes, and with it, death itself disappears: "death is finished...it is no more!"<sup>390</sup> In *The Funeral Party*, Alik's departure from life continues along a slightly-altered trajectory: while fear of death is absent, his pain similarly vanishes, and he feels "light and insubstantial like a cloud" and "wanted to tell people that everything was all right...there was nothing unpleasant about it."<sup>391</sup> Like Ivan Ilyich, he wants to

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<sup>389</sup> Ibid, 92. («Да мне всюду отлично...» [117]).

<sup>390</sup> Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, 106. («Какая смерть? Страху никакого не было, потому что и смерти не было» [Толстой, *Собрание сочинений*, 147])

<sup>391</sup> Ulitskaya, *The Funeral Party*, 118. («Он был в забытьи, только изредка похрипывал. При этом все, что говорили вокруг, он слышал, но как будто из страшной дали. Временами ему даже хотелось сказать им, что все в порядке...» [147]).

assure his loved ones in order to minimize their sufferings. Love for others, and particularly, love for life does not inspire fear of death in Alik, but instead allows him to peacefully accept death.

After Alik dies, Irina wonders, “what had been so special about him? Was it that he had loved everyone? But how had that love showed itself?”<sup>392</sup> “Loving everyone” may seem on the surface to be the type of love modeled by Tolstoy’s peasant characters Gerasim and Platon Karataev and the one internalized by Ivan Ilyich at the end of his life, but in Alik’s case, his type of love is special in that it is concentrated and individualized: he loved everyone that came into his life with his whole heart, which in turn inspired those around him to invest in life and love more passionately than they had before. For example, Alik’s love created a sacred community, the impact of which Irina understands immediately after his death: she “realized it was as if Alik had never emigrated. He had built his Russia around him, a Russia which hadn’t existed for a long time and perhaps never did.”<sup>393</sup> Furthermore, Alik’s love manifested itself through creation: through his art, he created beauty, prompting others to consider different angles and perspectives. On a more individualized level, Alik demonstrated his love for others through his dedicated care of his wife Nina, to his lover Valentina by showing her a new world hidden in plain sight, and to Irina by allowing her to experience true love and providing her with a child.

One of Ulitskaya’s main inversions of Tolstoy’s religious themes in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* is the pagan and daemonic aura that permeates the novella. “We are surrounded by the most vulgar forms of primitive religiosity” says Father Victor—a priest who comes to discuss baptism with Alik—speaking abstractly about religion, but this quote directly identifies the

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<sup>392</sup> Ibid, 143. («...—чего же в нем было такого особенного? Он всех любил? Да в чем она, любовь эта, заключалась?» [178]).

<sup>393</sup> Ibid, 122. («[Алик] как будто никуда и не уезжал! Устроил ту Россию вокруг себя. Да и России той давно уже нет. И даже неизвестно, была ли...» [154]).

Dionysian influences that characterize Alik's final days.<sup>394</sup> Ivan Ilyich's move from Inauthenticity (fear of death and spiritual torment) to Authenticity (acceptance of death, internalized abstracted love for others) is described with typical Christian imagery: "in the place of death there was light."<sup>395</sup> Alik's transition from life to death is, other the other hand, guided by pagan and daemonic influences, details of which are scattered throughout the novella: Alik's daughter Maika reading *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* and Alik's friend Gioia reading Dante's *Inferno*, Alik's still-lives of pomegranates and his reinterpretation of *The Last Supper* also featuring pomegranates hanging on the walls, hellish Paraguayan music emanating from the streets, oppressive heat and muggy weather, fountains of wine and endless rounds of margaritas, naked women dancing around Alik's loft. As he lies immobilized by his disease, Alik realizes that "there was nothing better than these senseless parties where people were united by wine, friendship, and cheerfulness."<sup>396</sup> Ulitskaya seems to be asking whether religious faith is necessary for a good end-of-life, ultimately arguing that faith is indeed needed, although it is not required to be religious.

The theme of faith at the end of life that so clearly underscores Ivan Ilyich's transition from the Inauthentic to the Authentic mode in which he can accept death without fear is inverted in Alik's experience. Alik's wife Nina—the ethereal formal model whose connection to reality is tenuous at best—concerns herself primarily with her husband's spiritual wellbeing as he approaches death. Her special brand of faith can be best described as *dvoeverie*, and she begs Alik to be baptized, to take the Sacrament, and to speak to a Russian Orthodox priest before he dies. Alik humors her, but on the condition that he can speak to a rabbi as well (Alik is a non-

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<sup>394</sup> Ibid, 47. («Всегда под рукой вульгарнейшие образцы религиозного примитива» [57]).

<sup>395</sup> Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, 106. («Вместо смерти был свет» [Толстой, *Собрание сочинений*, 147]).

<sup>396</sup> Ulitskaya, *The Funeral Party*, 60 («он знал сейчас, что не было у него в жизни ничего лучше этих бессмысленных застолий» [74]).



practicing Jew). The priest, Father Victor, speaks to Alik about “insatiable human love that is transformed...to the love of God himself,” and here, Ulitskaya nods at Tolstoy’s idea of abstracted love as salvation from fear of death.<sup>397</sup> Father Victor speaks about a Third presence in the room between them and Alik is overcome with “mortal weariness. He couldn’t feel any Third present...[it] was something out of a fairytale.”<sup>398</sup> When Reb Maneshe arrives to take Father Victor’s place at Alik’s bedside, Alik continues his good-natured teasing of these esteemed religious figures: “Can’t a Jew seek advice from a rabbi before death?”<sup>399</sup> The rabbi’s answer is patronizing: Alik, having not studied the Torah throughout his life, is a child in captivity, not a Jew, and yet this is better than being an apostle. Both religious elders fail to provide solutions for Alik. Like Ivan Ilyich, if Alik wants true metaphysical answers, he must look within. Unlike Ivan Ilyich, however, Alik is not for want of metaphysical answers: he is content, and with that, he is positioned to die a good death.

Similarly to Ivan Ilyich, Alik experiences his own version of “death is finished,” which occurs almost literally. His wife Nina “finally stopped bothering him [with tinctures and salves], and Alik suddenly said very clearly, ‘Nina, I am completely better now.’”<sup>400</sup> The narrator does not reveal to the reader that these words are Nina’s hallucination (or vision), but instead implies that Alik’s utterance of these words is in fact the moment he dies: Nina’s connection to the spiritual world allows her to witness Alik’s ethereal transition from life to death. In this way, death occurs and at the same time it doesn’t: death is finished, it is no more.

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<sup>397</sup> Ibid, 47. («собственническая, алчная любовь преобразуется...через низменное, приходят к самой Божественной Любви...» [58]).

<sup>398</sup> Ibid, 50. («Смертельная тоска напала на Алика. Не чувствовал он никакого третьего. И вообще третий—персонаж из анекдота» [61]).

<sup>399</sup> Ibid, 57. («—А почему еврей перед смертью не может посоветоваться именно с раввином?» [71]).

<sup>400</sup> Ibid, 119. («—Нина, я совершенно выздоровел...» [150]).

Alik's "rise from the dead" (as experienced literally by Nina through her vision) is then externalized even further: at his funeral party, his daughter Maika plays a tape recorded by Alik before his death, in which he communicates directly with his friends mourning his death. This communication from beyond the grave stuns the audience and functions as a resurrection. Following the biblical story of Jesus's resurrection, Alik's funeral takes place three days after his death. "Boys and girls! My Pussy-cats and Cuckoos!" Alik's voice rings out from the cassette-player, "I'm right here with you! Pour the vodka! Let's drink and eat, like we always do!...There's just one thing I beg you, no fucking tears, ok? Everything's fine, just as it should be!"<sup>401</sup> As the tears die down and the merriment begins, the narrator explains, "Three days ago [Alik] had been alive, then he had died; now he occupied some strange third position, and everyone was in a state of grief and shock about it, although they didn't hold back on the alcohol."<sup>402</sup> No longer alive, Alik's love permeates the invisible boundary between life and death and continues to foster a sense of community, thereby solidifying the omnipotent power of individualized love. The strange 'third' position recalls Alik's disbelief in a mysterious Third discussed by Father Victor. In the very last mention of Alik in the novella, Nina has another vision of him: "she saw that he really was fully recovered and was moving exactly as he used to, with his old light step...[with] her cross hanging on his chest, and she realized that everything was all right."<sup>403</sup>

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<sup>401</sup> Ibid, 142. («—Ребятки! Девчущки! Зайки мои!...—Я здесь, ребятки, с вами! Наливаем! Выпиваем и закусьваем! Как всегда! Как обычно!...—И прошу вас, пожалуйста, без всяких мудовых рыданий! Все отлично! Своим чередом! О'кей? Да?» [177]).

<sup>402</sup> Ibid, 145. («Алик сделал, как обычно, нечто необычное: три дня тому назад был живой, потом стал мертвый, а теперь занял какое-то третье, странное, положение, и оттого все были в смущении и в печали, хотя алкоголем никак не пренебрегали» [180]).

<sup>403</sup> Ibid, 150. («И еще она увидела, что ее крестик висит у него на груди, и поняла, что все у нее получилось» [188]).

### Concluding Remarks:

To die on one's own terms is complicated, nuanced, and varies from person to person based on their personal philosophies and experiences. Death, and particularly a terminal diagnosis, represents the loss of choice and the end to the illusion of radical choice. While the nineteenth-century authors reckoned with choice in a retrospective sense, in their character's reflections of their own lives, relationships, and choices, the twentieth-century writers grapple with choice in the limited future. In other words, a terminal diagnosis is not the end of the journey. The "quest" identified by Frank in his discussion of illness narratives, continues until the very end—death. In the Soviet and American context which prioritizes the biomedical approach to death and dying, the challenge of dying patients remains to exercise their right to self-determination in deciding how and where they want to spend their final moments.

Solzhenitsyn and Ulitskaya's use of exile and emigration as metaphors for the illness experience speaks to the overwhelming sense of despair many terminally ill patients feel, namely that their options have run out and that their power is limited in a fundamental and terrifying way. Exile means having one's present and future dictated by the state, of never returning to one's home; emigration (particularly from the Soviet Union) is a transmuted form of exile and also implies the inability of return. In the context of the terminal illness experience, returning "home" to a healthy body is no longer a possibility. One must make a new home in their altered body and discover a different kind of life and orientation within.

By engaging with Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, Solzhenitsyn and Ulitskaya again underscore the importance of choice. Ivan Ilyich's moral transformation throughout the novella culminates in his decision to accept death, a choice which allows him to experience a good death. Efrem Podduyev and Alik do the same. Although Alik has already accepted death before the

beginning of the novella, he stands his ground in denying to be baptized, thereby asserting his self-determination in the face of death. Efrem continues along a similar trajectory as Ivan Ilyich in his moral reconfiguration that stems from his terminal diagnosis, but he also chooses to authentically take responsibility for his life choices in order to greet death with courage. He could have easily tossed aside Tolstoy's stories and like Rusanov flippantly dismiss their lessons, but he decides instead to confront himself and his mistakes, and to become a better man before he dies.

Part II

“The Living”:  
Doctors and Caregivers at the End of Life

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In part I “The Dying,” I explored the complicated task of confronting one’s death through terminal illness. As the nineteenth-century Russian writers question what can be considered a good death, they identify fear and existential dread that characterize the end-of-life experience as the greatest impetus to finding closure and acceptance in Authentic moments. Twentieth-century Russian writers argue that a good death entails both an acceptance of death and the freedom to assert one’s self-determination in the face of medical paternalism which overrides the patient’s desires regarding their treatment. When it comes to “the Living”—doctors and caregivers attending to the dying person—the question of how to best provide a good death becomes understanding what qualifies as successful end-of-life care. In part II “the Living,” I explore how Turgenev, Tolstoy, Chekhov, Solzhenitsyn, and Ulitskaya approach caring for terminally ill patients from the perspectives of doctors who treat the patient’s disease and caregivers who care for the dying person’s illness.

Kleinman differentiates disease from illness in order to illuminate the nuances in doctors and caregivers’ understandings of their personal and professional roles when caring for their patients. In other words, illness is the lived experience of being sick. The physician attends to disease: in examining the body, diagnosing the sickness, and prescribing treatment, the doctor recasts illness as disease, a practice in which “something essential to the experience of illness is lost; it is not legitimated as a subject for clinical concern, not does it receive an intervention.”<sup>404</sup> As Solzhenitsyn shows in *Cancer Ward*, the experience of illness is a secondary concern for doctors, particularly within the Soviet system. The doctor’s goal is clear, as Dontsova frames it:

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<sup>404</sup> Kleinman, *Illness Narratives*, 7.

their “job [is] to save lives. No more, no less.”<sup>405</sup> In recasting the sick person into a patient with a disease is what Michel Foucault refers to as “the clinical gaze” (*le regard médical*), which he defines as the medical practice of objectifying the patient by treating them as if they are a body apart from their personal identity.<sup>406</sup> Ultimately, a patient is someone who presents a problem and a challenge for their doctor whose duty is then to diagnose and treat their patient’s disease and the person’s experience of illness becomes a secondary. The doctor-patient relationship, then, is categorized by a chasm of misunderstanding and an inability for both parties to see eye-to-eye, which complicates both the doctor’s understanding of the problem and the patient’s experience of illness.

Russian writers uphold concern, sympathy, and transparency—tenets of attuned care and empathic witnessing—as crucial values and actions in providing the dying person with a good death. Ultimately, providing a good death requires practicing what Kevin Aho calls “existential medicine.” In contrast to scientific medicine which treats the human being as “a physical organism determined by causal laws,” existential medicine directly addresses the lived experience of illness and how this experience “disrupts and modifies how we interpret ourselves.”<sup>407</sup> In practicing existential medicine, Aho argues that it is imperative for doctors to attend to illness as well as to disease. Heidegger upholds this view in his *Zollikon Seminars* in which he critiques the medical profession’s tradition of regarding the human solely as a physical organism as opposed to a complicated being concerned with its existence.<sup>408</sup> By exposing uncritical assumptions in scientific medicine, Heidegger hoped to undercut the scientific dogma

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<sup>405</sup> Solzhenitsyn, *Cancer Ward*, 87. («Поставлена спасти жизнь, именно жизнь» [94].

<sup>406</sup> Foucault, *Birth of the Clinic*, 9.

<sup>407</sup> Kevin Aho (ed), *Existential Medicine: Essays on Health and Illness* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018).

<sup>408</sup> The *Zollikon Seminars* refer to a series of lectures given by Heidegger in Switzerland from 1959–1969 about the theory and practice of medicine, psychology, psychiatry, and psychotherapy.

which overlooks (if not directly discounts) the patient's personal experiences of illness.<sup>409</sup> Aho upholds this idea and argues that "Cancer, from the perspective of existence, cannot be reduced to abnormal cell growth in the body. This is because cancer is first and foremost a significant experience that the sufferer feels and lives through... This is why two people diagnosed with the same 'disease' can undergo two very different experiences of 'illness.'"<sup>410</sup> In critiquing the medical profession's focus on disease as opposed to illness, Heidegger encourages doctors to question their assumptions of the natural sciences and to concern themselves with their patient's "life-world" in attending to their unique experiences and self-interpretations.<sup>411</sup>

In chapter 3 "The Doctors' Dilemma: Physician's Perspectives," I present the doctor's experience treating terminally ill patients in the works of Turgenev, Chekhov, and Solzhenitsyn. Turgenev's doctor in his short story "A District Doctor," ("Уездный лекарь," 1850) is a complicated figure: on the one hand, he is attentive and invested in saving his dying patient, but on the other hand, he is dishonest with her and her family about her prognosis out of shame at his inability to cure her. Drawing on his own experiences as a physician, Chekhov presents the doctor-figure as complex and nuanced. In his short stories—"The Doctor" ("Доктор," 1887), "The Grasshopper" ("Попрыгунья," 1892), and "A Doctor's Visit" ("Случай из практики," 1898)—Chekhov questions what qualities determine a good doctor for the dying, ultimately arguing that a successful physician attends to both disease in diagnosing and prescribing treatment and also as a witness to the patient's experience of illness, which requires empathy, understanding, and a recognition of suffering. In *Cancer Ward*, Solzhenitsyn introduces a constellation of doctor characters and illuminates the tensions inherent in the doctor-patient

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<sup>409</sup> Aho, *Existential Medicine*.

<sup>410</sup> Ibid.

<sup>411</sup> Ibid.



relationship that are magnified by Soviet medical paternalism. In presenting an array of doctors who override their patient's wishes, Solzhenitsyn shows the importance of a nurturing and understanding doctor-patient relationship in helping dying patients achieve a good death. Ultimately, the theme that runs through Turgenev, Chekhov, and Solzhenitsyn's works about doctors is the importance of attuned care and empathic witnessing—tenets of existential medicine—which require honesty, transparency, and accountability. In the Russian context, particularly in the Soviet era, these values clash with doctors' insistence on curing disease and triumphing over death. This clash furthers the divide between doctors and their patients, ultimately complicating their end-of-life experience.

What happens when doctors are faced with their own terminal diagnoses? Having established and analyzed the various challenges of the doctor treating terminally ill patients, I then examine the experience of the doctor-turned-patient character who is forced to confront mortality in a novel and intimate way. Chekhov himself rarely spoke about his terminal illness (tuberculosis, with which he was diagnosed when he was twenty-four years old) in his personal letters or in his fiction works. The one exception is "A Boring Story," ("Скучная история," 1899), in which the protagonist medical professor confronts his own impending death from illness. Solzhenitsyn, on the other hand, delves into the minds of several doctor characters in *Cancer Ward*. He presents Dontsova as a doctor-turned-patient who struggles to accept her own terminal illness, but whose experience of being near death positively affects her ability to care for her patients.

Existential medicine is best exemplified in the caregiver's attuned care for the dying person's physical, emotional, and spiritual needs. The caregiver takes over the doctors' care for the dying patient once they are discharged from the hospital, and in empathically witnessing the

dying person's illness experience, caregivers can respond to provide attuned care and create an environment for the dying person to experience a good death. In chapter 4 "Mediating Death: Caregivers' Perspectives," I analyze the works of Tolstoy and Ulitskaya who uphold the caregiver as instrumental to providing the dying person with the care, love, and support they need to have a good death. In his presentation of caregiver characters, Tolstoy compares successful caregivers Natasha from *War and Peace*, Kitty from *Anna Karenina*, and Gerasim from *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* with their ineffective counterparts Marya, Levin, Varenka, and Praskovya Federovna. In setting up these oppositions, Tolstoy argues that meaningful caregiving depends on a combination of love, duty to ease suffering, and acceptance of death. Over the course of his literary career, Tolstoy returns to and redefines what qualities make a successful caregiver, evidently trying to present the ideal caregiver as a moral exemplar who is wise, dedicated, and accepting of the dying person's wishes at the end of their life. Ulitskaya inherits Tolstoy's discussion of caregiving in *The Funeral Party* but presents the challenges inherent in caregiving, particularly in caring for a loved one at the end-of-life. While Tolstoy is more concerned with the moral dimensions of caregiving, Ulitskaya shows that successful caregiving is more determined by the quality of love than by selflessness.

Chapter 3  
The Doctor's Dilemma: Physicians' Perspectives of Terminal Illness

“All in all, I feel doctored to death...”  
—Aleksander Solzhenitsyn, *Cancer Ward*<sup>412</sup>

“If I had been by Prince Andrei, I would have saved  
him, naturally not referring to my personal abilities  
but to the general progress of medical science”  
—Anton Chekhov in a letter to A. S. Surovin<sup>413</sup>

When faced with a terminal diagnosis, many physicians are at a loss of how to interact and support patients through one of the most challenging periods of their lives. Terminal diagnoses represent the end of medicine's authority, and the danger of death reminds many doctors of the limits to their expertise. In Bulgakov's short story “The Blizzard” (“Вьюга,” 1926) the physician-narrator is suffers from nightmares of failed operations, of “exposed ribs [and] of my hands covered in human blood.”<sup>414</sup> Waking up in a state of panic, the doctor admits that “I [was] obsessed by one thought—how can I save [this patient]? And the next? And the next!”<sup>415</sup> He is exhausted by the increasing number of patient visits at his clinic and ends his evenings overwhelmed and dejected. When he is summoned to treat a dying woman during a ferocious blizzard, the doctor is overcome with despair at his inability to save her and “felt the customary stab of cold in the pit of my stomach, as I always did when I saw death face to face.”<sup>416</sup> He laments, “[the diagnosis] was as useless now as it would have been earlier; there was

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<sup>412</sup> Solzhenitsyn, *Cancer Ward*, 459. («Вообще чувство, что меня залечили» [Солженицын, *Раковый корпус*, 459]).

<sup>413</sup> Anton Chekhov, *Letters of Anton Chekhov to his Friends and Family with Biographical Sketches*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1920), 277).

<sup>414</sup> Mikhail Bulgakov, *A Country Doctor's Notebook* (Brooklyn: Melville House Publishing, 2013), 50. («Ночью я видел в зыбком тумане неудачные операции, обнаженные ребра, а руки свои в человеческой крови...» [Михаил Булгаков, *Морфий и Записки юного врача* (Москва: Издательство «Э», 2018), 52]

<sup>415</sup> Ibid. («...[я] слушал, как таинственно бьет в глубине сердце, и нес в себе одну мысль: как его спасти? И этого—спасти. И этого! Всех!» [ibid]).

<sup>416</sup> Ibid, 54. [«У меня похолодело привычно под ложечкой, как всегда, когда я в упор видел смерть» [ibid, 60]].

nothing to be done about it. What a ghastly thing to happen! What absurdly precarious lives we lead!...It was too sickening even to contemplate.”<sup>417</sup>

Bulgakov’s doctor-narrator cuts to the heart of each doctor’s struggles, namely the pressure to save every patient who comes to him. Doctors, as representatives of the medical field which prioritizes scientific inquiry, precision, and professional detachment are placed in a particularly challenging position. On the one hand, they are regarded by their patients as experts in interpreting and understanding the human body, and on the other hand, they are fallible human beings whose expertise is determined by the available scientific knowledge and medical technology. “What is modern medicine’s ideal?” the Russian doctor Vikentiy Veresaev (1867–1945) asks in his *Memoirs of a Physician* (1901), “It lies in stamping out of every disease in its inception, or better still—in not admitting it into the system at all.”<sup>418</sup> In his recollections, Veresaev remarks on being paralyzed by fear of death and by consuming thoughts of his own culpability and failure. He remembers one tragic instance when a “sickly boy, with an ugly peeling face and apathetic stare [who] became dear to me” died under his care.<sup>419</sup> Distraught, Veresaev “roamed the streets aimlessly, plunged into a state of numb stupor; I could think of nothing, and my soul was gripped by a feeling of horror and despair. Every now and then the thought ‘why, I have killed a human being!’ stood out in my consciousness with merciless vividness.”<sup>420</sup> Veresaev’s memoir reveals the enormous burden that doctors shoulder in their careers and personal lives, namely the responsibility of holding their patient’s lives in their

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<sup>417</sup> Ibid, 56. («Ну, а к чему? Теперь не к чему, да и раньше не к чему было. Что с ним сделаешь! Какая ужасная судьба! Как нелепо и страшно жить на свете!...Даже подумать тошно и тоскливо!» [ibid, 63]).

<sup>418</sup> Vikenty Veresaev, *Memoirs of a Physician*, trans. Simeon Linden (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1916), 204.

<sup>419</sup> Ibid, 74.

<sup>420</sup> Ibid, 76.

hands. The successful doctor, Veresaev reveals, is Herculean in snatching a dying person's life out of Death's firm clutches.

And yet doctors confront death more frequently and in a more acute sense than the average person, and one would presume that such a constant confrontation *being-towards-death* would affect their existential orientation. Might the constant reminder of death make doctors more empathetic and accepting of mortality and equip them with a special Authentic wisdom that they can communicate to their patients? In their battle against death, however, doctors more frequently Fall into the Inauthentic realm because they *flee* in the face of death. When it comes to their medical practice, terminal diagnoses represent the limits of their knowledge and authority. The disease can no longer be conquered, and now doctors can discharge the patient to their caregivers and focus their attention on saving the next patient. Bulgakov's doctor-narrator, for example, opens a medical textbook to the page specifying the dying woman's condition as soon as he returns home, intent on driving away morbid thoughts and hoping to be more prepared for the next time. In being fearful of death, it is clear why doctors struggle with such a painful Authentic experience when forced to confront their own mortality after a terminal diagnosis.

A clear theme that runs throughout doctors' narratives is their relationship with their patients, which rests upon the fundamental tension between treating their patients' "disease" as opposed to attending to their "illness." Arthur Kleinman differentiates between the two, defining disease as the practitioner's recasting of sickness into a medical problem that needs to be solved. Illness, on the other hand, is the lived experience of being sick.<sup>421</sup> In recasting illness into disease, the physician essentially objectifies their patient by considering them through "the

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<sup>421</sup> Disease is "what the practitioner recreates in the recasting of illness in terms of theories of disorder...that is to say, the practitioner reconfigures the patient's...illness problems as narrow technical, disease problems."<sup>421</sup> Illness, on the other hand, is the "innately human experience of symptoms and suffering, [and] refers to how the sick person...perceive[s], live[s] with, and respond[s] to symptoms and disability" (Kleinman, *The Illness Narratives*, 5).

clinical gaze,” in which the patient is seen as a body apart from their personal identity. The doctor, in failing to understand the patient’s illness experience, often struggles to provide the kind of care the patient needs. The caregiver, on the other hand, attends to illness as opposed to disease and is more successful in providing *attuned care* through their ability to *empathically witness* the dying person’s illness experience, an idea to which I return to in chapter 4.

In recent bioethics discussions, the question of what makes a good doctor and what qualifies as good care has rested directly upon this opposition between disease and illness. To attend to illness, the doctor must cultivate the skills of attuned care and empathic witnessing. Empathic witnessing, we are reminded, is what Kleinman refers to as “experiential phenomenology,” in that one enters the patient’s world and existentially commits to being with them as they shape their personal illness narrative. Kleinman identifies the physician’s difficulty in empathizing with their dying patient’s experience of illness as the greatest hinderance to providing attuned care. In the end-of-life context, empathic witnessing means being sensitive to the dying person’s experience, which requires one to recognize their suffering, anticipate their physical and emotional needs, and respect their decisions regarding their care. It is best exemplified when the practitioner and the dying person “work out an appropriate and desired way toward death.”<sup>422</sup> Kleinman acknowledges that “an individual’s course of death, like that of life, may take dozens of different turns...[and] the pathway and course of action should emerge from the doctor-patient relationship or should be something determined by the dying person.”<sup>423</sup> The physician, Kleinman asserts, “cannot bring a teleology (a doctrine of final causes and

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<sup>422</sup> Kleinman, *The Illness Narratives*, 154.

<sup>423</sup> *Ibid.*

ultimate meaning) from medicine.”<sup>424</sup> As we saw in *Cancer Ward*, such a teleology complicates the patient’s dying experience.

And yet, cultivating the skills of attuned care and empathetic witnessing presents a great challenge to doctors. To be emotionally invested in their patient has its drawbacks as well, doctors argue, for feelings can often get in the way of a doctor’s duties. Veresaev remarks on the difficulty in being both empathetic with his patients and of maintaining professional distance: watching his patients suffer “jarred upon the nerves badly and interfered with one’s work. Habit had to be acquired...such comparative ‘hardening’ [on the behalf of the physician] is both essential and desirable.”<sup>425</sup> He had to “remain deaf to the cries of the man being operated on, blind to the agonized contortions of [the patient’s] tortured body, one has to choke down feelings of sympathy, and control one’s agitation...this was very difficult until one got used to such scenes...it was constantly necessary to repeat to oneself: ‘I am perfectly well, it is not I but another person who is being hurt.’”<sup>426</sup> On the patients’ side however (as is the case of Ivan Ilyich and Kostoglotov), this distance often interferes with their treatment and complicates their illness experience. The doctor’s dilemma in maintaining a professional boundary speaks to their constant oscillation between two extremes: being empathetic or limited in their emotional investment, being a savior or being blamed for their patient’s death, and in the Russian context, being a part of their communities or being seen as outsiders. Bulgakov’s short story posits an important question: how much of their time must doctors devote to their patients to be considered a good doctor? And furthermore, what is doctors’ responsibility to the patient when their death is imminent?

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<sup>424</sup> Ibid.

<sup>425</sup> Veresaev, *Memoirs of a Physician*, 16.

<sup>426</sup> Ibid, 15.

Russian writers have confronted this dilemma in their fiction for centuries. As Bulgakov's doctor-narrator reflects on the burdensome responsibilities of his profession, he angrily recalls Tolstoy's moralizing thoughts on death: "It was all right for him at Yasnaya Polyana. I don't suppose he was taken to see people who were dying."<sup>427</sup> Chekhov, who struggled with tuberculosis for half his life and who succumbed to the disease at the young age of forty-two, writes of his own experiences treating terminally ill patients: "In the course of my medical practice, I have grown accustomed to seeing people who were soon going to die, and I have always felt strange when people whose death was at hand talked, smiled, or wept in my presence...but what seems strange to me...[is that] we [doctors] do not feel our own death, and write stories as if we are never going to die."<sup>428</sup>

Turgenev is the first Realist writer to present the doctor's dilemma in his short story "A District Doctor." In this story, we already see a tradition of dishonesty on behalf of the doctor with his patient Alexandra Andreevna and her caregivers. When the doctor enters Alexandra's room, he realizes immediately that "she's bound to die."<sup>429</sup> He nevertheless declares to the family "pray don't worry," and adds as an aside to the narrator that "the doctor is bound to say that."<sup>430</sup> To the narrator of the story, the doctor bemoans the "blind confidence [the family and patient has] in you, and you yourself feel that you are not capable of helping...that was precisely

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<sup>427</sup> Bulgakov, *A Country Doctor's Notebook*, 57. («Ему хорошо было в Ясной Поляне—думал я—его небось не возили к умеряющим...» [Булгаков, *Морфий и Записки юного врача*, 65]). Veresaev echoes a similar idea: "Tolstoy's chief artistic merits lies in his strikingly human and earnest treatment of every one of the types he paints...he makes one mistake when he deals with doctors; Tolstoy cannot describe them without irritation and an almost Turgenev-like wink to the reader."<sup>427</sup> He continues, "Evidently there is something, an indefinable 'something' which prejudices us [doctors] in all eyes. And I fancied that it must be this cloaking of ourselves in a kind of nebulous mantle of mystery, the exaggerated confidence and expectation that we excite towards ourselves."<sup>427</sup> (Veresaev, *Memoirs of a Physician*, 183).

<sup>428</sup> Chekhov, *Letters of Anton Chekhov*, 86.

<sup>429</sup> Ivan Turgenev, *Sketches from a Hunter's Album*, trans. Richard Freeborn (New York: Penguin Random House, 1990), 68.

<sup>430</sup> *Ibid.*, 64. («не извольте беспокоиться»—докторская, знаете, обязанность» (CITE FROM RUSSIAN)



the sort of confidence that Alexandra Andreevna's whole family had in me: and they forgot to think that their daughter was in danger. I, also, on my side, assured them that it was all right, while my soul sank into my heels.”<sup>431</sup> He continues to uphold the lie that Alexandra is on the mend, even telling her family, “She’ll live, don’t you worry,” evidently because he cannot bear the loss of her family’s loss of confidence in himself and in his ability as a medical professional.<sup>432</sup>

The doctor of Turgenev’s story also details the immense pressure that is part and parcel of every physician’s experience, namely, the pressure to stave off death at any cost. As Alexandra’s condition worsens, the doctor admits to the narrator, “You are not a medical man, my dear sir; you cannot comprehend what takes place in the soul of a fellow-being, especially when he first begins to divine that his malady is conquering him.”<sup>433</sup> He laments the inevitable decay of self-confidence when “it seems to you, that you have forgotten everything you ever knew, and that the patient does not trust you and that others are beginning to observe that you have lost your wits, and communicate the symptoms to you unwillingly, gaze askance at you, whisper together.”<sup>434</sup> He continues, desperately hoping that “there certainly must be a remedy for this malady, you think, if you could only find it. Here now, isn't this it? You don't give the medicine time to act properly...now you grasp at this, now at that. You take your prescription-book, it certainly must be there, you think. To tell the truth, you sometimes open it at haphazard:

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<sup>431</sup> Ibid, 68. «...видишь доверие к тебе слепое, а сам чувствуешь, что не в состоянии помочь. Пот именно такое доверие всё семейство Александры Андреевны ко мне возымело: и думать позабыли, что у них дочь в опасности. Я их тоже, с своей стороны, уверяю, что ничего, дескать, а й самого душа в пятки уходит»

<sup>432</sup> Ibid, 65. («—Будет жива, не извольте беспокоиться»).

<sup>433</sup> Ibid, 67. «Вы не медик, милостивый государь; вы понять не можете, что происходит в душе нашего брата, особенно на первых порах, когда он начинает догадываться, что болезнь-то его одолевает»

<sup>434</sup> Ibid. «Так тебе кажется, что и позабыл-то ты всё, что знал, и что больной-то тебе больше не доверяет, и что другие уже начинают замечать, что ты потерялся, и неохотно симптомы сообщают, исподлобья глядят, шепчутся»

perchance Fate, you think to yourself...”<sup>435</sup> Evidently, the doctor’s dishonesty with his patient and her family stems from a sense of profound shame in his own abilities and from an immense social pressure to cure her.

Turgenev also presents the tensions inherent in the doctor-patient relationship, particularly when there is a romantic element that factors into their interactions. The doctor’s genuine desire to save his patient is also motivated by his own romantic feelings for her, and by the hope that they will be married once she returns to health. Again, this speaks to the doctor’s challenging position in maintaining firm boundaries with their patient. Arguably, one can presume that the more emotionally invested one is in the patient, the more involved one will be in their care. Turgenev shows, however, that this emotional stake may in fact be a hindrance to quality care, in that the doctor’s romantic feelings for his patient propel him to conceal the truth of her condition, which inevitably leads to more pain for her family after she dies.

Russian literature also has a rich tradition of doctors-turned-writers recording their own experiences as physicians into their fictional works, the most famous being Chekhov and Bulgakov. While Bulgakov started his career as a physician and later abandoned the profession to pursue a literary one, Chekhov served as a doctor for most of his life. In one his letters to his publisher A. S. Surovin, Chekhov famously declares in 1888, “medicine is my lawful wife, and literature is my mistress. When I get fed up with one, I spend the night with the other. Though it is irregular, it is less boring that way, and besides, neither of them loses anything through my infidelity.”<sup>436</sup> He continues, “you advise me...not to think of medical work. I do not know why

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<sup>435</sup> Ibid. («Ведь есть лекарство, думаешь, против этой болезни, стоит только найти. Вот не оно ли? Попробуешь—нет, не оно! Не даешь времени лекарству как следуют подействовать...то за тохватишься, то за то. Возьмешь, бывало, рецептурную книгу...ведь тут оно, думаешь, тут! Право слово, иногда наобум раскроешь: авось, думаешь, судьба...»)

<sup>436</sup> Chekhov, *Letters of Anton Chekhov*, 99.

one should not hunt two hares in the literal sense...I feel more confident and more satisfied with myself when I reflect that I have two professions and not one...if I did not have my medical work, I doubt if I could have given my leisure and my spare thoughts to literature.”<sup>437</sup> For Chekhov, then, literature served as more than just an antidote for or distraction from medicine, but as its necessary companion.

When forced to reckon with their own deaths, doctors in Russian literature more frequently deny their mortal situation and are arguably more immobilized by fear than their patients. Nikolai Stepanovich from Chekhov’s “A Boring Story,” keeps his diagnosis to himself and spirals into a state of despair and Anxiety in reflecting on his own life. Dontsova of Solzhenitsyn’s *Cancer Ward* similarly conceals her suspicions of stomach cancer from her colleagues, denying them to herself until the disease has progressed. Even when she seeks treatment, she is adamant with her doctor about keeping her diagnosis to himself, hoping that her ignorance of her disease will assuage her overwhelming feelings of anxiety.

#### Doctor-Characters in Russian Literature: Terminal Diagnoses and the End of Doctoral Authority

What qualities make a good and successful physician? Chekhov addresses this question in his fiction through his representation of doctor characters. Some of them are flawed while others are idealized, as is the case of the doctor in the short story “The Head Gardener’s Tale” (“Рассказ старшего садовника,” 1894). In the story, the titular character relays a tale (or “legend” as he calls it) about a village doctor from his grandmother’s childhood. The doctor, despite being “morose and unsociable” was nevertheless a “learned man...in [the] days that learned men were few. He spent his days and nights in contemplation, in reading and healing

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<sup>437</sup> Ibid.

disease, looked upon everything else as trivial...in the breast of that learned man there beat a wonderful angelic heart.”<sup>438</sup> The doctor cared for his patients and “loved them as if they were children and did not spare himself for them. He was ill with consumption...but when he was summoned to the sick, he forgot his own illness...and, gasping for breath, climbed up the hills however high they might be. He disregarded the sultry heat and cold...and would accept no money and, strange to say, when one of his patients died, he would follow the coffin with the relations, weeping.”<sup>439</sup> This doctor cares deeply for his patients and puts their needs ahead of his own, thereby showing his deeply empathetic and dedicated nature.

Many of this legendary doctor’s qualities and characteristics mirror Chekhov’s in real life. Like this cherished doctor, Chekhov suffered from tuberculosis for half of his life, barely mentioning his diagnosis to his loved ones, and rarely allowed illness to interfere with his medical work.<sup>440</sup> During a particularly bad episode of coughing and chest pain in 1891, Chekhov nevertheless visited the famine-stricken provinces of Nizhniy Novgorod and Voronezh to help raise funds for the famine victims. Similarly, in the summer of 1892, Chekhov served as an unpaid zemstvo doctor in Serpukhov during the cholera epidemic, which he balanced with his

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<sup>438</sup> Anton Chekhov, *Chekhov’s Doctors*, ed. Jack Coulehan (Kent: The Kent State University Press, 2003), 156. («Он был всегда угрюм и несообщителен... Дело в том, что был ученый, а в ту пору ученые не были похожи на обыкновенных людей. Они проводили дни и ночи в созерцании, в чтении книг и лечении болезней, на всё же остальное смотрели как на пошлость и не имели времени говорить лишних слов... В груди этого ученого человека билось чудное, ангельское сердце»)

<sup>439</sup> Ibid. («Как бы ни было, ведь жители города были для него чужие, не родные, но он любил их, как детей, и не жалел для них даже своей жизни. У него самого была чахотка, он кашлял, но, когда его звали к больному, забывал про свою болезнь, не щадил себя и, задыхаясь, взбирался на горы, как бы высоки они ни были. Он пренебрегал зноем и холодом, презирал голод и жажду. Денег не брал, и, странное дело, когда у него умирал пациент, то он шел вместе с родственниками за гробом и плакал»)

<sup>440</sup> In the few letters in which he does mention his illness, Chekhov very cursorily refers to his symptoms. In a letter from April 6, 1886, Chekhov mentions that he is coughing up blood: “...I am ill. Spitting up blood and weakness” (Anton Chekhov, *Letters of Anton Chekhov*, 47). In a letter to A. S. Surovin on April 1, 1897, he admits that “the doctors have diagnosed me with tuberculosis in the upper part of the lungs and have ordered me to change my manner of life (ibid, 347). Again to A. S. Surovin on January 8, 1900, Chekhov writes of his stay in Yalta on doctors’ orders: “...My health is not so bad. I feel better than I did last year, but yet the doctors won’t let me leave Yalta. I am as tired and sick of this charming town as of a disagreeable wife” (ibid, 375).

other duties of managing twenty-five other village hospitals and traveling around the countryside educating the local population about the disease and its transmission.<sup>441</sup> As Michael C. Finke shows in his biography, Chekhov's dedication to medicine took precedence even over his literary career: he continued to work full-time as a physician when he would traditionally be vacationing with his family and dedicating his efforts to writing.<sup>442</sup> Not all doctors, however, can live up to the standards set by Chekhov in his own life nor in the story of the legendary doctor. Indeed, many doctor characters in Chekhov's work are flawed, complicated, and constantly redefining themselves in relation to their profession.

Chekhov's considers his characters from a doctor's detached bird-eye view by revealing very little about what they think and feel, propelling the reader to extrapolate characters' motives by reading between the lines of what they say and don't say. Chekhov's minimalist style forces one to look for meaning in the small details in the characters' actions and weave together an entire picture out of mundane moments that carry special significance. The substance of many of his short stories rests upon the small and seemingly innocuous interactions between the characters. Chekhov's experience as an observant and dedicated doctor bleeds into the way he constructs his stories, showing that one must look underneath to discover another's true thoughts and motivations.

In the short story "The Doctor," the plot rests upon the lack of honest communication between the characters. The story begins on a dreary day at sunset: the mother of a dying child Misha, Olga Ivanovna, is bereft at the prospect of losing her only son. The attending doctor Tsvetkov, however, knows that the boy is dying from a brain tumor that is so advanced, that all

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<sup>441</sup> Michael C. Finke, *Freedom from Violence and Lies: Anton Chekhov's Life and Writings* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2021), 96.

<sup>442</sup> *Ibid.*

that is left to do for him is to provide palliative care. “I should be as glad of any hope as you Olga but there is none,” he tells her, “We must look the hideous truth in the face. The boy has a tumor on his brain, and we must prepare ourselves for his death, for such cases never recover.”<sup>443</sup> In communicating the boy’s terminal diagnosis, the doctor consciously frames his impending death as both his and the mother’s concerns by using the term “we,” thereby articulating his emotional investment in his patient. Olga Ivanovna, however, refuses to abandon hope for her son’s recovery and begs the doctor to return the next day. “Good god, can nothing really be done?” she asks him, “Nikolai, you are a doctor and ought to know what to do!”<sup>444</sup> Olga underscores the physician’s challenging position in the face of a terminal diagnosis: the patient’s family, just as in Turgenev’s story, expects the doctor to be omnipotent in staving off death. He acquiesces, but it implies that he does so more out of romantic love for the dying boy’s mother than out of professional obligation. In their conversations, Tsvetkov and Olga Ivanovna refer to each other informally by their first names, and the agitated doctor brings up their former romantic past, begging Olga Ivanovna to admit once and for all that the dying boy is not his son: “Come, I entreat you Olga, for once in your life, tell me the truth,” he beseeches her, “Tell me that Misha is not my son.”<sup>445</sup> Tsvetkov reveals the controversy over the boy’s paternity: at the time of her pregnancy, Olga Ivanovna was romantically involved with two other men whom she claims as the boy’s father and who continue to support him financially.

Already the ambiguity surrounding the Misha’s paternity reveals the aura of dishonesty that permeates this end-of-life scene. While the lying originates with the patient’s mother and not

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<sup>443</sup> Chekhov, *Chekhov’s Doctors*, 22. («—Я был бы рад надежде не меньше вас, Ольга, но ее нет,—ответил Цветков. —Нужно глядеть чудовищу прямо в глаза. У мальчика бугорчатка мозга, и нужно постараться приготовить себя к его смерти, так как от этой болезни никогда не выздоравливают»)

<sup>444</sup> *Ibid.*, 23. («—Николай! Ты доктор и должен знать, что делать!»)

<sup>445</sup> *Ibid.* («Скажите, что Миша не мой сын...»)

the doctor (as was the case in Turgenev's story), Tsvetkov's inability to ascertain the truth affects his caregiving. Even though the doctor's interaction with his dying patient is minimal (indeed, they only share a few words), there is a lot to be said about the quality of Tsvetkov's care for Misha that is influenced by Olga Ivanovna's masking of the truth. As she had at many points in her son's life, she insists that Tsvetkov is his father, but the veracity of her words is brought into question by her long pauses and evident hesitation in revealing this fact. The doctor, however, refuses to believe her, thinking that she is lying because "she is afraid that if she tells me the truth, I shall leave off giving her money, she thinks that if she did not lie, I should not love the boy!"<sup>446</sup> These internal thoughts reveal that Tsvetkov *does* love the boy, and perhaps his dedication to Misha and his mother stems more from his attachment to them than it does from his professional obligations. Tsvetkov knows that medically there is nothing more to be done for the dying boy, but he promises to return regardless so he can help ease Misha's suffering and to comfort Olga Ivanovna in her grief. In portraying a doctor who cares for his patient, Chekhov shows that doctor's investment in the patient's life is a necessary quality for quality care.

It is unclear why Olga Ivanovna would lie to the doctor at such a critical juncture. Is it because she thinks that, upon discovering once and for all that the boy is not his son, Tsvetkov would cease his utmost effort to save the boy's life? The paternity issue raises questions about Tsvetkov's commitment to his patient's care, and the doctor struggles with maintaining emotional boundaries as the boy drifts closer to death. Tsvetkov evidently cares for Misha—he speaks to him gently and caresses his hair, calling him a "darling boy." He wishes for the boy to be someone else's son so that he can distance himself from the pain, grief, and regret that will overwhelm him after the boy's death. The story ends with the doctor cursing his former lover for

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<sup>446</sup> Ibid, 24. («Она боится, что если откроет мне истину, то я перестану выдавать ей деньги! Она думает, что если бы она не лгала, то я не любил бы этого мальчика!»).

her duplicity, but still assures her that he will return the next day to attend to the dying boy. Yet the question of why Tsvetkov promises to return hangs in the air: is it out of love for Olga Ivanovna? Is it out of a professional duty to ease Misha's suffering? Or is it because the doctor loves the boy, regardless of whether he is his son? The uncertainty of the story speaks to the doctor's dilemma in maintaining boundaries with their patient and of bearing the responsibility for their patients' lives, all of which determine the quality of medical care they provide.

Both Turgenev and Chekhov's story show the tensions inherent in the doctor-patient relationship when romantic love is introduced into the dynamic. Love and truth—or rather love and dishonesty—are blurred together in these end-of-life contexts, particularly when the doctor fails to maintain an emotional distance between himself and his patient. In Turgenev's story, the romantic love the doctor feels for Alexandra Andreevna keeps him tethered to her side and intent on treating her, yet it manifests in dishonesty to her and her family about her prognosis. In Chekhov's story, the doctor's amorous feelings for his patient's mother and the considerations of their romantic past call into question the quality of his care for the dying boy. If he were to discover once and for all that the boy is not his son, would that change his investment in the boy's treatment? Olga Ivanovna seems to think so, unaware of the fact that Tsvetkov already loves Misha regardless of his parentage, and in maintaining that the boy is the doctor's son, she hopes to secure Tsvetkov's undivided attention and commitment to saving her son from death. In portraying Tsvetkov as a doctor who truly cares for his patients, Chekhov shows that good doctoring depends on both medical expertise and an investment in one's patient.

The social and professional pressure to prevent death also complicates the doctor's experience. In Chekhov's short story "The Grasshopper," the vapid socialite protagonist Olga Ivanovna (who shares the same name as the mother in "The Doctor") considers only those who



are exceptional in their talents and professions as worthy of her time, discounting the quiet charm and integrity of her doctor-husband Dymov. Olga Ivanovna's obsession with celebrity and genius drives her into an affair with an artist and she dismisses Dymov as a "simple, ordinary, and in no way remarkable man."<sup>447</sup> Only when he dies from a fatal illness caught from a patient does she realize how special he really is. Osip Stepanovich Dymov is a kind, empathetic, and celebrated doctor who is dignified and modest in exhibiting his achievements: he keeps his accomplishments to himself, knowing that he treats his patients out of genuine concern for their wellbeing as opposed to seeking glory. He dedicates most of his waking hours to his patients and to advancing the medical field: "every day from nine to twelve, he saw patients and was busy in his ward, and after twelve o'clock, he went by tram to the other hospital, where he dissected. His private practice was a small one, not worth more than five hundred rubles a year," and the narrator adds, echoing Olga Ivanovna's thoughts, "that was all. What more can one say about him?"<sup>448</sup> "Meanwhile," the narrator continues, "Olga Ivanovna and her friends were not quite ordinary."<sup>449</sup> The narrator's opinion about Dymov's worth clearly mirrors that of his wife's, implied using the adverb "meanwhile." Olga Ivanovna reveals that they met and fell in love when Dymov was treating her dying father: "he watched [my father] for days and nights at his bedside."<sup>450</sup>

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<sup>447</sup> Ibid, 135. («[Ольга Ивановна] кивая на мужа и как бы желая объяснить, почему она вышла за простого, очень обыкновенного и ничем не замечательного человека» [А. П. Чехов, *Избрание произведений в трех томах: том второй Повести и Рассказы 1892–1903* (Москва: Государственное издательство художественной литературы, 1950), 3]).

<sup>448</sup> Ibid. («Ежедневно от девяти часов утра до полудня он принимал больных и занимался у себя в палате, а после полудня ехал на конке в другую больницу, где вскрывал умерших больных. Частная практика его была ничтожна, рублей на пятьсот в год. Что еще можно про него сказать?» [3]).

<sup>449</sup> Ibid. («А между тем Ольга Ивановна и ее друзья и добрые знакомые были не совсем обыкновенные люди» [ibid]).

<sup>450</sup> Ibid, 136. («Когда бедняжка-отец заболел, то Дымов по целым дням и ночам дежурил около его постели» [ibid])

While Olga Ivanovna and her immature antics are the focus of the short story, Dymov remains in the background and serves as her stable and reliable anchor. In his home life just as in his professional life, Dymov is tender, patient, and dedicated. Although she is aware of his “simplicity, good sense, and kind-heartedness,” Olga is more concerned with spending her time with high-achievers and celebrities who raise her own social status.<sup>451</sup> When Dymov catches diphtheria from a dying patient by “sucking up the mucus through a pipette from a [sick] boy,” he falls deathly ill and perishes soon after.<sup>452</sup> His colleague Korostelev, who attends to Dymov on his deathbed laments, “and what for? It was stupid...just from folly...”<sup>453</sup> After he dies, however, Korostelev seems to change his mind about Dymov’s reason for performing such a procedure: “He is dying because he sacrificed himself. What a loss for science!”<sup>454</sup> He continues, “compare him with all of us. He was a great man, an extraordinary man! What gifts! What hopes we all had for him...Merciful God, he was a man of science; we shall never look on his like again...and his moral force...not a man, but a pure, good, loving soul, and clean as crystal. He served and died for science! And he worked like an ox night and day—no one spared him—and with his youth and his learnings he had to take a private practice and work at translations to pay for these...” Korostelev looks at Olga Ivanovna’s dresses with hatred and disgust, “...vile rags!”<sup>455</sup> Ultimately, as is the case of Bazarov, it is unclear *why* Dymov made the medical decision he did which led to his death. Was it suicide, out of shame and heartbreak over his

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<sup>451</sup> Ibid, 137 («Его простота, здравый смысл и добродушие приводили ее в умиление и восторг» [6])

<sup>452</sup> Ibid, 151. («Знаете от чего он заразился? Во вторник у мальчика высасывал через трубочку дифтеритные пленки [23]).

<sup>453</sup> Ibid, 153. («А к чему? Глупо...Так, сдуру...» [ibid]).

<sup>454</sup> Ibid. («Умирает, потому что пожертвовал собой...Какая потеря для науки!» [25]).

<sup>455</sup> Ibid, 154. («Это, если всех нас сравнить с ним, был великий, необыкновенный человек! Какие дарования! Какие надежды он подавал нам всем!...Господи боже мой, это был такой ученый, какого теперь с огнем не найдешь...А какая нравственная сила!...Добрая, чистая, любящая душа—не человек, а стекло...Служил науке и умер от науки. А работал, как вол, день и ночь, никто его не щадил, и молодой ученый, будущий профессор, должен был искать себе практику и по ночам заниматься переводами, чтобы платит за эти...подлые тряпки!» [26]).

wife's flaunted affair? Or was it as Korostelev suggests, either a folly or a sacrifice for science? Could it have been the pressure to save his patient at any cost that led Dymov to perform such a risky procedure? In a typical Chekhovian fashion, the story ends with uncertainty. What is clear, however, is that Dymov's dedication to his profession, as well as his gentle soul, made him into an exceptional doctor. What Chekhov seems to be suggesting in this story is that both these factors—kindness and drive—are necessary qualities to good doctoring. In Dymov's case, the reader is not privy to his relationships with his patients. What can be gathered about his skills as a doctor is revealed either by Korostelev or by the narrator. We can extrapolate from his interactions with his wife and her friends, however, that in his professional life Dymov's attentiveness, modesty, and gentleness mark him as a good doctor.

Many of Chekhov's stories featuring physicians portray the doctor from a removed standpoint—it is rare that the reader glimpses moments when the doctor treats his patient. One exception is the story "A Case History," in which a doctor is summoned to the countryside to treat a young woman Liza who claims to be close to death. Although this story does not include a doctor treating a terminally ill patient, it is nevertheless important to include in this discussion because it shows another crucial element of doctoring, namely, the importance of the doctor listening and empathizing with his patient. Furthermore, the doctor Korolyov arrives at Liza's house under the impression that she is deathly ill, and he is immediately ushered in by her distraught mother who says, "we're in real trouble."<sup>456</sup> The governess of the household, also frenzied, details Liza's condition: "the doctors say its nerves [but] when she was a little girl she was scrofulous, and the doctors drove it inwards, so I think it may be due to that."<sup>457</sup> When

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<sup>456</sup> Ibid, 175. («Пожалуйте, господин доктор...чистое горе...» [490]).

<sup>457</sup> Ibid. («Доктора говорят—нервы, но когда она была маленькой, доктора ей золотуху внутрь вогнали, так вот: думаю, может быть от этого» [ibid]).

Korolyov examines Liza, she mentions how heart palpitations kept her up all night, but curiously admits that it is not the heart that worries her but the thought that she “might die from fright.”<sup>458</sup> After the examination, the doctor concludes that there is nothing medically or physically wrong with Liza and turns to return to the station.

Already Korolyov proves himself to be a good doctor, for when Liza’s mother begs him to spend the night, he does so, even though “he wanted to tell her that he had a great deal of work in Moscow, and his family was expecting him home...but he looked at her face, heaved a sigh, and began taking his gloves off without another word.”<sup>459</sup> In doing so, he shows his kind heart and empathetic spirit. After dinner, he walks around the family’s property bordering their factory and considers his patient’s feelings at living in such a dreary place: “As a doctor accustomed to judging correctly chronic complaints, the radical cause of which was incomprehensible and incurable, he looked upon factories as baffling, the cause of which was also so obscure and not removable, and all the improvements in the life of the factory hands he looked upon not as superfluous, but as comparable as the treatment of incurable disease.”<sup>460</sup> Already, the narrator links illness to the physical environment, and as Korolyov attends to Liza, he realizes that her malady is more emotional and spiritual than it is physical. He understands that her suffering stems from her unhappiness with her life, home, and future, all of which contribute to her physical suffering. In putting himself in her shoes, Korolyov exhibits his ability to act as an empathic witness to his patient.

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<sup>458</sup> Ibid. («—У меня сердцебиение—сказала она.—Всю ночь был такой ужас...я едва не умерла от ужаса!» [401]).

<sup>459</sup> Ibid, 177. («Он хотел сказать ей, что у него в Москве много работы, что дома его ждет семья...но он поглядел на ее лицо, вздохнул и стал молча снимать перчатки» [492]).

<sup>460</sup> Ibid, 178. («Он, как медик правильно судивший о хронических страданиях, коренная причина которых была непонятна и неизлечима, он на фабрики смотрел, как на недоразумение, причина которого была тоже неясна и неустранима, и все улучшения в жизни фабричных он не считал лишними, но приравнивал и к лечению неизлечимых болезней» [494]).

Even though Korolyov knows there is nothing medically wrong with his patient, he nevertheless treats her by addressing the root of her suffering, which is evidence of his success in providing attuned care. Liza acknowledges that she feels comfortable in his presence: “I hear sympathy in your voice,” she admits to the doctor, “it seemed to me as soon as I saw you that I could tell you all about [how I feel]...it seems to me that I have no illness, but that I am weary and frightened...I should like to talk, not with a doctor, but with some intimate friend who would understand me and convince me that I was right or wrong.”<sup>461</sup> She admits that the cause of her suffering is her unbearable loneliness. As he listens to her account of her illness, Korolyov reads between the lines: “do you read a great deal?” he asks when Liza alludes to Lermontov’s narrative poem “The Devil,” “do you see things at night?” he questions when Liza mentions being tormented by shadows.<sup>462</sup> Liza smiles at the doctor, knowing that he understands her, and Korolyov is convinced of the same. It is clear to him that Liza “needed to as quickly as possible give up [the factory] and [her inheritance]...it was clear to him, too, that she thought so herself, and was only waiting for someone she trusted to confirm her.”<sup>463</sup>

Korolyov is a tactful enough professional to abstain from giving her straightforward advice, and instead communicates his “diagnosis” “in a roundabout way.”<sup>464</sup> He addresses her existential angst by showing that he too understands her suffering: “you in your position as a factory owner and heiress are dissatisfied...if you were satisfied [you would] sleep soundly...[our parents] slept soundly; we, our generation, sleeps badly, we are restless...life will

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<sup>461</sup> Ibid, 181. («В вашем голосе мне слышится участие: мне с первого взгляда на вас почему-то показалось, что с вами можно говорить обо всем...мне кажется, что у меня нет болезни, а беспокоюсь я и мне страшно...мне хотелось бы поговорить не с доктором, а с близким человеком, с другом, который бы понял меня, убедил бы меня, я права или неправа» [497]).

<sup>462</sup> Ibid. («А вы много читаете?...Вы что-нибудь видите по ночам?») [497]).

<sup>463</sup> Ibid. («И он знал, что сказать ей; для него было ясно, что ей нужно поскорее оставить пять корпусов, и миллион...для него было ясно также, что так думала и она сама, и только ждала, чтобы кто-нибудь, кому она верит, подтвердил это» [ibid]).

<sup>464</sup> Ibid, 182. («И он сказал то, что хотел, не прямо, а окольным путем» [498]).

be good in fifty year's time; it is only a pity we shall not last until then."<sup>465</sup> When the doctor leaves the next morning, Liza sees him off from her veranda (throughout the story, she does not leave her bedroom), which already shows that her condition has improved: she even wears a flower in her hair, symbolizing her hope and renewal in her life. Korolyov's willingness to see beyond his patient's physical symptoms allows him to address the root of her illness, which is her emotional and existential suffering. Thus, Chekhov implies that to be a good doctor is to be more than just a caregiver of disease, but to be a witness to illness and suffering as well.

In the Soviet context, the doctors' dilemma of curing disease, maintaining boundaries between themselves and their patients, and triumphing over death becomes even more accentuated. Death means more now than just the death of an individual—it has social, philosophical, and political implications as well. In *Cancer Ward*, Solzhenitsyn explores the doctors' dilemma by presenting the hospital as a fundamentally political space in which physicians act as representatives of the Soviet state in furthering its death-denying ideology. Ethical concerns such as the right to treat, natural medicine versus technology, and the tensions between paternalism and autonomy unfold through conversations between patients and their doctors. In presenting an array of doctor characters who struggle to act as empathic witnesses for their dying patients, Solzhenitsyn argues that sensitivity to the patient's wishes and a commitment to honoring their dignity are qualities that determine ideal medical care. In my analysis of doctor characters in *Cancer Ward*, I present them from least to most empathetic in order to show how a positive and nurturing doctor-patient relationship at the end of life rests upon the practice of attuned care and empathic witnessing.

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<sup>465</sup> Ibid. («Вы в положении владелицы и богатой наследницы недовольны, не верите в свое право и теперь вот не спите... у родителей наших был бы немислим такой разговор... по ночами они не разговаривали, а крепко спали, мы же, наше поколение, дурно спим... Хорошая будет жизнь через пятьдесят, жаль только, что мы не дотянем» [ibid]).

The doctors treating cancer patients—the pompous and self-absorbed doctor and ward director Nazamutdin Bahramovich, the head-strong and determined physician Liudmila Dontsova, the dedicated and hard-working surgeon Lev Leonidovich, the kind-hearted and soft-spoken attending physician Vera Gangart, and finally the empathetic family-doctor Oreshchenkov—vary in their success of attending to illness. Solzhenitsyn differentiates between the kinds of success possible within the Soviet hospital: the one upheld by the State—eradicating disease, and the one dismissed for its “useless”—empathizing and honoring the patient’s wishes regarding their care. Nizamutdin Bahramovich is introduced very briefly as a self-absorbed administrator who “obviously loved listening to the sound of his own voice...he thought he looked like a man of authority, reputation, education, and intellect. Legends would be springing up about him back in the *aul* where he was born. He was well known throughout the town too, and even occasionally got a mention in the newspaper.”<sup>466</sup> The senior doctor “viewed his position not as an unremitting, exhausting job, but as a constant opportunity to parade himself, to gain rewards and a whole range of special privileges.”<sup>467</sup> Indeed, Nizamutdin Bahramovich functions as more of a figure-head and representation of the problematic Soviet healthcare system in his constant berating of his colleagues for “what was wrong with their work” and lectures them on how “they should intensify their struggle for precious human lives.”<sup>468</sup> He upholds the clinical gaze when considering his patients’ prognoses, particularly in cases of terminal illness: “Nizamutdin Bahramovich insisted too on discharging those who were doomed. So far as possible, their deaths should occur outside the clinic. This would increase the turnover

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<sup>466</sup> Solzhenitsyn, *Cancer Ward*, 356. («Он явно прислушивался к своему голосу и при каждом жесте и повороте, очевидно, видел себя со стороны—какой он солидный, авторитетный, образованный, и умный человек. В его родном ауле о нём творили легенды, известен он был и в городе, и даже в газете о нём упоминали иногда» [361].

<sup>467</sup> Ibid. («Главврач понимал своё положение не как постоянную, неусыпную и изнурительную обязанность, но как постоянное красование, награды и клавиатуру прав» [ibid]).

<sup>468</sup> Ibid, 358 («...бороться за драгоценные человеческие жизни...» [362]).

of beds, it would also be less depressing for those who remained and it would help the statistics, because the patients discharged would be listed not as ‘deaths’ but as ‘deteriorations.’”<sup>469</sup>The narrator does not reveal his interactions with his patients, but even the doctors under his watch view him with disdain.

The main doctor Dontsova is learned, headstrong and (as we saw in chapter 2) she considers curing disease as her top priority. As Ludmilla Koehler argues in her essay “Eternal Themes in Solzhenitsyn's *Cancer Ward*,” the headstrong main physician in the cancer ward Dontsova “has a fighting spirit and circumvents the strict regulations of the hospital in order to help her patients. The other doctors are also full of enthusiasm and courage in standing up for their pioneering efforts in the treatment of their patients, efforts based on scrupulous research conducted under the most primitive conditions. In general, the doctors emerge as a group of people any country could be proud.”<sup>470</sup> The question of whether doctors like Dontsova deserve such reverence and applause is repeatedly questioned by the authorial voice and the characters within the novel. Kostoglotov, for example, critiques the problematic stance of the doctor in his or her relationship to the patient: when Dontsova forbids Kostoglotov from leaving the hospital (“‘you will go home,’ Dontsova weighed her words one by one with great emphasis, ‘when I consider it necessary to interrupt your treatment. And then you will only go temporarily’”), he directly addresses her paternalistic position: “Ludmilla Afansyevna! Can’t we get away from this tone of voice? You sound like a grownup talking to a child. Why not talk as an adult to an adult?”<sup>471</sup>

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<sup>469</sup> Ibid, 60. («И ещё настаивал Низамутдин Бахрамович не задерживать обречённых. Смерть их должна происходить по возможности вне клиники—это тоже увеличит оборачиваемость коек, и меньше угнетения будет оставшимся, и улучшится статистика, потому что они будут выписаны не по причине смерти, а лишь "с ухудшением"» [64]).

<sup>470</sup> Ludmilla Koehler, “Eternal Themes in Solzhenitsyn's *Cancer Ward*”: 56.

<sup>471</sup> Solzhenitsyn, *Cancer Ward*, 75. («Вы поедете тогда—с большим значением отвесила Донцова—когда я сочту нужным прервать ваше лечение. И то на время» [ibid]; «Людмила Афанасьевна! Как бы нам



Dontsova and her team of doctors rarely communicate terminal diagnoses to their patients, conceal their patients' negative prognoses, and refuse to disclose the consequences of certain treatments. In doing so, the doctors uphold a system which dismisses the individual desires and needs of their patients. Dennis Sansom argues in his article "Medicine and Human Identity in Solzhenitsyn's *Cancer Ward*," that through the development of three characters (the clinician Dontsova, the patient Kostoglotov; and the family doctor, Oreshchenkov) "Solzhenitsyn shows the de-personalizing effects of a bureaucratic paternalism, which primarily treats patients as though they were *biological machines*. Patients are subjects who cannot and should not be reduced only to causal, physiological laws and whose need for personal and spiritual connections with other subjects is vital to their purpose and wellbeing."<sup>472</sup> As Kostoglotov says, "you see, you [doctors] start from a completely false premise. No sooner does a patient come to you than you begin to do all his thinking for him...and once again I am a grain of sand, just as I was in the camp. Once again nothing *depends* on me."<sup>473</sup> He maintains that "the patient has the right to know everything."<sup>474</sup>

Dontsova is propelled by her altruistic desire to save her patients but she is nevertheless plagued by guilt from the consequences of certain lifesaving treatments. She recalls her compliance in the early 1930s with the Soviet medical practice of treating cancer with intense radiation which in 1955 (the year the novel takes place) is known to cause radiation sickness—in other words, irreparable damage: "X-ray cures, which had been safely, successfully, even brilliantly accomplished ten or fifteen years ago through heavy doses of radiation, were now

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установить не этот тон взрослого с ребёнком а—взрослого со взрослым?» [Солженицын, *Раковый корпус*, 81]).

<sup>472</sup> Dennis Sansom, "Medicine and Human Identity in Solzhenitsyn's *Cancer Ward*": 100.

<sup>473</sup> Solzhenitsyn, *Cancer Ward*, 76. («Вы сразу исходите из неверного положения: раз больной к вам поступил, дальше за него думаете вы...И опять я—песчинка, как в лагере, опять от меня ничего не зависит» [Солженицын, *Раковый корпус*, 81]).

<sup>474</sup> *Ibid*, 120. («...больной должен всё знать» [127]).

resulting in unexpected damage or mutilation of the irradiated parts.”<sup>475</sup> Despite her guilt, however, Dontsova justifies the treatment: she “had saved the patient from certain death in the only way possible...and if the patient reappeared today with some sort of mutilation he had to understand that this was the price he must pay for the extra years he had already lived, as well as for the years that still remained of him.”<sup>476</sup> While Dontsova does not necessarily view patients as strictly biological machines, as Samson asserts, she is so committed to their treatment and curing them of disease that she discounts their desires regarding their treatment, thus overshadowing their autonomy and dignity with her paternalistic actions. For example, when patients are distressed about the impending complications of their treatment, Dontsova dismisses their reactions as ungrateful. After a patient with ovarian cancer learns she must have her uterus removed, she breaks down into tears and says, “but this will be the end of me! My husband is sure to leave me!” Dontsova responds, “Well, don’t tell your husband what the operation is...how will he discover? You can easily hide the whole thing.’ She was there to save life, no more, no less.”<sup>477</sup> For Dontsova and for many doctors treating aggressive diseases, death is evidence of failure, and thus extending life at whatever cost to her patients is a principle which guides her medical practice. She does not see the difference between a healthy life full of possibility and one marked by substantially diminished quality of life.

Once Kostoglotov discovers the consequences of his hormone therapy, he and Dontsova argue over the doctor’s “right to treat.”<sup>478</sup> After Kostoglotov insists on openly discussing his

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<sup>475</sup> Ibid, 89. («Смысл был тот, что рентгеновские лечение, благополучно, успешно или даже блистательно закончившиеся десять и пятнадцать лет тому назад дачею крупных доз облучения,—выявлялись теперь в облучённых местах неожиданными разрушениями и искажениями» [95]).

<sup>476</sup> Ibid. («И, приходя теперь с увечьем, [больной] должен был понять, что это плата за уже прожитые добавленные ему годы и ещё за те, которые оставались впереди» [ibid]).

<sup>477</sup> Ibid, 87. («Да ведь это конец жизни!...Да ведь меня муж бросит...—А вы мужу и не говорите, что за операция!...Он и никогда и не узнает. В ваших силах это скрыть. Поставлена спасти *жизнь*, именно *жизнь*» [94]).

<sup>478</sup> Ibid, 82. («Право лечить» [87]).

treatment options, Dontsova “had been deliberately cunning, she had mentioned the injection as something quite insignificant because she was tired of all this explaining...it was a treatment highly recommended for [Kostoglotov’s] particular type of cancer by the most up-to-date authorities. Now that she anticipated the amazing success that attended Kostoglotov’s treatment, she could not possibly weaken before his obstinacy or neglect to attack him with all the weapons she believed in.”<sup>479</sup> For Dontsova, healing her patient is the primary goal, and it is for this reason that she is incensed at Kostoglotov’s heated question: “why do you assume you have the right to decide for someone else? Don’t you agree it’s a terrifying right, one that rarely leads to good? ...No one’s entitled to [that right], not even doctors.”<sup>480</sup> Dontsova, frustrated by this argument, responds “with deep conviction”: ““But doctors *are* entitled to that right—doctors above all’...by now she was really angry. ‘Without that right there’d be no such thing as medicine!’”<sup>481</sup>

Despite her solid convictions, however, Dontsova is indeed troubled by Kostoglotov’s assertion that doctors do not have the right to decide for their patients (“she realized that all day she had been more than upset, really wounded by [Kostoglotov’s argument] about the right to treat”<sup>482</sup>) and begins to question herself: “was it possible? Could the question arise of a doctor’s *right* to treat?” she wonders, “once you began to think like that...goodness knows where you’d end up...by that reasoning all the daily advantages of medicine would have to be sacrificed.”<sup>483</sup>

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<sup>479</sup> Ibid. («А она нарочно схитрила, сказала, как о пустяке, потому что устала уже от этих объяснений...пришла пора нанести опухоли ещё новый удар, очень рекомендуемый для данного вида рака современными руководствами. Прозревая нерядовую удачу в лечении Костоглотова, она не могла послабить его упрямству и не обрушить на него всех средств, ы которые верила» [88]).

<sup>480</sup> Ibid, 79. («Почему вообще вы берёте себе право решать за другого человека? Ведь это—страшное право, оно редко ведёт к добру. Бойтесь его! Оно мне дано и врачу» [85]).

<sup>481</sup> Ibid. («—Оно именно дано врачу! В первую очередь—ему!—убеждённо вскрикнула Донцова, уже сильно рассерженная.—А без этого право не было б и медицины никакой!» [ibid]).

<sup>482</sup> Ibid, 88. («...она поняла, что весь день не только взволнована, но уязвлена спором с ним о праве лечить» [94]).

<sup>483</sup> Ibid, 90. («Но можно ли так?—ставить вопрос о *праве* врача лечить? Если думать так, если сомневаться в каждом научно принятом сегодня методе, не будет ли он позже опровержен или отвергнут,—тогда можно чёрт знает до чего дойти!...Тогда лечить вообще нельзя!» [96]).

She thinks of all the patients she “healed, the young and the old, the men and the women [who] were now walking through plowed fields...picking cotton, cleaning streets, standing behind counters, sitting in offices...serving in the army” (in other words, performing their duties as ideal Soviet citizens).<sup>484</sup> Yet she is plagued by guilt at the “accidents...of mistaken diagnoses and of measures taken too late or erroneously” and knows that “until the day she died she would always remember the handful of poor devils who had fallen under the wheels.”<sup>485</sup>

When it comes to Kostoglotov, however, Dontsova knows that he is no ordinary patient who would unquestioningly accept her authority. Kostoglotov’s knowledge of the consequences of his treatment allows her to speak to him plainly and assuredly. Kostoglotov, scared as he might be at the prospect of dying maintains his existential need of having his autonomy and dignity respected: “Yes, I came to you as a corpse and I begged you to take me in...and therefore you make the logical deduction that I came to you to be saved *at any price!* But I don’t want to be saved at any price! There isn’t anything in the world for which I’d agree to pay *any price!*”<sup>486</sup> He continues, “[You *relieved*] *my suffering!*...Thank you! I’m grateful and I’m in your debt. Only now let me go. Just let me crawl away like a dog to my kennel, so I can lick my wounds and rest until I’m better.”<sup>487</sup> The argument between doctor and patient ends in a breakdown of trust. Kostoglotov maintains that he “is not much a clinger to life...if I had a chance of six months of life, I’d want to live them to the fullest...Extra treatment means extra

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<sup>484</sup> Ibid, 91. («...а излеченные ею, а возвращённые к жизни, а спасённые, а исцелённые ею молодые и старые, женщины и мужчины, ходят по пашне...убирают хлопок, метут улицы, стоят ха прилавками, сидят в кабинетах...служат в армии...» [97]).

<sup>485</sup> Ibid. («...а до могиле будет помнить тех нескольких, тех немногих горемык, которые попали под колёса» [ibid]).

<sup>486</sup> Ibid, 77. («Да, я приехал к вам мертвецом, и просился к вам...и вот вы делаете логический вывод, что я приехал к вам спасться *любой ценой*. А я не хочу—любой ценой!! Такого на свете нет ничего, за что б я согласился платить *любую* цену!» [82]).

<sup>487</sup> Ibid, 78. («Я приехал к вам за облегчением страданий! И вы помогли!...Я ваш благодарный должник. Только теперь—отпустите меня! Дайте мне, как собаке, убраться к себе в конуру и там облежаться и облизаться» [83]).

torment...what's the point?"<sup>488</sup> Dontsova, meanwhile, completely ignores his desires: "you must accept your treatment not just with faith but with *joy*! That's the only way you will recover!"<sup>489</sup> Kostoglotov, realizing that Dontsova will not budge from her paternalistic position, secretly decides to treat himself with "a secret medicine, a mandrake root from Issyk Kul."<sup>490</sup> Ultimately, the doctor-patient relationship is permanently fractured because the doctor rejects her patient's desires and preferences for his treatment, and therefore disregards his need for autonomy, dignity, and respect. "There was a battle," Dontsova tells her colleague Vera Gangart, "but [Kostoglotov] was defeated and he surrendered."<sup>491</sup> Dontsova is guided by altruistic values, but the quality of her care is called into question by her denial of her patients' autonomy.

While Dontsova is outspoken and outright in her paternalism, other doctors in the hospital more sensitively hide their paternalistic values and behaviors from the patients. The surgeon Lev Leonidovich, for example, takes the time to get to know his patients and cares deeply about his work. He worries about his patients' prognoses after he performs surgeries and "was in the habit of dropping in on his postoperative cases...just to have a look."<sup>492</sup> He invests in connecting with his patients, as is clear in his interactions with the patient Dyomka: after a successful amputation surgery, Dyomka is distressed at the prospect of the "crippled" life ahead of him, one that will be marked by a decreased quality of life. After Lev Leonidovich and

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<sup>488</sup> Ibid, 80. («Откровенно говоря, я за жизнь не очень-то держусь...И если проглянуло мне прожить полгода—надо их и прожить...Лишнее лечение—лишнее мучение...зачем?» [86]).

<sup>489</sup> Ibid, 81. («Еще обязательное условие: переносить лечение не только с верой, но с радостью! Вот только тогда ты вылечишься!» [87]).

<sup>490</sup> Ibid. («В запасе у Костоглотова было секретное лекарство—иссык-кульский корень» [ibid]).

<sup>491</sup> Ibid, 92. («Был бой, но он разбит и покорился!» [98]).

<sup>492</sup> Ibid, 355. («Вот почему Лев Леонидович имел привычку ещё до пятиминутки забегать к своим послеоперационным, глянуть одним глазом» [359]).

Dyomka discuss his future options, Dyomka is filled with hope: “Lev Leonidovich made it sound so easy. He was right, to hell with the nagging painful thing! [Dymoka] felt better without it.”<sup>493</sup>

Yet when it comes to his actual doctoring of patients, Lev Leonidovich oscillates between seeing his patients as individuals and as statistics. In describing his daily routine, the narrator highlights the responsibility of the doctors “penetrating each patient...[the doctors] had to penetrate his pains, his emotions, his anamnesis, his case history, the progress of his treatment, his present condition—in fact, everything theoretically and practically possible for them to do.”<sup>494</sup> Unfortunately, the reality of the situation proves that such individualized attention is impossible: Lev Leonidovich, in considering this problem, realizes that

if each [of the doctors] had been the best specialist available and not merely a man who drew a doctor’s salary, if there hadn’t been thirty patients to every staff member, if they hadn’t had to bother about the most tactful thing to put in a case history (a document which might one day find itself on the desk of a state prosecutor), if they hadn’t been human beings, that is to say firmly attached to their skin and bones, their memories and intentions, and weren’t the ones in pain—then very probably such a system of doctors’ rounds would have been the best conceivable solution. But as Lev Leonidovich very well knew, things were as they were.<sup>495</sup>

I include this lengthy quote because of its importance in illustrating the intense pressures faced by Soviet doctors: not only were they responsible for curing their patients, but they were also functionaries of the state and therefore subject to scrutiny that could endanger their lives should their behaviors and documenting of evidence be considered suspicious. Lev Leonidovich, despite

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<sup>493</sup> Ibid, 356. («Так облегчённо это сказал Лев Леонидович! И действительно, заразу гнетучую — туда её! Без неё легче» [360]).

<sup>494</sup> Ibid, 360. («И собравшись кружком около каждой койки, они должны были в одну, в три или в пять минут все войти в боли этого одного больного, как они уже вошли в их общий тяжёлый воздух, — в боли его и в чувства его, и в его анамнез, в историю болезни и в ход лечения, в сегодняшнее его состояние и во всё то, что теория и практика разрешали им делать дальше» [365]).

<sup>495</sup> Ibid, 361. («И если б их было меньше; и если б каждый из них был наилучший у своего дела; и если б не по тридцать больных приходилось на каждого лечащего; и если б не запорашивало им голову, что и как удобнее всего записать в прокурорский документ — в историю болезни; и если б они не были люди, то есть, прочно включённые в свою кожу и кости, в свою память и свои намерения существа, испытывающие облегчение от сознания, что сами они этим болям не подвержены; — то, пожалуй, и нельзя было бы придумать лучшего решения, чем такой вот обход» [ibid]).

knowing the uselessness of these rounds, continues to perform them in order to bring comfort to his patients: the surgeon “heard some of his patients out and sat down on their beds. Some of them he asked to show him the diseased place. He examined it, felt it, and covered the patient up himself with a blanket.”<sup>496</sup> Despite these actions, however, Lev Leonidovich cannot help but consider his patients as statistics: when asked by one of his colleagues what to do if a patient dies on the operating table, the surgeon replies: “an if is an if, but if we do nothing he’ll die for sure...we’ve got a good death rate so far, we can take the risk.”<sup>497</sup>

Lev Leonidovich, like his colleagues Dontsova and Vera, takes care to hide his patients’ negative prognoses because he believes that “improvement of moral was the main aim of the rounds.”<sup>498</sup> He discusses the prognoses with his assistants in Latin, and when he hears “*Status idem*...no change,” he manipulates the situation to inspire hope in his patient: ““is that so?” he would reply happily. At once he would check the remark with the patient herself. ‘You feel a bit better, do you?’ ‘Yes perhaps,’ the patient would agree, slightly surprised. She hadn’t noticed it herself, but if the doctors had noticed it, it must be true. ‘There, you see!’ [says Lev Leonidovich], ‘Little by little, you’ll get well soon.’”<sup>499</sup> Furthermore, the surgeon communicates with his team only in medical terms to further befuddle his patients. In one case with a terminally ill patient, his team tells Lev Leonidovich:

“the patient is receiving general tonics and sedatives.” It meant the end. It was too late to treat him. There was nothing to treat him with; the only aim was to reduce his suffering. Then Lev Leonidovich would knit his heavy eyebrows, as if making up his mind to lift the curtain and explain what had to be explained: “All right, Grandpa, let’s be quite frank

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<sup>496</sup> Ibid. («Он выслушивал, и ко многим садился на койку, некоторых просил открыть больное место, смотрел, щупал, после прощупа сам же заворачивал на больном одеяло или предлагал пощупать и другим врачам» [ibid]).

<sup>497</sup> Ibid, 364. («То ещё «если», а без нас наверняка. —Подумал. —У нас пока отличная смертность, мы можем и рисковать» [369]).

<sup>498</sup> Ibid, 362. («В подбодрении он даже начинал видеть главную цель такого обхода» [366]).

<sup>499</sup> Ibid. («— Да? —обрадованно откликнулся он. И уже у самой больной спешил удостовериться: —Вам— легче немножко? —Да пожалуй, —удивляясь, соглашалась и больная. Она сама этого не заметила, но если врачи заметили, то так, очевидно, и было» [ibid]).

and open about this. What. You're feeling now is a reaction to your earlier treatment. Don't push too hard, just lie there quietly and we'll see you get better...you may think we're not doing much, but we're helping your organism defend itself. The doomed man would nod his head. The doctor's frankness had turned out to be less lethal than expected. It kindled his hope.<sup>500</sup>

This deception furthers a divide between the doctor and his patient so much so that Lev Leonidovich becomes a double of himself. On the inside he is one doctor, truly concerned about his patients, while on the outside he is an impenetrable character who “would make a point of never saying what he really thought. He took care to prevent his tone expressing his feelings...Never once did Leonidovich turn his head abruptly, never once did he look alarmed, his benevolent, bored expression indicating to patients how simple their disease were.”<sup>501</sup> This double-life leaves the surgeon feeling “exhausted as if he'd done a full operation.”<sup>502</sup>

In an ironic turn of events, Dontsova comes to Lev Leonidovich with a suspicion that she has stomach cancer. I expand on Dontsova's perspective in the next section “Doctors-turned-Patients,” but in this context, it is important to first analyze this event from Lev Leonidovich's perspective. As someone whose entire medical practice rests on his success in deceiving his patients about their prognoses, with a physician as skilled as Dontsova, such a move would prove impossible. Dontsova straightforwardly asks Lev Leonidovich to operate on her and he responds with an off-color joke: “Operate on you? Not for anything in the world!...if I hack you to death

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<sup>500</sup> Ibid. («— Больной получает общеукрепляющее и болеутоляющее. То есть: конец, лечить поздно, нечем, и как бы только меньше ему страдать. И тогда, сдвинув тяжёлые брови и будто решаясь на трудное объяснение. Лев Леонидович приоткрывал: —Давайте, папаша, говорить откровенно, начистоту! Всё, что вы испытываете—это реакция на предыдущее лечение. Но не торопите нас, лежите спокойно—и мы вас вылечим. Вы лежите, вам как будто ничего особенно не делают, но организм с нашей помощью защищается. И обречённый кивал. Откровенность оказывалась совсем не убийственной! —она засвечивала надежду» [367]).

<sup>501</sup> Ibid, 363. («Ни разу он не поворачивал резко головы, ни разу не взглядывал тревожно, и по доброжелательно-скучающему выражению Льва Леонидовича видели больные, что уж очень просты их болезни, давно известны, а серьёзных нет» [ibid]).

<sup>502</sup> Ibid. («Он вышел усталый, как после доброй операции» [368]).



they'll say I did it out of jealousy, because your department's more successful than mine."<sup>503</sup> It is striking to note that, in conversation with other doctors, Lev Leonidovich can joke about death cavalierly, which shows that he does not consider Dontsova to be a patient. Evidently, Lev Leonidovich is incapable of empathically witnessing Dontsova's dire situation and of treating her with kindness, gentleness, and sympathy.

The cancer ward's other attending doctor Vera Gangart (or Vega, as Kostoglotov affectionately refers to her) is more emotionally sensitive than either Dontsova and Lev Leonidovich. Like Turgenev's doctor character in "The District Doctor," Vera becomes romantically involved with her patient Kostoglotov. This romantic connection propels her to be more dedicated to his treatment than with other patients, and she feels pressure to "persuade him to submit to [the hormone therapy]. She couldn't give him up, surrender him to the tumor. She was becoming more and more passionately concerned."<sup>504</sup> Once he discovers that she too is aware of the negative consequences of the hormone therapy which will cure his cancer, he feels betrayed and angry. Nevertheless, Vera sides with Dontsova in convincing Kostoglotov to accept the treatment: "she's been so warm and friendly to him, when she'd looked at him and said, '[the treatment] is absolutely necessary. Your life depends on [it]. We're trying to save your *life!*'"<sup>505</sup> Kostoglotov is incensed with Vera when he finds out the true consequences of his treatment: "So much for Vega. She wants to do the best for him, did she? So that was why she was trying to lure him towards this fate?"<sup>506</sup> Attention should be drawn to the author's use of *luring* to describe Vera's commitment to Kostoglotov's healing.

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<sup>503</sup> Ibid, 367. («— Вас? Ни за что!... Потому что если зарежу вас, скажут, что из зависти: что ваше отделение превосходило моё успехами» [372]).

<sup>504</sup> Ibid, 343. («...надо было убедить его подчиниться этому лечению! Невозможно было отдать этого человека—назад опухоли! Всё ярее разгорался у неё азарт» [346])

<sup>505</sup> Ibid, 245. («[Лечения] очень важные для вашей жизни! Вам надо жизнь спасти!» [253]).

<sup>506</sup> Ibid. [«Вот так Vega! Она хотела ему добра?—и для этого обманом вела к такой участи?» [ibid].

In contrast to Dontsova, Vera is more accepting of Kostoglotov's insistence on autonomy and begins to doubt the paternalistic system that Dontsova unquestioningly internalizes. She recalls a conversation she had with Kostoglotov in which he asserts that "his medicine man with the roots [was not] any less of a doctor than she was... Vera had taken slight offense at the time, but later it occurred to her that he might be partly right."<sup>507</sup> She realizes that medicine is a science that is still being perfected and thus accepts the possibility of her own fallibility: "these were dark waters, weren't they?" she wonders, "one had to keep following the medical journals, reading them and pondering them."<sup>508</sup> Vera, in contrast to Dontsova, understands the fallibility of biomedical treatment and in discussing *chaga* with her patients, she understands that "if a patient believed in [chaga], it had its uses" despite the fact that she "herself didn't believe in *chaga*."<sup>509</sup> Out of the other doctors in the cancer ward, Vera is perhaps the kindest, most understanding, and the closest to successfully empathically witnessing her patients' illness experiences. As she makes her rounds, she sits down "beside every patient, examining him and talking to him."<sup>510</sup> She asks them personal questions and tries to understand and get to know them. However, Vera does not *entirely* reject the paternalistic system of which she is a part. Like the other doctors in the cancer ward, Vera lies to her patients about their prognoses. When her patient Vadim asks if the cancer will spread to his liver in the form of secondaries, Vera says, "'Good heavens no, why should there be? Of course not!' Gangart lied very persuasively and animatedly. She seemed to have convinced him... Vadim was inclined to believe her. It made it easier if he did..."<sup>511</sup>

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<sup>507</sup> Ibid, 343. («Костоглотов однажды швырнул ей, что он не видит, чем его знахарь с корешком меньше врач... Вера тогда почти обиделась. Но потом подумала, отчасти верно» [347]).

<sup>508</sup> Ibid. («Разве это не тёмная вода? Сколько тут надо следить за журналами, читать, думать!» [ibid]).

<sup>509</sup> Ibid, 372. («...если больной верил—то тем самым и полезна» [378]).

<sup>510</sup> Ibid, 371. («Вера Корнильева садилась около каждого, смотрела, разговаривала» [376]).

<sup>511</sup> Ibid, 373. («—Да нет, что вы! Конечно нет!—очень уверенно и оживлённо солгала Гангарт и, кажется, убедила его... Склонился Вадим поверить ей. Если поверить—легче...» [379]).

The doctors in the cancer ward function as representatives of the Soviet healthcare system which denies individual autonomy. It is only the family doctor Oreshchenkov who represents the pinnacle of Solzhenitsyn's idea of a successful doctor—he is empathetic, sensitive, and tailors his care for his patients based on their requests, thereby honoring their dignity and practicing attuned care. Oreshchenkov also operates out of his own practice and is thus less beholden to the paternalistic demands of the Soviet hospital. When Dontsova visits him for a consultation on her suspicion of cancer, she is adamant that she wants to know as little as possible about her diagnosis. As a more approachable and compassionate physician than Dontsova, Oreshchenkov understands that her candid and frank request is a call for human recognition of her suffering. Unlike Dontsova, who pushes aggressive treatment on unwilling patients, and unlike Lev Leonidovich, who hides the truth of the patients' prognosis and treatment, Oreshchenkov does not engage in paternalistic behavior. Unlike the other two doctors, he lets the patient dictate the terms of their medical care and incorporates their existential and emotional concerns into their treatment. In response to her request to know nothing about her diagnosis, Oreshchenkov responds that he understands her but does not share her opinion, but he commits himself to honoring her wishes.

The interaction between the two doctors as they discuss Dontsova's symptoms is particularly interesting because of the delicate balancing game that they play. Dontsova remarks briskly that she does not want to take up too much of Oreshchenkov's time, and he responds kindly with "if you'll forgive me Lyudochka" (using a sweet diminutive which implies their closeness and familiarity with one another) "I'll sit at the desk. It's not that I want it to look like a formal interview, it's just that I'm used to sitting there."<sup>512</sup> Oreshchenkov is careful in

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<sup>512</sup> Ibid, 419. («А уж меня, Людочка, извините, я—за стол. Это пусть не будет официально. Просто я к месту присяду» [421]).

establishing the dynamic between the two doctors and is sensitive to the fact that Dontsova is deeply uncomfortable by her newfound status as a patient. Oreshchenkov's eyes "reflected the constant attention he gave both patient and visitor."<sup>513</sup> He is acutely aware of Dontsova's position and does his utmost to create an environment in which she feels secure and safe: he does not examine her physically but "continued to talk to her as a guest. He seemed to be inviting her to join both estates at once. But she had been crushed, she had lost her former bearing."<sup>514</sup>

During Dontsova's consultation, the conversation between the two doctors turns to the role and responsibility of physicians. Oreshchenkov argues that what is most important in medicine is the need to establish a relationship between the patient and physician based on trust, mutual respect, and understanding for the treatment to be successful. Oreshchenkov understands that patients look at doctors as not merely their saviors, but as their supporters: "looking for the right doctor is the sort of thing you can't ask your friends for advice about," he continues, "in fact, it's a matter as essentially intimate as a search for a husband or a wife. But nowadays it's easier to find a good wife than a doctor ready to look after you personally for as long as you want, and who understands you fully and truly."<sup>515</sup> Oreshchenkov identifies a pertinent value in medical care that is overlooked by the doctors in the cancer ward—the patient's need for empathy and understanding, something which Chekhov's doctors Tsvetkov and Korolyov understand and practice. Dontsova disagrees and frowns at the abstractness of these ideas. Solzhenitsyn, thus, underscores the problem of medicine and treatment in this discussion between the two doctors.

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<sup>513</sup> Ibid. («Вообще же ровно-внимательные глаза доктора Орещенкова никогда без надобности не отводились в сторону, не потуплялись к столу и бумагам, они не теряли ни минуты, предоставленной смотреть на пациента или собеседника» [422]).

<sup>514</sup> Ibid, 423. («Он все так же разговаривал с ней как с гостьей. Он, кажется, предлагал ей состоять в обоих сословиях сразу,—но она была смята и не могла уже держаться по-прежнему» [426]).

<sup>515</sup> Ibid. («Поиск врача бывает так интимен, как поиск мужа-жены. Но даже жену хорошую легче найти, чем в наше время такого врача» []).

While both physicians are driven by their desire to heal, Dontsova is more focused on literal healing, while Oreshchenkov is more concerned with treating the patient holistically, in that the feelings, desires, and fears of the patient are included in the treatment on top of their physical ailments. Their discussion turns to a point of contention that has followed Dontsova throughout the novel: that a positive doctor patient relationship depends on trust, accountability, and transparency. “A doctor and his patient are like enemies,” Oreshchenkov says, “What kind of medicine is that?”<sup>516</sup> Dontsova, as the voice of medical paternalism, does not think the patient knows what is best for himself, while Oreshchenkov, as the voice of personalized treatment, believes that the fractured relationship between doctor and patient is of utmost importance, even more important than saving lives.

Thus, in *Cancer Ward*, Solzhenitsyn outlines the problems inherent in healthcare: the dominance of the doctor’s authority over the patient’s dignity and autonomy, and the question of the doctor’s “right to treat.” Ultimately, each doctor in the cancer ward differs in their opinion of what constitutes as the most successful treatment. For the outspoken and brazen Dontsova, the patient must accept his or her treatment without question, regardless of how emotionally distressing and physically detrimental it is to his or her quality of life. Lev Leonidovich prefers to hide the patients’ true prognosis—what is the point, he thinks, in destroying their hopes, if the outcome will not change regardless? Vera is kind, attentive, and empathetic yet she too is complicit in denying her patients’ right to self-determination, thereby strengthening the paternalistic system which she represents. Oreshchenkov, on the other hand, recognizes the importance in incorporating the patient’s existential and emotional concerns into their medical treatment; without it, the patient loses their humanity in the face of depersonalized, aggressive

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<sup>516</sup> Interestingly, this quote is only found in the Russian version of the text, not in its English translation. («а врач должен разоблачать. Больной и врач как враги — разве это медицина?» [430]).

treatment. Thus in *Cancer Ward*, Solzhenitsyn underscores the problems inherent in Soviet medicine, showing that medicine is essentially a dialectic—a living and unfinished struggle between doctor and patient.

#### Doctor-Turned-Patient Narratives: Doctors Confronting Their Own Terminal Diagnoses

When it comes to confronting death, doctors seem poised to do so from the most intimate and knowledgeable perspective. While patients themselves may be aware of their declining health and be able to interpret certain symptoms as indicative of a serious illness, it is the doctors with their expertise and professional experience who predict their own death with more accuracy. Yet the two prominent doctor characters in Russian literature who recognize these signs of terminal illness—Chekhov’s medical professor Nikolai Stepanovich of “A Boring Story” and Solzhenitsyn’s oncologist Dontsova of *Cancer Ward*—confront the certainty of their deaths and of their newfound position as patients quite differently. In “A Boring Story,” Nikolai Stepanovich’s declining health is obvious to those around him, but he refuses to acknowledge his condition to others; similarly, he rebuffs any advice from others, dismisses his family and friends’ concerns, and refuses to seek treatment. On the other hand, Dontsova’s stomach cancer is obvious to her but not to anyone else. She discloses her suspicions to her chosen doctor Oreshchenkov, and even then begs him to keep the official diagnosis to himself: “the best thing would be if I knew nothing!’ she tells him, ‘I’m serious. You decide whether I’m to go to the hospital or not and I’ll go, but I don’t want to know the details...do you understand?’”<sup>517</sup> Both

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<sup>517</sup> Solzhenitsyn, *Cancer Ward*, 421. («Вы знаете, я стараюсь не думать! То есть, я думаю об этом слишком много, стала ночами не спать, а легче бы всего мне самой не знать! Серьёзно. Вы примете решение, нужно будет лечь—я лягу, а знать—не хочу. Если ложиться, то легче бы мне диагноза не знать, чтоб не соображать во время операции: а что они там сейчас могут делать? а что там сейчас вытягивают? Вы понимаете?» [Солженицын, *Раковый корпус*, 424]).

Nikolai Stepanovich and Dontsova's refusal to acknowledge the seriousness of their diseases speaks to the doctors' inability to face their mortality. This particular "doctors' dilemma," which so often complicates their patients' illness experiences also negatively affects their own.

Chekhov wrote "A Boring Story" (often translated as "A Dreary Story") in 1889 shortly after his brother's Nikolai's death from tuberculosis. While Nikolai's health had been in decline for years due to alcoholism and bouts of homelessness, his death affected Chekhov deeply. This somber and reflective mood is reflected in the protagonist Nikolai Stepanovich's ruminations about death and in his dissatisfaction with his professional and family life. At the beginning of the story, Nikolai Stepanovich is already aware that he is terminally ill. "I know perfectly well that I cannot live more than six months," he admits.<sup>518</sup> Neither he nor the narrator of the story ever reveal his official diagnosis, and indeed, the reader is left wondering whether his illness is real or imaginary until the last half of the story when others start showing concern over the professor-doctor's changing physical appearance. Interestingly, Nikolai Stepanovich's immediate family—his wife and his daughter—do not remark or even seem to notice his physical deterioration, as they are consumed by their own trifles and domestic worries. It is only Katia—Nikolai Stepanovich's adopted daughter and closest friend—who shows genuine concern for his health and mental state and who empathizes with his feelings of despair and terror.

What plagues Nikolai Stepanovich most during his end of life are not the pangs of physical illness but an overwhelming sense of *ennui*, indifference, and regret. As his death approaches, he finds himself emotionally distanced from his family and isolated from his friends and colleagues. During one particularly distressing night when Nikolai Stepanovich feels that

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<sup>518</sup> A terminal diagnosis is given when the patient has six months or less to live. Anton Chekhov, *Selected Stories of Anton Chekhov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 52. («Мне отлично известно, что проживу я еще не больше полугода» [Чехов, *Избранные произведения*, 512]).

everything “was looking at me [with] the stern and imposing thought: ‘This man will evidently die soon,’” he considers calling his wife and daughter to his bedchamber for support.<sup>519</sup> “I felt for my pulse, and not finding it in my wrist, search for it in my temple, then under my chin...and everything I touched was cold and clammy with sweat. My breath comes quicker and quicker, my body trembles, all my insides are stirred up...What to do? Call my family? No, no need. I don’t know what my wife and Liza will do if they come for me.”<sup>520</sup> He feels overwhelmed by the isolating nature of being ill and knows he has no one to turn to for sympathy or understanding. During a particularly arresting panic attack, Nikolai Stepanovich feels that “I was just immediately going to die. But why did it seem so? I had no sensation in my body that suggested my immediate death, but my soul was oppressed with terror, as though I had suddenly seen a vast menacing glow of fire.”<sup>521</sup> Nevertheless, what is important about this scene is it shows that Nikolai Stepanovich’s fear of death is stronger than his dissatisfaction with his life. Despite his frustration with his family, he continues to crave human connection and intimacy.

Nikolai Stepanovich feels alien from his own flesh-and-blood, and in a typical existential fashion described by Heidegger, the doctor’s once-familiar world is “made strange” to him to the point where he cannot recognize his wife or his daughter. “I watch them both and it is only now at dinner does it become perfectly clear to me that their inner life has escaped my observation long” Nikolai Stepanovich admits, “I have the feeling that once upon a time I lived at home with a real family, but now I’m the dinner guest of someone who is not my real wife and am looking

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<sup>519</sup> Ibid, 46. («...у меня появляется какое-то особенное выражение, которое у всякого, при взгляде на меня, должно быть, вызывает суровую внушительную мысль: По-видимому, этот человек скоро умрет» [532]).

<sup>520</sup> Ibid, 57. («Жутко...Щупаю у себя пульс и, не найдя на руке, ищу его в висках, потом в подбородке и опять на руке, и все это у меня холодно, склизко от пота. Дыхание становится все чаще и чаще, тело дрожит, все внутренности в движении...Что делать? Позвать семью? Нет, не нужно. Я не понимаю, что будут делать жена и Лиза, когда войдут ко мне» [578]).

<sup>521</sup> Ibid. («Мне кажется, что все смотрит на меня и прислушивается, как я буду умирать...» [ibid]).



at someone who is not the real Liza.”<sup>522</sup> Nikolai Stepanovich’s awareness of his approaching death has reconfigured his internal world and, by extension, shifted his understanding of his social role. As Katya later astutely points out to him, “your eyes are opened, that’s all. You’ve seen something that for some reason you didn’t want to notice before,” although she is wrong in her assertion that “[your] sickness has nothing to do with it.”<sup>523</sup> It is indeed the onset of illness and the fact that it is his sense of sickness-unto-death that spurs Nikolai Stepanovich’s existential shift.

As a medical professional, Nikolai Stepanovich understands the state of his health more accurately than other dying characters in Russian literature. Despite this certainty, he frequently flees from any serious consideration of his being-towards-death by investing himself in his work and ignoring pangs of consciousness that implore him to consider more existential concerns:

it would seem I should now be most occupied with questions about the darkness beyond the grave and the visions that will haunt my sepulchral sleep. But for some reason my soul rejects those questions, though my mind is aware of all their importance. As twenty or thirty years ago, so now in the face of death I am interested only in science. Breathing my last, I will still believe that science is the most important, the most beautiful and necessary thing in man's life, that it has always been and always will be the highest manifestation of love, and that only by science will man conquer nature and himself.<sup>524</sup>

Nikolai Stepanovich’s bouts of Authenticity are short-lived and in attempting to deny the seriousness of his own condition, he flees into the Inauthentic realm, just as Ivan Ilyich and other

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<sup>522</sup> Ibid, 61. («У меня такое чувство, как будто когда-то я жил дома с настоящей семьей, а теперь обедаю в гостях у не настоящей жены и вижу не настоящую Лизу» [556]).

<sup>523</sup> Ibid, 64. («Просто у вас открылись глаза; вот и все. Вы увидели то, чего раньше почему-то не хотели замечать...Болезнь тут ни при чем» [560]).

<sup>524</sup> Ibid, 52. («казалось бы, теперь меня должны бы больше всего занимать вопросы о загробных потемках и о тех видениях, которые посетят мой могильный сон. Но почему-то душа моя не хочет знать этих вопросов, хотя ум и сознает всю их важность. Как 20–30 лет назад, так и теперь, перед смертью, меня интересует одна только наука. Испуская последний вздох, я все-таки буду верить, что наука—самое важное, самое прекрасное и нужное в жизни человека, что она всегда была и будет высшим проявлением любви и что только ею одною человек победит природу и себя. Вера эта, быть может, наивна и несправедлива в своем основании, но я не виноват, что верю так, а не иначе; победить же в себе этой веры я не могу» [542]).

dying characters do when their fear of death overwhelms them. He admits that considering such existential concerns would be detrimental to his mental well-being, most likely because (as Heidegger would put it) he prefers to occupy the Inauthentic mode by immersing himself in the They instead of dealing with the excruciating pain associated with the Authentic mode. Nikolai Stepanovich admits that “to tear away from his lectern and his students a man who has greater interest in the fate of bone marrow than in the final goal of the universe, is tantamount to having him nailed up in his coffin without waiting till he’s dead.”<sup>525</sup> The truth of his mortal condition is too difficult for him to bear.

Nikolai Stepanovich, however, is aware of the falsity associated with the They, and in a similar manner to Ivan Ilyich, his illness and nearness to death illuminates the social and professional role that he himself upheld and participated in throughout his healthy life. When Nikolai Stepanovich meets with an esteemed colleague, he seems to be watching and analyzing their interaction from above, judging its falsity with shame: “we try to show each other that we are both extraordinarily polite and very glad to see each other...we cautiously stroke each other's waists, touch each other's buttons... We both laugh, though we haven't said anything funny.”<sup>526</sup> He continues, “Cordially disposed as we are to each other, we can't help gilding our talk with all sorts of Orientalia, like: ‘As you were pleased to observe so justly,’ or ‘As I have already had the honor of telling you’ nor can we help laughing if one of us produces some witticism, even an unfortunate one...I see him to the front hall; there I help my colleague into his coat, but he does

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<sup>525</sup> Ibid. («Я только прошу снизойти к моей слабости и понять, что оторвать от кафедры и учеников человека, которого судьбы костного мозга интересуют больше, чем конечная цель мироздания, равносильно тому, если бы его взяли да и заколотили в гроб, не дожидаясь, пока он умрет» [ibid]).

<sup>526</sup> Ibid, 53. («мы стараемся показать друг другу, что мы оба необыкновенно вежливы и очень рады видеть друг друга...при этом мы осторожно поглаживаем друг друга по талиям, касаемся пуговиц...Оба смеемся, хотя не говорим ничего смешного» [533]).

everything to avoid this high honor...And when I finally return to my study, my face goes on smiling, probably from inertia.”<sup>527</sup>

When considering his professional and personal accomplishments (which should inspire pride and satisfaction for his contribution to his field and to society at large) Nikolai Stepanovich feels only futility and despair. Unlike the young Bazarov who wished “to be a giant” in his achievements, Nikolai Stepanovich has lived a long life and achieved a great deal, but even these achievements seem hollow in the face of death. He admits that while he is “famous a thousand times over [and] a hero and the pride of my motherland,” his accomplishments and status will not save him from “dying in a strange bed in anguish, in utter solitude.”<sup>528</sup> Nikolai Stepanovich realizes that the drive for success, prestige, and celebrity upheld by society as the pinnacle of human expression is very hollow indeed. Despite one’s accomplishments in life, one still dies alone, and this distressing thought overwhelms and immobilizes the doctor during his end of life.

The professor-doctor’s wholehearted rejection of existential and spiritual engagement at the end of life brings him psychic and emotional suffering. He understands that his refusal to accept his approaching death is a sign of cowardice: “My conscience and intelligence tell me that the best thing I could do now is give the [students] boys a farewell lecture, speak my last words to them, bless them, and yield my place to a man who is younger and stronger than I” Nikolai Stepanovich thinks, “But, God be my judge, I lack the courage to follow my conscience.”<sup>529</sup> As

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<sup>527</sup> Ibid. («мы не можем, чтобы не золотить нашей речи всякой китайщиной, вроде: ‘вы изволили справедливо заметить,’ или ‘как я уже имел честь вам сказать,’ не можем, чтобы не хохотать, если кто из нас сострит, хотя бы неудачно...Провожая до передней; тут помогаю товарищу надеть шубу, но он всячески уклоняется от этой высокой чести...И когда, наконец, я возвращаюсь к себе в кабинет, лицо мое все еще продолжает улыбаться, должно быть, по инерции» [544]).

<sup>528</sup> Ibid, 78. («Допустим, что я знаменит тысячу раз, что я герой, которым гордится моя родина...но все это не помешает мне умереть на чужой кровати, в тоске, в совершенном одиночестве...» [583]).

<sup>529</sup> Ibid, 52. («Мои совесть и ум говорят мне, что самое лучшее, что я мог бы теперь сделать,— это прочесть мальчикам прощальную лекцию, сказать им последнее слово, благословить их и уступить свое место человеку, который моложе и сильнее меня. Но пусть судит меня бог, у меня не хватает мужества поступить по совести» [542]).

his illness progresses, however, Nikolai Stepanovich's professed interest in science in the face of death slowly dissipates, leaving him feeling nothing but torture as he lectures to his students.

Suddenly "In the midst of a lecture, tears suddenly choke me, my eyes begin to itch, and I feel a passionate, hysterical desire to stretch my arms out and complain loudly," Nikolai Stepanovich says,

I want to cry out in a loud voice that I, a famous man, have been sentenced by fate to the death penalty...I want to shriek that I am poisoned; new ideas such as I have not known before have poisoned the last days of my life, and are still stinging my brain like mosquitoes. And at that moment my position seems to me so awful that I want all my listeners to be horrified, to leap up from their seats and to rush in panic terror, with desperate screams, to the exit. It is not easy to get through such moments.<sup>530</sup>

I draw particular attention to this quote because it echoes the very words of Ippolit from *The Idiot* (whose Anxiety at *being-towards-death* I discussed in chapter 1), who similarly refers to his terminal illness as a death penalty. By choosing these phrases to describe the feeling of being terminally ill, both Ippolit and Nikolai Stepanovich imply that death is a punishment, and it is perhaps for this reason that both these characters suffer such intense existential pain as they confront their illnesses. While Ippolit's disdain at his fatal condition stems from a sense of being unjustly executed before his life has even begun, Nikolai Stepanovich's arises from the fact that *despite* his celebrity and professional accomplishments, he is still somehow punished with death. As a doctor, he views himself as different than others, as perhaps more privileged to die happy and fulfilled at a ripe old age.

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<sup>530</sup> Ibid («Среди лекции к горлу вдруг подступают слезы, начинают чесаться глаза, и я чувствую страстное, истерическое желание протянуть вперед руки и громко пожаловаться. Мне хочется прокричать громким голосом, что меня, знаменитого человека, судьба приговорила к смертной казни, что через каких-нибудь полгода здесь в аудитории будет хозяйничать уже другой. Я хочу прокричать, что я отравлен; новые мысли, каких не знал я раньше, отравили последние дни моей жизни и продолжают жалить мой мозг, как москиты. И в это время мое положение представляется таким ужасным, что мне хочется, чтобы все мои слушатели ужаснулись, вскочили с мест и в паническом страхе, с отчаянным криком бросились к выходу» [543]).

Despite his professional achievements, however, Nikolai Stepanovich knows “Now it only remains for me not to ruin the finale. For that I must die like a human being.”<sup>531</sup> But what does it mean to “die like a human being?” This is the question posed in alternate forms by Turgenev (“how does one die decently?”), Tolstoy (“how does one die beautifully?”), and Dostoevsky (“how does one die virtuously?”). Chekhov adds his own variation (“how does one die like a human being?”): Nikolai Stepanovich admits that to die like a man requires that he “must meet [death] as befits a teacher, a scientist, and the citizen of a Christian country: cheerfully and with a peaceful soul.”<sup>532</sup> Although the reader is not privy to Nikolai Stepanovich’s final moments (as opposed to Ivan Ilyich’s), it is implied that the professor-doctor falls short of this goal. Throughout the story, he never truly immerses himself in Authentic moments, and as part I has shown, to experience Authentic moments and work through the unbearable Anxiety they inspire is the true path to dying with courage and an untroubled soul. Nikolai Stepanovich’s oscillation between Authentic and Inauthentic moments confuses and overwhelms him, but unlike other dying characters in Russian literature, he cannot confront the certainty of death in a way that leaves a lasting existential change.

Death is terrifying and dying is painful—physically, emotionally, spiritually—yet a doctor who is as intimately familiar with death as Nikolai Stepanovich ought to be more accepting of his end of life, should he not? That is the question that underlies Chekhov’s story. Indeed, Nikolai Stepanovich is aware of this contradiction, and it brings him unbearable shame: “I start weeping for no reason and hide my head under the pillow. In those moments I’m afraid somebody may come in, afraid I may die suddenly; I’m ashamed of my tears, and generally there

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<sup>531</sup> Ibid, 65. («Теперь мне остается только не испортить финала. Для этого нужно умереть по-человечески» [563]).

<sup>532</sup> Ibid. («Если смерть в самом деле опасность, то нужно встретить ее так, как подобает это учителю, ученому и гражданину христианского государства: бодро и со спокойной душой» [ibid]).

is something unbearable in my soul. I feel that I can no longer stand the sight of my lamp, the books, the shadows on the floor...”<sup>533</sup> Nikolai Stepanovich’s hopelessness for his situation, compounded with his own medical knowledge and certainty of his approaching death, is too much to bear: “Now, diagnosing myself and treating myself, there are moments when I hope that my own ignorance is deceiving me,” Nikolai Stepanovich admits, “that I’m also mistaken about the protein and sugar I find in myself, and about my heart, and about the swelling I’ve noticed twice now in the morning; re-reading the manuals on therapy with the zeal of a hypochondriac and changing my medications daily, I keep thinking I’ll hit on something comforting. It’s all paltry.”<sup>534</sup>

Ultimately, Nikolai Stepanovich’s solution to his fear of death is cultivating indifference and resignation. Whether he is successful of that is left to be seen, as the story ends before the professor-doctor meets his end. “These last months of my life, as I wait for death, seem to me far longer than my whole life,” Nikolai Stepanovich laments, “and never before was I able to be so reconciled to the slowness of time as now. Before, when I waited at the station for a train or sat at an examination, a quarter of an hour seemed like an eternity, but now I can spend the whole night sitting motionless on my bed and think with perfect indifference that tomorrow the night will be just as long and colorless, and the night after.”<sup>535</sup> Contemplating existential questions is

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<sup>533</sup> Ibid, 63. («Я начинаю без причины плакать и прячу голову под подушку. В это время я боюсь, чтобы кто-нибудь не вошел, боюсь внезапно умереть, стыжусь своих слез, и в общем получается в душе нечто нестерпимое. Я чувствую, что долее я не могу видеть ни своей лампы, ни книг, ни теней на полу...» [558]).

<sup>534</sup> Ibid, 69. («Теперь, когда я сам ставлю себе диагноз и сам лечу себя, временами я надеюсь, что меня обманывает мое невежество, что я ошибаюсь и насчет белка и сахара, которые нахожу у себя, и насчет сердца, и насчет тех отеков, которые уже два раза видел у себя по утрам, когда я с усердием ипохондрика перечитываю учебники терапии и ежедневно меняю лекарства, мне все кажется, что я набреду на что-нибудь утешительное. Мелко все это» [568]).

<sup>535</sup> Ibid, 78. («Последние месяцы моей жизни, пока я жду смерти, кажутся мне гораздо длиннее всей моей жизни. И никогда раньше я не умел так мириться с медленностию времени, как теперь. Прежде, бывало, когда ждешь на вокзале поезда или сидишь на экзамене, четверть часа кажутся вечностью, теперь же я могу всю ночь сидеть неподвижно на кровати и совершенно равнодушно думать о том, что завтра будет такая, же длинная, бесцветная ночь, и послезавтра...» [542]).

too upsetting for Nikolai Stepanovich and he knows that even though his “thoughts should be deep as the sky, bright, striking” he finds himself nevertheless concerned with “myself, my wife, Liza...my students, people in general; my thoughts are bad, paltry, I'm tricking myself.”<sup>536</sup> To him, “everything is muck, there is nothing to live for, and the sixty-two years I've lived should be considered a waste. I catch myself in these thoughts and try to convince myself that they are accidental, temporary, and not lodged deeply in me,” but finds that these thoughts “are not lodged in me accidentally or temporarily, but govern my whole being.”<sup>537</sup>

In the story's final scenes, Nikolai Stepanovich knows that his time is almost up. “I've decided that the last days of my life will be irreproachable at least in the formal sense,” he says, betraying his continued entrenchment in the Inauthentic realm.<sup>538</sup> He forces himself to confront once and for all the existential questions which he had so eagerly dismissed before. “What do I want?” he asks himself. “I want our wives and children, our friends and pupils to love in us, not our fame...but as ordinary men. Anything else?...I should like to wake up in a hundred years' time and to have just a peep out of one eye at what is happening in science. I should have liked to live another ten years...What further? Why, nothing further. I think and think, and can think of nothing more.”<sup>539</sup> Again, Nikolai Stepanovich is overwhelmed with self-pity and resignation: “it is clear to me that there is nothing vital, nothing of great importance in my desire. In my passion

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<sup>536</sup> Ibid, 69. («Казалось бы, в это время мысли мои должны быть глубоки, как небо, яркие, поразительны...Но нет! Я думаю о себе самом, о жене, Лизе...о студентах, вообще о людях; думаю нехорошо, мелко, хитро перед самим собою» [568]).

<sup>537</sup> Ibid («То есть все гадко, не для чего жить, а те 62 года, которые уже прожиты, следует считать пропащими...Я ловлю себя на этих мыслях и стараюсь убедить себя, что они случайны, временны и сидят во мне не глубоко...Ясно, что новые, аракеевские мысли сидят во мне не случайно и не временно, а владеют всем моим существом» [569]).

<sup>538</sup> Ibid, 77. («...я решил, что последние дни моей жизни будут безупречны хотя с формальной стороны» [581]).

<sup>539</sup> Ibid, 79. («...чего я хочу? Я хочу, чтобы наши жены, дети, друзья, ученики любили в нас не имя... а обыкновенных людей. Еще что? Я хотел бы иметь помощников и наследников. Еще что? Хотел бы проснуться лет через сто и хоть одним глазом взглянуть, что будет с наукой...Дальше что? А дальше ничего. Я думаю, долго думаю и ничего не могу еще придумать» [584]).

for science, in my desire to live, in this sitting on a strange bed, and in this striving to know myself—in all the thoughts, feelings, and ideas I form about everything, there is no common bond to connect it all into one whole.”<sup>540</sup>

In presenting a doctor faced with his death, Chekhov illuminates the challenge that physicians face in accepting mortality, not just with their patients, but especially with themselves. Nikolai Stepanovich’s constant fleeing in the face of death, his inability to withstand Anxiety and Authentic confrontation with dying, and his feelings of superiority complicate his end-of-life experience. He yearns for empathy from his family and desperately hopes to reveal to them the emotional burden that crushes him, but he does not reach out for help. He acknowledges his terminal condition only to himself because articulating it would mean that it was real. In doing so, he isolates himself even further. Here we recall a character who stands as Nikolai Stepanovich’s opposite—Markel from *Brothers Karamazov*, who in his dying moments reaches to others and shares his overflowing feelings of love, which ultimately inspire those around him to better themselves. In the final paragraphs of “A Boring Story,” Katia begs Nikolai Stepanovich for advice. In this pivotal moment, the medical professor has an opportunity to connect with the one person in his life he truly loves, to impart important wisdom that can only be gleaned from an Authentic confrontation with death, but he responds with “there is nothing I can tell you, Katia.”<sup>541</sup> He finally reveals to her that “I shall soon be gone,” but she does not acknowledge his confession. “I want to ask her ‘will you be at my funeral?’” Nikolai Stepanovich thinks, and in a typical fashion of a Chekhovian protagonist, he cannot articulate his

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<sup>540</sup> Ibid. («для меня ясно, что в моих желаниях нет чего-то главного, чего-то очень важного. В моем пристрастии к науке, в моем желании жить, в этом сиденье на чужой кровати и в стремлении познать самого себя, во всех мыслях, чувствах и понятиях, какие я составляю обо всем, нет чего-то общего, что связывало бы все это в одно целое» [ibid]).

<sup>541</sup> Ibid, 80. («Что же я могу сказать? —недоумеваю я.—Ничего я не могу» [585]).



ardent desire for connection, understanding, and empathy.<sup>542</sup> And while the reader of Chekhov's story is not privy to Nikolai Stepanovich's final moments, it is implied that they will be marred with regret and sorrow for his inability (or rather, refusal) to summon the courage needed to "die like a man" with an untroubled soul.

Dontsova also refrains from engaging with existential questions as she faces her death. In an ironic change of fate in the last half of the novel, Dontsova is diagnosed with cancer (a common side-effect from interacting daily with radiation and x-rays): "something gnawing at her self-confidence, and at her sense of responsibility and authority. Was it the pain she could clearly feel in her stomach? Some days she couldn't feel it at all, other days it was weaker, but today it was stronger."<sup>543</sup> Because of her training as an oncologist, Dontsova is too shrewd to dismiss the pains as inconsequential and would have "investigated [the source of pain] without fear."<sup>544</sup> Like Nikolai Stepanovich, she is careful to hide this suspicion from her colleagues and attempts to suppress her own ruminations about it. Instead, "she knew the road too well to take the first step along it: to tell her relatives, to tell her colleagues. When it came to dealing with it herself she kept herself going with the typical Russian temporizing: Maybe it'll go away. Maybe it's only my nerves."<sup>545</sup> In denying the seriousness of her condition which would force her to reckon with Authenticity, Dontsova flees in the face of death. Dontsova echoes Nikolai Stepanovich's refusal to discuss his illness, which also results in her isolating herself from her colleagues. It is only in the end of the novel that she finally discloses her suspicions to Vera and Lev Leonivodich and

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<sup>542</sup> Ibid, 81. («Значит, на похоронах у меня не будешь?» [587]).

<sup>543</sup> Ibid, 88. («Но сегодня, как ни кружилась она по клинике, что-то мешало весь день её уверенности, ответственности и властности. Была ли это ясно ощущаемая боль в области желудка у неё самой? Некоторые дни она не чувствовала её, некоторые дни слабей, сегодня—сильней» [94]).

<sup>544</sup> Ibid. («Если б она не была онкологом, она бы не придавала значения этой боли или, напротив, бесстрашно пошла бы на исследования» [ibid]).

<sup>545</sup> Ibid. («Сама-то для себя она проавлялась русским авосем: а может обойдётся? а может только нервное ощущение?» [ibid]).

she betrays her anxiety at the situation: while she “smiled lightly [she] twisted her horn-rimmed spectacles round her fingers,” before asking Lev Leonidovich to operate on her.<sup>546</sup>

While Nikolai Stepanovich never abdicates his position as a doctor to become a patient seeking treatment for his terminal condition, Dontsova finally overcomes her hubris and seeks advice from her trusted doctor Oreshchenkov. When she his office for the consultation, she feels calm at the thought that “in this room only the best possible decisions could be taken.”<sup>547</sup> Dontsova hands over her own doctoral authority to Oreshchenkov, and is “glad...that he was there and would take all her anxiety upon himself.”<sup>548</sup> She seems to project her own values and thoughts onto her doctor and is impressed by “his look of confidence...as though, while he treated other people, he was absolutely sure he could never fall ill himself.”<sup>549</sup> His calm demeanor brings Dontsova peace for the first time since she’d begun to suspect that she has cancer. Yet as she begins to describe her symptoms and desires for treatment, Dontsova “looked gray and her voice faltered,” something Oreshchenkov immediately notices.<sup>550</sup> In surveying his patient, Oreshchenkov discerns that “whether it was the size of the armchair or the way her shoulders sagged, somehow she no longer looked like a big, strong woman. She had shrunk.”<sup>551</sup> Oreshchenkov understands the very heart of Dontsova’s pain, that she has transformed from doctor to patient, from a place of authority and certainty to a place of dependency and confusion. Indeed, her identity as a doctor is jeopardized by her inhabiting the role of the patient, and this switch in positions is devastating for her.

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<sup>546</sup> Ibid, 367. («Донцова усмехнулась, крутя на пальце большими роговыми очками» [372]).

<sup>547</sup> Ibid, 418. («...и сразу почувствовала успокоение, и даже почти уверенность, что только лучшее из решений будет принято сейчас здесь» [421])

<sup>548</sup> Ibid. («И посмотрела прямо на Орещенкова, радуясь, что он жив, что он есть и всю её тревогу переймёт на себя» [ibid]).

<sup>549</sup> Ibid. («Он всегда выглядел так уверенно, будто, леча других, сам абсолютно не может заболеть» [ibid]).

<sup>550</sup> Ibid. («Вид её был сер, голос ослаблен» [ibid]).

<sup>551</sup> Ibid, 421. («От большого ли кресла или от ослабших плеч, она не выглядела сейчас крупной, большой женщиной. Она уменьшилась» [424]).

When he asks her to describe the symptoms in her own words, as well as her own assessment as a doctor, she tells him that “I’ll tell you my symptoms right away, but as for what I think about them—well, you know, I try *not* to think about them. That is to say, I think about them all too much and now I’ve begun not sleeping at nights.”<sup>552</sup> Dontsova admits to skirting the issue on the subject, which in the Heideggerian formulation shows her refusal to acknowledge her *being-towards-death*. As Dontsova describes her symptoms to Oreshchenkov, she does so from the point of view of a doctor, not patient, “forcing herself not to omit any details which might point toward a crushing diagnosis. (But in spite of herself, she was tempted to omit some of them, just to hear him say, “it’s nothing serious, Ludochka, nothing at all).”<sup>553</sup> Despite her insistence that she wants to know nothing of her diagnosis, however, “the thought flashed through [her] mind that he must have made his diagnosis already, that she might as well ask him straight out without waiting for the x-ray. But it was terrifying, the idea of asking him here and now and getting an answer...she had to put it off, she had to soften the blow by a few days of waiting.”<sup>554</sup> It is evident, however, that Oreshchenkov is troubled by Dontsova’s retelling of her symptoms, for he “made a point of insisting there should be no delay [in the official diagnostic examination]. He would examine Dontsova on Monday.”<sup>555</sup>

Solzhenitsyn’s narrator returns to the idea of illness as a punishment by giving the reader direct access to Dontsova’s thoughts during her consultation with Oreshchenkov. “...having confessed to being ill was like having confessed to a crime: immediately they had lost the key to

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<sup>552</sup> Ibid. («Симптомы я все вам сейчас назову, — но что я сама думаю? Вы знаете, я стараюсь не думать! То есть, я думаю об этом слишком много, стала ночами не спать» [ibid]).

<sup>553</sup> Ibid, 423. («И Донцова стала рассказывать, дифференцируя и группируя симптомы и заставляя себя не упускать тех подробностей, которые могли бы потянуть на тяжёлый диагноз» [ibid, 425]).

<sup>554</sup> Ibid. («У Донцовой мелькнуло, что по сути он уже, наверно, вынес и диагноз, и даже можно прямо сейчас спросить, не дожидаясь дня рентгена. Но так сразу, так прямо спросить и, верно ли, неверно, что-то узнать— вот прямо сейчас узнать—было очень страшно» [ibid]).

<sup>555</sup> Ibid, 424. («Он сам настоял не откладывать несколько, а посмотреть Донцову в понедельник» [427]).

the equality they once possessed...by her confession she had excluded herself from the noble estate of medical men and transferred herself to the taxpaying, dependent estate of the patients.”<sup>556</sup> Oreshchenkov invites her to tea, and despite her polite refusals, Dontsova understands that “he was making a determined effort to pull her out of the category of the criminally ill into the category of the hopelessly healthy.”<sup>557</sup> This interesting word choice of “criminally ill” speaks to the fact that Dontsova has internalized completely the Marxist-Leninist understanding of illness: in a healthy communist state, there is no room for disease, and even less is there room for illness. She articulates her anger at the injustice of her situation, “Why does it have to be so unjust? Why should I, an oncologist, be struck down by an oncological disease, when I know every single one of them, when I can imagine all the attendant effects, consequences and complications?”<sup>558</sup> Oreshchenkov’s response to Dontsova’s woes are unexpected: “There’s no injustice there...on the contrary, it is justice in the highest degree. It’s the truest of all tests for a doctor to suffer from the disease he specializes in.”<sup>559</sup> This ironic admission from Oreshchenkov reveals the dire need for empathy in the medical setting. Sometimes it is only in experiencing something oneself that one can understand and sympathize with the plight of another. The question of justice, again, underscores the theme that runs through

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<sup>556</sup> Ibid, 423. («Но вот она пришла и призналась в болезни—как в преступлении, и сразу лопнула струна равенства между ними! Нет, не равенства—равенства с учителем никогда и не было, но резче того: своим признанием она исключила себя из благородного сословия врачей и переводила в податное зависимое сословие больных» [426]).

<sup>557</sup> Ibid, 424. («Он-таки тянул, тянул её из разряда преступно-больных в разряд безнадежно-здоровых» [ibid]).

<sup>558</sup> Ibid, 422. («Но почему такая несправедливость: почему меня, онколога, должна настичь именно онкологическая болезнь, когда я их все знаю, когда представляю все сопутствия, последствия, осложнения?...» [425]).

<sup>559</sup> Ibid. («Никакой тут несправедливости нет,—басовостью и отмеренностью очень убеждал его голос. — Напротив, это в высшей степени справедливо. Это самое верное испытание для врача: заболеть по своей специальности» [ibid]).

end-of-life experiences, namely the idea of death as a punishment. “I never thought I’d take it so hard,” Dontsova admits.<sup>560</sup>

As is the case in Chekhov’s story, the reader never discovers whether Dontsova conquers her illness. She is sent to Moscow for further testing, which implies the seriousness of her condition. In her last few days as the attending doctor in the cancer ward, however, Dontsova is changed. When Kostoglotov revives his argument about being discharged, Dontsova “did not even bother to restate [her] case herself. Besides, she was tired. ‘It’s your decision,’ she said; ‘you do what you want. But the treatment is not finished.’”<sup>561</sup> This is a grand departure from her earlier stance when she refused to let Kostoglotov leave her care. Like Oreshchenkov predicted, Dontsova has cultivated a newfound sense of empathy for her patients. In examining his body one last time, she realizes that “the skin virtually screamed that it was time to stop treatment...Outside her line of duty, to which she was now bidding farewell, she couldn’t even really object to Kostoglotov. It was true, it was barbarous treatment.”<sup>562</sup> She compromises with him, prescribes him treatment, and sends him home. Evidently, her own diagnosis allows her to sympathize with her patients, and in discharging Kostoglotov, she finally understands the meaning of attuned care and empathic witnessing.

Thus, doctors find themselves in particularly challenging positions when faced with their own deaths. Despite their intimate proximity to dying patients, especially in Dontsova’s case, physicians struggle with terminal diagnoses and death in the same way as their patients.

Arguably they wrestle with Anxiety in a more acute way because they unconsciously consider

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<sup>560</sup> Ibid. («— Никогда не думала, что буду так переживать!» [Ibid]).

<sup>561</sup> Ibid, 459. («Да Донцова что-то и не настаивала, устала и она: — Голова — ваша, как хотите. Но лечение не кончено» [459]).

<sup>562</sup> Ibid, 460. («В обычное время Людмила Афанасьевна не спустила б ему такой грубой реплики и проработала бы крепко. Но сейчас—поникла в ней вся воля, она еле доканчивала обход. А вне своей должности, уже прощаясь с ней, она, собственно, не могла возразить Костоглотову. Конечно, лечение было варварское» [460]).

their profession and medical expertise to protect them from an unexpected diagnosis. Both Nikolai Stepanovich and Dontsova betray the implicit bias in the medical profession, namely the idea of death as punishment and evidence of their own failures as doctors.

### Concluding Remarks

Doctor characters in Russian literature are burdened with the enormous responsibility of curing life-threatening diseases and staving off death. Sometimes they are successful, but in many cases (especially in a cancer ward) their expertise and talents are not enough to save their patients. Feelings of failure and despair overwhelm the doctors once they realize that the disease that they are impotent against the forces of nature, and in hopes of being more successful in the future, they turn their attention to other patients who need their care. In battling against death, doctors struggle with Authentic moments and when they find themselves face to face with their own deaths, they struggle with accepting their mortality arguably more than dying patients do.

Russian writers identify the doctor as a challenging figure, one who is deeply invested in their patient's care but who complicates their treatment by focusing on eradicating disease as opposed to healing illness. What becomes clear in Chekhov and Solzhenitsyn's portrayal of doctor figures is the dire need for attuned care and empathic witnessing in the medical setting, in being able to sympathize and understand the patient's experience of illness in order to provide the best possible care. That requires a reconfiguration of values which the doctor sees as an impediment to their practice, but as contemporary bioethicists argue, a more honest and transparent doctor-patient relationship rests upon doctors treating their patients as complicated individuals as opposed to bodies with diseases. In the next chapter, "Empathic Witnessing: Caregivers' Perspectives," caregivers fill in the gap of quality care left open by medical doctors

when they attend to the dying person's illness. In taking over medical responsibilities and incorporating emotional attunement into their care, caregivers respond to dying people's need to be seen and heard, and to have their suffering recognized.

## Chapter 4 Mediating Death: Caregivers' Perspectives

“[The caregiver] becomes a moral witness,  
neither a judge not a manipulator.  
Patient becomes an active colleague,  
not a passive recipient. Both learn and  
change from the experience.”  
—Arthur Kleinman, *The Illness Narratives*<sup>563</sup>

When it comes to supporting the dying person, it is the caregiver who most clearly enables a good death. A few days before his death, Alik records a tape to play at his funeral in which he expresses gratitude to his caregivers who were instrumental in helping him die decently. “My friends, I can’t thank you [enough] because no such thanks exist,” he says, “I worship you, all of you, especially the women. I’m even grateful for my damned illness. If it wasn’t for this I’d never have known how good you are.”<sup>564</sup> Caregivers play an integral role in the dying person’s end of life by providing them with physical, emotional, and spiritual support. Both Tolstoy and Ulitskaya uphold the caregiver as central to a peaceful end-of-life experience. In this chapter, I investigate the figure of the caregiver in Tolstoy and Ulitskaya’s works, showing that successful caregiving depends on empathically witnessing the dying person’s dying experience and providing attuned care based on their needs.

Caring for others is how we show love, support, and concern for people in our lives, for our communities, and for our environment. Care lies at the foundation of any ethical act we perform, and yet for centuries philosophers, theologians, and physicians have struggled to define and understand what care really means. Historically, care has been defined as both burden (represented by anxiety, worry, concern) and solicitude (represented by attention,

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<sup>563</sup> Kleinman, *The Illness Narratives*, 216.

<sup>564</sup> Ulitskaya, *The Funeral Party*, 144. («— Ребята, я не могу вам сказать спасибо, потому что таких спасибо не бывает. Я вас всех обожаю. Особенно вас, девчущки. Я даже благодарен этой проклятой болячке. Если бы не она, я бы не знал, какие вы... » [Улицкая, *Веселые похороны*, 178]).



conscientiousness, and devotion). These two aspects of care, while seemingly opposite, are integral to understanding how we relate to ourselves and to others. As care ethicists Carol Gilligan and Joan C. Tronto argue, care is an integral part of our being and engagement with the world and yet a fundamental problem underlying our understanding of moral responsibility is thinking of ourselves as “individuals” separate from others as opposed to interrelated actors sharing a common world. In the capitalist framework which upholds moral values such as independence and self-sufficiency, asking for help or needing some sort of assistant, whether it is physical, emotional, or financial, is a sign of weakness.

Care ethicists determine the main problem in our contemporary society to be that we do not care well or enough for others and or for our environment. Never is this clearer than in how we care for dying people, who are stigmatized and socially avoided once medical efforts to heal them are exhausted.<sup>565</sup> Dying people cannot care for themselves and must depend on others such as family members, friends, nurses, doctors, and religious figures to meet their physical, emotional, and spiritual needs. While today there is a greater prevalence of professional caregivers for dying people such as hospice nurses and palliative care specialists, in some cultures most caregiving responsibilities fall on family members, and mostly female family members. Tronto identifies pertinent values of care and caregiving as attentiveness, responsibility, nurturance, compassion, and meeting others’ needs—values which, she argues, have been traditionally associated with women and thereby considered inferior to other “masculine values” such as reason and rationality.<sup>566</sup> This widely held misunderstanding of caregiving as a kind of “women’s morality” speaks to the traditional understanding of women as

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<sup>565</sup> Youngjin Kang, “Why are Dying Individuals Stigmatized and Socially Avoided?” *Journal of Social Work in End-of-Life and Palliative Care* 17, no. 4 (2021): 317.

<sup>566</sup> Joan C. Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (New York: Routledge, 1994). 26.

speaking “in a different moral voice [than men which] both partially privileges yet ultimately excludes them from the loftiest moral thinking.”<sup>567</sup> Tronto argues that in engendering care, society has circumscribed caregiving as a weak or undesirable activity when it is in fact at the center of our moral behavior. The idea of women as being more sensitive and nurturing to another person’s emotional plight than men is echoed in recent studies on caregiving.<sup>568</sup>

Caregiving for the sick and specifically for the dying has been such an ingrained practice of the private family life, that before the late twentieth century there was no official discussion of its value and responsibilities.<sup>569</sup> However, recent developments in the fields of philosophy, medicine, sociology, and public policy have put caregiving into the spotlight. According to Harvard University Medical School’s *Caregivers’ Handbook* (2019), a caregiver is “someone who handles many or all of the needs for a loved one or friend who is no longer able to care for himself or herself because of illness, age, or disability.”<sup>570</sup> Caregivers’ responsibilities can include physical care (bathing, feeding, bathroom-assistance), medical care (administering medication, managing pain symptoms, communicating with doctors, setting up hospital visits and appointments), legal care (assisting in the creation of wills/trusts, establishing durable power of attorney, advance directives, guardianship), financial care (helping organize finances,

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<sup>567</sup> Ibid.

<sup>568</sup> A 1989 study on the gender-discrepancies of family caregiving found that women make up at least three-fourths of primary caregivers (Nancy J. Finley, “Theories of Family Labor as Applied to Gender Differences in Caregiving for Elderly Patients,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 51, no. 1 (1989): 83). Another more recent study suggests that 57–81% of all caregivers for the elderly are women (Nidhi Sharma, Subho Chakrabati, and Sandeep Grover, “Gender differences in caregiving among family: caregivers of people with mental illness,” *World Journal of Psychiatry* 6, no. 1 (2016): 8).

<sup>569</sup> American ethicist and psychologist Carol Gilligan was the first to introduce the ethics of care in her book *In a Different Voice* (1982), where she critiques Lawrence Kohlberg’s theories of moral development as masculine, arguing that care is socially engendered.

<sup>570</sup> n.a., *Caregiver's Handbook: A Guide to Caring for the Ill, Elderly, Disabled & Yourself* (Boston: Harvard Health Publishing, 2018), 2.

managing insurance policies), and last but not least, emotional care (discussing end-of-life decisions, existential compassion, emotional and social support).

As opposed to doctors and professional nurses, many caregivers for the dying have little to no medical training or experience, and the quality and success of their care comes from their ability to empathetically witness the dying person's illness. As Arthur Kleinman argues, empathic witnessing is a moral act in which the caregiver who enters the patient's "uncertain, fearful world of pain and disability reciprocally introduces the patient...into the equally uncertain world uncertain world of therapeutic actions [which] enhances the therapy and makes of it and the illness a rare opportunity for moral education."<sup>571</sup> As opposed to the doctor who Kleinman asserts is "driven away...from the experience of illness," the caregiver attends directly to the dying person's illness experience, which is often painful and isolating. In focusing on eradicating disease, the doctor objectifies the dying person and transforms them from a person into a problem needed to be solved, which complicates the doctor-patient relationship. The caregiver, then, ameliorates this divide by attending to the needs of the dying person which are overlooked in the hospital setting.

In my analysis of caregivers in Russian literature, I explore the role caregiver characters play in helping the dying person achieve a good death. While it is true that experiencing a good death requires patients to confront their own fears about death, caregivers help provide a safe environment from which to do so. As Tolstoy shows in his fiction, not everyone who keeps the dying person company in their final moments can be considered a good caregiver. To truly help another achieve a good death, you must be a special kind of person who is propelled by genuine love and a sense of duty to ease another's suffering. The ideal caregiver, however, is one who

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<sup>571</sup> Ibid, xiv.

accepts death and who can assist the dying person in their “quest” (as Arthur Frank puts it) to find closure and courage in facing their mortality. Tolstoy upholds certain characters as successful caregivers such as Natasha, Kitty, and Gerasim for their innate vivacity and ability to sacrifice their needs for the dying person, and he shows that they inspire other inadequate caregivers to be more empathetic and sensitive.

In *The Funeral Party*, Ulitskaya extends Tolstoy’s examination of successful caregivers into the twentieth century, in which she presents an unconventional end-of-life scene. The terminally ill painter Alik is an atypical dying character of the Russian literary canon, for he embraces death without the slightest hint of sentimentality or regret. His caregivers who attend to his physical, emotional, and sexual needs are his present and former lovers and they join in dancing and partying as they send Alik off towards his death. For the vivacious Alik, death is an opportunity to celebrate life, and his caregivers honor him by throwing him the party of a lifetime, all the while wetting his lips when he is thirsty, cleaning his apartment, and paying his overdue bills. She shows that caregiving comes in many different forms.

While Tolstoy and Ulitskaya differ in their representations of caregivers, both authors uphold ideas of attuned care and empathic witnessing as necessary elements to successful caregiving. For Tolstoy, empathic witnessing comes from identifying what the dying person wants and needs and tailoring one’s care to provide them with respite and support (in other words, practicing attuned care). Natasha exemplifies attuned care for Andrei by accepting his decision to part with life; for Kitty it is attending to Nikolai’s physical needs; and for Gerasim, it is in recognizing Ivan Ilyich’s suffering and articulating an acceptance of death. In Ulitskaya’s novella, Alik’s caregivers practice attuned care and empathic witnessing by setting aside their own feelings of grief to celebrate his life.

Tolstoy's Caregivers:  
Love, Duty, and Acceptance of Death

Throughout his literary career, Tolstoy often explores the archetype of the caregiver and paints them as examples of the moral ideal in his fiction. From his first published work *Childhood* to *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* forty years later, Tolstoy shows that the caregiver is an essential figure in the end-of-life experience, and one instrumental to preparing the dying person for a good death. Their selfless acts of compassion as well as their dedicated commitment to meet the dying person's needs places them in a special moral category, the depth of which Tolstoy consistently plunders. He upholds caregivers as moral exemplars for their special skills of empathetic witnessing in setting aside their own needs to ease the dying person's suffering. When presented with the greatest task of all, which for Tolstoy is Authentically confronting and accepting death, caregivers are compassionate, reassuring, and patient. And above all, they provide the dying person with invaluable physical, emotional, and spiritual support, as they assist them on their Authentic quest for a good death.

Tolstoy underscores the fact that it is the caregivers who provide support for the dying patient, not the doctors. While doctors aim to control a disease's progression, he considers them inept at addressing the more pressing emotional and existential issues at the end of life. As Ivan Ilyich's doctor admits, "it was true...that Ivan Ilyich's physical sufferings were terrible, but worse than the physical sufferings were his mental sufferings which were his chief torture."<sup>572</sup> Caregivers respond directly to the dying person's physical and emotional suffering, while also functioning as mediators between life and death. And while Tolstoy's evolving ideas about which qualities determine a successful caregiver, one aspect remains constant: the caregivers

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<sup>572</sup> Tolstoy, *Death of Ivan Ilyich*, 98. («Доктор оговорил, что страдания его физические ужасны, и это была правда; но ужаснее его физических страданий были его нравственные страдания, и в этом было главное его мучение [144]).

who provide the best care do not fear death. They sacrifice their comfort, temper aspects of their personalities, and commit their full attention to the dying person's needs, thereby embodying the notion of selfless love without reward.

In Tolstoy's portrayal of caregivers, the distinction between caring *for* someone and caring *about* someone is particularly important. Caring *about* someone is characterized by inaction, while caring *for* someone necessitates action. Tolstoy's characters who care *about* dying patients remain trapped in their own minds and restrained by their overwhelming emotions: they find it difficult, if not impossible, to act in any helpful way. Here we think of Marya who cares *about* her father as he is dying, but not *for* him. While she loves him deeply and is tormented by his misery, she is characterized by her inaction as she listens by his door "wishing to enter but deciding not to do so."<sup>573</sup> Levin also cares *about* his brother Nikolai: he is distressed by Nikolai's anguish yet is immobile when it comes to providing any useful help. At Nikolai's deathbed, Levin "sat with his head hanging not knowing what to do. Not to speak of supper, of preparing for bed, of considering what they were going to do" for the dying man.<sup>574</sup> Natasha, Kitty, and Gerasim—Tolstoy's ideal caregivers—on the other hand dive swiftly into action: Natasha knits by Andrei's bed knowing that this seemingly innocuous act brings him comfort, Kitty tidies Nikolai's dingy hotel room to make him feel at ease, and Gerasim sits with Ivan Ilyich's legs on his shoulders long hours into the night. Ultimately, a successful caregiver must care *about* and *for* the dying person to truly make a positive difference in their experience of end of life.

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<sup>573</sup> Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 767. («...несколько раз подходила к двери, прислушиваясь, желая войти и не решаясь этого сделать» [Толстой, *Война и мир*, 406]).

<sup>574</sup> Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, 452. («Вернувшись от больного на ночь в свои два номера, Левин сидел, опустив голову, не зная, что делать. Не говоря уже о том, чтоб ужинать, устраиваться на ночлег, обдумывать, что они будут делать» [496]).

Tolstoy juxtaposes successful empathetic caregivers whom he upholds as moral examples with ineffective caregivers who are self-absorbed and overwhelmed by their fear of death. By contrasting Marya with Natasha, Levin with Kitty, and Praskovya Fedorovna with Gerasim, Tolstoy shows while caring for dying patients is in itself a good moral act, the way caregiving is performed and from what motivations it stems determines the quality of care and the effect it has on dying characters. Tolstoy's ineffective caregivers do still technically "care," but often they complicate the dying process instead of supporting and empathetically witnessing the dying person's end-of-life experience. Yet the positive caregivers do more than just successfully care for the dying person: they also stand as moral examples for the ineffective caregivers, who learn by their example and overcome their own limitations. For example, although Marya is at first consumed with her own grief in Andrei's presence, she eventually overcomes it enough to provide him with the peace he needs to pass away with dignity. Levin is similarly blinded by anguish and distress at his brother's suffering, but he ultimately sets it aside enough to be present with Nikolai when he dies.

Tolstoy's helpful caregivers share three main qualities: physical presence to the patient (non-verbal communication and taking care of physical comfort), emotional attunement to the patient's psychological needs (empathy, recognition of suffering), and finally, they do not fear death. These qualities form a trinity of sorts, for the progression in Tolstoy's thought regarding caregivers shows that successful caregivers act from the heart, from the mind, and from the spirit. Yet it is only Gerasim, the last of Tolstoy's caregivers, who possesses all three of these qualities. In tracing Tolstoy's evolving ideas on successful caregivers, it is evident that each portrayal gradually builds upon the one before it. Natasha's caregiving, for example, comes almost entirely from her heart—her romantic love for Andrei drives her actions at his bedside.

Kitty acts from both her heart and her mind in caring for her dying brother-in-law—she is propelled by love for Nikolai (which is really an extension of her love for Levin) but also by a sense of moral duty to ease his physical suffering, a necessary aspect of caregiving which she learns from Varenka. Gerasim’s love is a Christian abstract form of love (which the older Tolstoy upholds as the ideal kind of love), but he acts also from moral duty and from a spiritual recognition of suffering. By the end of his literary career, Tolstoy has tinkered with the archetype of the caregiver enough to present it in its completed form, which he portrays in Gerasim. Gerasim, as Tolstoy’s emblematic caregiver, articulates the same acceptance of death as his original caregiver Natalia Savishna from *Childhood* does. Thus, in his later years, Tolstoy shows that his evolution of ideas about caregiving deepen in significance as opposed to changing entirely.

In Tolstoy’s fiction, the only characters who seem to accept death without fear are peasants and women, and only a few privileged women such as Natasha and Kitty. Mark Conliffe argues that Tolstoy upholds a “true and sincere, and independent attitude to death at the forefront of good caring,” and defines this attitude as “one that is neither self-centered, life-changing, nor demanding on others; it is not self-conscious or concerned with how others might regard it; and it accepts death as a natural event and thus does not compel individuals to extreme or extraordinary actions.”<sup>575</sup> Indeed, the quality that all of Tolstoy’s unsuccessful caregivers share is self-absorption. As the dying person drifts slowly towards death, the unsuccessful caregivers are too preoccupied with their own grief and their immobilizing fear of death to provide any helpful care.

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<sup>575</sup> Mark Conliffe, “Natasha and Kitty at the Bedside: Care for the Dying in *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*,” *Slavonica* 19, no. 1 (2012): 24.



For Tolstoy, the caregivers whom he holds in high esteem—Natasha, Kitty, and Gerasim—are characters marked by their spiritedness and vitality. Natasha, for example, is described as “bold” with “wildly bright eyes” whose “favorite mood [is] love of, and delight in, herself.”<sup>576</sup> Kitty is “enchanting” whose “spark of joy...seemed to infect everyone.” Gerasim is a “clean, fresh, young muzhik [who is] always cheerful [and] bright.”<sup>577</sup> Yet they all willingly set aside their effervescence so that they can provide the best kind of care for the dying person.<sup>578</sup> This “sacrifice” is not made in the hopes of receiving praise or out of social obligation (as some of his inadequate caregivers like Varenka do), but out of a genuine sense of empathy and commitment to ease the dying person’s suffering. In other words, Natasha, Kitty, and Gerasim act as empathetic witnesses who enter the world of the dying person and tailor their care to meet their individual needs. Natasha’s knitting, for example, is a small example of her empathizing with Andrei’s mental state, but what is more important is her recognizing that he is ready to die and letting him go despite her ardent love and desire to be with him. Kitty senses Nikolai’s embarrassment and averts her eyes when changing his clothes to honor his dignity. Gerasim, sensing Ivan Ilyich’s humiliation at his inability to use the restroom on his own, reassures him that he performs the physical tasks willingly.

Tolstoy first introduces the caregiver character in his first published work *Childhood*. It is admittedly a primitive sketch of the caregiver which he continues to develop in his subsequent works *War and Peace*, *Anna Karenina*, and *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. As the young Nikolenka rushes back to his country estate after hearing of his mother’s illness, he finds her dutiful nurse

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<sup>576</sup> Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 510. («Она возвратилась в это утро опять к своему любимому состоянию любви к себе и восхищения перед собою» [Толстой, *Война и мир*, 271]).

<sup>577</sup> Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, 68. («Герасим был чистый, свежий, раздобревший на городских харчах молодой мужик»).

<sup>578</sup> It is important to mention that for Tolstoy there is an important difference between egoism and egotism. Tolstoy conceives of egoism as a healthy orientation, in which the person is self-concerned but not self-absorbed and full of vitality and conviction. Egotism, on the other hand, is selfishness and negative self-consciousness.

and servant Natalia Savishna knitting stockings by her bed. Tolstoy repeats this act of knitting near the ill person, of keeping them company without being overbearing, in *War and Peace* when Natasha knits by Andrei's side. Yet the majority of Natalia Savishna's caregiving actions take place behind closed doors, unseen and unknown by the narrator. Instead, the author hints that what makes Natalia Savishna an exemplary caregiver is her acceptance of death as a part of life. This is not to say that death does not affect Natalia Savishna—she cries bitterly recounting her mistress' agonizing death to Nikolenka—but when she greets her own death a few months later, it is with complete faith and acceptance. Her understanding of death as God's will makes a lasting impression on Nikolenka, who admits that she “exercised such a strong and beneficial influence upon the bent of my mind and [the development of my sensibility.”

Caregivers in *War and Peace*:  
Marya, Natasha, and Empathic Witnessing

In *War and Peace*, Prince Andrei and Natasha reunite after a painful separation just as he dies from infected battle wounds. Natasha stays by Andrei's side, nursing him and comforting him with such skill that “the doctor had to admit that he had not expected from a young girl either such firmness, or such skill in nursing a wounded man.”<sup>579</sup> Natasha's intuition regarding Andrei's needs, be they physical or emotional is starkly contrasted with Andrei's sister Marya who joins Natasha in caregiving for Andrei. Tolstoy upholds Natasha as a successful caregiver because of her ability to anticipate Andrei's needs and act as an empathetic witness to his dying experience by honoring his wishes during his final days. Marya, on the other hand, is an unsuccessful caregiver she is unable to control her emotions and empathize with her dying

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<sup>579</sup> Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 991. («Наташа не отходила от раненого Болконского, и доктор должен был признаться, что он не ожидал от девицы ни такой твердости ни такого искусства ходить за раненым» [520]).

brother. Natasha senses Andrei's readiness to die and despite her ardent love for him, she lets him go (thereby accepting death), and serves as a moral example for Marya who learns from her the skills of caregiving and the importance of empathy.

When Marya arrives in Moscow to care for Andrei, she understands immediately that his condition is terminal. Her love and sorrow for her brother overwhelms her in his presence, which causes him considerable distress. While Natasha maintains her emotional composure at Andrei's bedside so as not to upset him, Marya falters before him and is consumed by her own grief and fear. When she first sees Andrei in his fragile state, Marya "felt the sobs rising in her throat. Hard as she had tried to prepare herself and now tried to remain tranquil, she knew that she would be unable to look at him without tears."<sup>580</sup> Andrei is visibly perturbed by Marya's distress and assumes an "almost hostile expression."<sup>581</sup> Marya even expects Andrei to pity her and the anguish his death is causing her: "how could he have failed to pity her and how could he speak like that in her presence?" she thinks.<sup>582</sup>

Marya's thoughts often center on her own suffering when she is in the presence of death, and in Tolstoy's eyes, this makes her an inadequate caregiver. Indeed, the narrator judges Marya's self-absorption at Andrei's side because it is not the first instance in which she exhibits her own self-interest in the face of death. Marya's first experience as a caregiver is in attending to her dying father at Bugacharovo only a few months before she joins Natasha in caring for Andrei. It is important to acknowledge that caring for her father is incredibly challenging for Marya, as she has suffered abuse at his hands for many years. For example, in his last cognizant moments before a debilitating stroke, the stern and rigid Prince Bolkonsky "repeated every

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<sup>580</sup> Ibid, 1052. («Сколько она ни готовилась, ни старалась успокоиться, она знала, что не в силах будет без слез увидеть его» [552]).

<sup>581</sup> Ibid, 1053. («В глубоком, не из себя, а в себя смотревшем взгляде, была почти враждебность...» [ibid]).

<sup>582</sup> Ibid, 1054. («...как мог он говорить это при той, которую он любил и которая его любила!» [ibid]).

injustice he had ever inflicted on [Marya]. Trying to convict her, he told her she had worn him out...[that she made] it the object of her life to poison his existence, and he drove her from his study...he declared that he did not wish to remember her existence and warned her not to dare to let him see her.”<sup>583</sup>

One of the biggest challenges in Marya and Prince Bolkonsky’s relationship is their failure to communicate effectively which impedes Marya’s ability to adequately care for her father. The last moment between them exemplifies this: when Marya’s no longer comprehends her father’s words, it is the serf Tikhon who translates the old man’s parting words to his daughter: “put on your white dress. I like it.”<sup>584</sup> Despite her deep love and reverence for her father, her fear of him keeps Marya from being present at his side at crucial moments, which is something he evidently wishes for. Marya “knew that her going [into her father’s room] during the night at an unusual hour would irritate him,” yet her certainty in this fact is mistaken: “‘I have been calling for you all night,’ [Prince Bolkonsky] brought out... ‘why didn’t you come in?’”<sup>585</sup> There are few moments, however, in which Marya intuits the true meaning of her father’s nonverbal behavior and allows her to recognize what he needs. For example, while the doctor insists that his restlessness is of a physical nature, Marya knows that her father “wished to tell her something, and the fact that her presence always increased his restlessness confirmed her opinion.”<sup>586</sup>

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<sup>583</sup> Ibid 765. («Он напоминал ей всё, в чем он был несправедлив против нее. Стараясь обвинить её, он сказал ей, что она измучила его, что она поссорила его с сыном, имела против него гадкие подозрения, что она задачей своей жизни поставила отравлять его жизнь, и выгнал ее из своего кабинета» [405]).

<sup>584</sup> Ibid, 770. («—Надень твоё белое платье, я люблю его» [407]).

<sup>585</sup> Ibid, 767, 769. («Она знала, что её приход ночью, в необычное время, раздражит его» [406] «—Зачем не пришла? [407]).

<sup>586</sup> Ibid, 766. («но княжна Марья...думала, что он что-то хотел сказать ей. Он очевидно страдал и физически и нравственно» [405]).

Being verbally abused and rejected by father for most of her life, Marya finds herself wishing for his death as she watches him “night and day, hardly sleeping at all...wishing to find symptoms of the approach of the end.”<sup>587</sup> She berates herself for these thoughts, yet finds comfort in knowing that her father’s death will free her from her emotional prison: “since her father’s illness began...all the personal desires and hopes that had been forgotten or sleeping with her had re-awakened...thoughts of a life free from the fear of her father, and even the possibility of love and family happiness floated continually in her imaginations like temptations of the devil.”<sup>588</sup> Yet Marya’s wish for his death is made in the hopes of commuting her own unhappiness, not in hopes of ending his physical and emotional suffering. These thoughts are ultimately self-serving—as his caregiver, Marya has her own interests at heart. Even after the prince’s final stroke, Marya’s thoughts continue to center on herself and how his death will affect her: ‘Yes...I...wished for his death! Yes, I wanted it to end quicker...I wished to be at peace...and what will become of me? What use will peace be when he is no longer here?’ Marya murmured...pressing her hands to her bosom which heaved with convulsive sobs.”<sup>589</sup>

Marya serves as an incapable caregiver for her father also because she is afraid of death and is thus unable to restrain her emotions in his presence, which ultimately complicates the prince’s dying process. After Tikhon communicates Prince Bolkonsky’s wish for Marya to don her white dress, Marya “having understood this...sobbed still louder, and the doctor taking her

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<sup>587</sup> Ibid, 766. («Она день и ночь, почти без сна, следила за ним и, страшно сказать, она часто следила за ним не с надеждой найти признаки облегчения, но следила, часто желая найти признаки приближения к концу» [ibid]).

<sup>588</sup> Ibid. («...что со времени болезни ее отца... в ней проснулись все заснувшие в ней, забытые личные желания и надежды... мысли о свободной жизни без страха отца, даже мысли о возможности любви и семейного счастья, как искушения дьявола беспрестанно носились в ее воображении» [406]).

<sup>589</sup> Ibid, 770. («—Да... я... я... я желала его смерти! Да, я желала, чтобы скорее кончилось...Я хотела успокоиться... А что ж будет со мной? На что мое спокойствие, когда его не будет!—бормотала вслух княжна Марья, быстрыми шагами ходя по саду и руками давя грудь» [407]).

arm led her out to the veranda.”<sup>590</sup> Immediately after she exits his bedroom, her father is clearly agitated, which prompts a stroke from which he does not recover. When he dies, Marya is so overwhelmed by his death that she refuses to believe it: “‘No, he’s not dead—it’s impossible!’ she told herself and approached him, and repressing the terror that seized her, she pressed her lips to his cheek. But she stepped back immediately. All the force of the tenderness she had been feeling for him vanished instantly and was replaced by a feeling of horror at what lay there before her. ‘No, he is no more! He is not, but here, where he was, is something unfamiliar and hostile, some dreadful terrifying repellent mystery!’”<sup>591</sup> When she cares for Andrei, Marya’s reacts exactly as she did at her father’s deathbed: she cannot restrain her emotions and weeps at the thought of Andrei dying, who attempts to “return to life and to see things from her point of view.”<sup>592</sup> Her grief at his fatal condition and her desire to see him healed is contrasted with the fact that Andrei has already accepted his death, something which Natasha intuitively understands. When she meets Marya outside Andrei’s room, Natasha acknowledges his disengagement from life: “‘two days ago *this* suddenly happened,’ said Natasha, struggling with her sobs. ‘I don’t know why, but you will see what he is like.’”<sup>593</sup>

In his analysis of Tolstoy’s caregivers, Mark Conliffe asserts that the actions of those who Tolstoy considers good caregivers are

at their core...not...generous or compassionate at all, though they surely are true and sincere. Good care-givers, such reasoning proposes, do not deny the truth of the situation

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<sup>590</sup> Ibid. («Поняв эти слова, княжна Марья зарыдала еще громче, и доктор, взяв ее под руку, вывел ее из комнаты на террасу, уговаривая ее успокоиться и заняться приготовлениями к отъезду» [ibid]).

<sup>591</sup> Ibid, 771. («—Нет, он не умер, это не может быть!—сказала себе княжна Марья, подошла к нему и, преодолевая ужас, охвативший её, прижала к щеке его свои губы. Но она тотчас же отстранилась от него. Мгновенно вся сила нежности к нему, которую она чувствовала в себе, исчезла, и заменилось чувством ужаса к тому, что было перед нею.— Нет, нет его больше! Его нет, а есть тут же, на том же месте, где он был, что-то чуждое и враждебное, какая-то страшная, ужасающая и отталкивающая тайна!» [408]).

<sup>592</sup> Ibid, 1055. («С большим усилием над собой, он постарался вернуться назад в жизнь и перенесся на их точку зрения» [553]).

<sup>593</sup> Ibid, 1052. («Но два дня тому назад, —начала Наташа, —вдруг это сделалось... —Она удержала рыдания. —Я не знаю отчего, но вы увидите, какой он стал» [552]).

and they do not assign it special significance. They also do not deny themselves or try to be something they cannot be. They are true to themselves and do not worry about how others view them. They remain independent and spontaneous.<sup>594</sup>

This argument, however, does not hold true when held up against Marya's actions. At Andrei's deathbed, it is Marya, not Natasha, who is true to herself and does not worry about how others view her: she does not suppress her grief and incredulity at Andrei's failure to pity her. While it is true that she is sincere in her emotional reactions, Marya's obvious distress upsets her dying brother. Conliffe associates these traits of sincerity and truthfulness with Tolstoy's ideal caregiver, however these traits do not ease Andrei's death but in fact complicate it. Marya does eventually set aside her own desire to see Andrei returned to health when it becomes apparent that his physical state has deteriorated too far. Ultimately, Marya joins Natasha in accepting Andrei's gradual detachment from life and together they "could not express in words what they understood [but] they both saw that he was sinking slowly and quietly, deeper and deeper, away from them, and they both knew that this had to be so and that it was right."<sup>595</sup>

Natasha is also devastated by Andrei's condition but takes care to hide her emotions from him. Even when she dares to hope for his recovery, she remembers her role as a caregiver and puts Andrei's needs before her own, something that Marya is incapable of doing until the very end. As Natasha and Andrei abstractly discuss the possibility of Andrei returning to health, Natasha "felt happy and agitated, but at once remembered that this would not do and that he had to be quiet."<sup>596</sup> Tolstoy highlights Natasha's self-effacement in the face of Andrei's death when she runs to greet Marya:

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<sup>594</sup> Conliffe, "Natasha and Kitty at the Bedside": 25.

<sup>595</sup> Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 1060. («Они обе видели, как он глубже и глубже, медленно и спокойно, опускался от них куда-то туда, и обе знали, что это так должно быть, и что это хорошо» [Толстой, *Война и мир*, 556]).

<sup>596</sup> *Ibid*, 1058. («Наташа была счастлива и взволнована; и тотчас же она вспомнила, что этого нельзя, что ему нужно спокойствие» [555]).

there was only one expression on her agitated face when she ran into the drawing-room—that of love—boundless love for [Andrei], for [Marya], and for all that was near to the man she loved; and of pity, suffering for others, and passionate desire to give herself entirely to helping them. It was plain that at that moment there was in Natasha's heart no thought of herself or of her own relations with Prince Andrei.<sup>597</sup>

This self-effacement, namely Natasha's tempering of her own emotions and her decentering of herself in relation to Andrei, contrasts sharply with Conliffe's formulation of Tolstoy's successful caregivers as being true to themselves and not worrying about how others see them. In going against her own effusive nature, Natasha *is not* being true to herself and she cares very much about how Andrei sees her. She wants nothing more than to be a peaceful, supportive presence at his side, which requires her to set aside her own desires and natural impulses. Yet Tolstoy is careful to show that Natasha's behavior is far from disingenuous by accentuating that her actions stem from a place of sincere love and respect for Andrei, not from social obligation.

Natasha shows her commitment to caring for Andrei as he draws closer to death by the seemingly futile actions she undertakes in hopes of soothing him. In addition to knitting by his bed, Andrei observes the way Natasha “wanted to draw a deep breath...but refrained from doing so and breathed cautiously.”<sup>598</sup> This restraint of her emotions stirs in Andrei a deep respect and love for Natasha, since he knows first-hand how difficult it is for Natasha to temper her emotions. Knowing the intensity of her passion at perfectly ordinary moments, Andrei recognizes the significance of Natasha's reservation at his deathbed. Conversely, Andrei shows contempt for Marya precisely because she does *not* try to hide her emotions.

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<sup>597</sup> Ibid, 1051. («На взволнованном лице ее, когда она вбежала в комнату, было только одно выражение— выражение любви, беспредельной любви к нему, к ней, ко всему тому, что было близко любимому человеку, выражение жалости, страдания за других и страстного желанья отдать себя всю для того, чтобы помочь им. Видно было, что в эту минуту ни одной мысли о себе, о своих отношениях к нему, не было в душе Наташи» [551]).

<sup>598</sup> Ibid, 1057. («...ей нужно было после своего движения вздохнуть во всю грудь, но она не решалась этого сделать и осторожно переводила дыханье» [554]).



If it is true in Conliffe's formulation that Tolstoy upholds those who accept death as a natural part of life and at the same time assign it little significance, again Natasha fails to fit this criterion. It *is* true that Natasha accepts Andrei's death, yet it is *not* true that his death is insignificant. In fact, Andrei's death is life-changing for her. I challenge Konstantin Leont'ev's assertion that "Everything of importance that later happens to Natasha, Pierre, and Princess Marya could happen even if Prince Andrey had simply been killed outright," on the grounds that his dying process allows Marya and Natasha to act as caregivers, an experience which has a profound effect on both their character developments.<sup>599</sup> For Marya, understanding that an integral part of good caregiving is honoring the wishes of the dying person allows her experience empathy for others. For Natasha, acting as an empathetic witness to Andrei's dying allows her to mature into the woman who becomes an ideal mother at the end of the novel, which for Tolstoy, marks a completion in her character's evolution.

Both Marya and Natasha's experiences as Andrei's caregivers equip them with the skills needed to care for others in different situations. After her brother Petya dies in battle, Natasha employs her ability to empathize and anticipate the needs of other by caring for her grief-stricken mother. The narrator notes that "Sonya and [Count Rostov] tried to replace Natasha [at her mother's side] but could not. They saw that she alone was able to restrain her mother from unreasoning despair. For three weeks Natasha remained constantly at her mother's side, sleeping on a lounge chair in her room, making her eat and drink, and talking to her incessantly because the mere sound of her tender caressing tones soothed her mother."<sup>600</sup> While Natasha is silent at

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<sup>599</sup> Konstantin Leontiev, "The Novels of Count L.N. Tolstoy: Analysis, Style, and Atmosphere—A Critical Study" in *Essays in Russian Literature*, ed. and trans. Spencer E. Roberts (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1968), 299.

<sup>600</sup> Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 1162. («Соня, граф старались заменить Наташу, но не могли. Они видели, что она одна могла удерживать мать от безумного отчаяния. Три недели Наташа безвыходно жила при матери, спала на кресле в ее комнате, поила, кормила ее и, не переставая, говорила с ней, говорила, потому что один нежный, ласкающий голос ее успокаивал графиню» [609]).

Andrei's side, at her mother's, she fills the silence with her tranquil voice. Natasha's ability to enter into the world of the person for whom she cares and from there anticipate their needs and desires allows her to become Tolstoy's ideal caregiver. By observing Natasha at Andrei's side, Marya learns to set aside her own needs and emotions to become a good caregiver. After Andrei's death, she tempers her own grief and "for three weeks looked after Natasha as if she had been a sick child."<sup>601</sup>

By contrasting Marya and Natasha's caregiving for Andrei, Tolstoy upholds Natasha as the superior caregiver for her ability to set aside her own emotions, anticipate Andrei's needs, and ultimately, to let him go when he is ready to die. Natasha, who is marked by her passion, vitality, and optimism, willingly sacrifices these qualities to ease Andrei's transition from life to death. She serves as a moral example for Marya, who emulates Natasha's caregiving actions both for Andrei and later for Natasha herself. While Marya's turbulent emotions stood in the way of her caregiving for her father and initially for her brother, Natasha's example inspires within her a developed sense of empathy and self-reliance.

*Caregivers in Anna Karenina:*  
Levin, Varenka, Kitty, and the Duty to Ease Suffering

In *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy again incorporates the scene of end of life in order to underscore the differences in caregiving between a few different characters: the brooding Konstantin Levin who is paralyzed by his fear of death; Varenka, the ward of a rich Russian woman who cares for invalids at Bad Soden; and the practical, duty-oriented Kitty who assumes caregiving responsibilities for her husband's dying brother Nikolai. Levin is spiritually conflicted and emotionally overwhelmed at his brother's deathbed, much in the same way as Marya, and

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<sup>601</sup> Ibid, 1163. («Княжна Марья отложила свой отъезд и последние три недели, как за больным ребенком, ухаживала за Наташей» [ibid]).

his failure to provide adequate care for Nikolai stems directly from his fear of death. Varenka, despite being a minor character, has a significant moral and spiritual influence on Kitty, whom she teaches the practical skills of caregiving. These skills become vital to Kitty's successful caring for Nikolai. In portraying these three characters and their approaches to caregiving, Tolstoy complicates his idea of what makes a successful caregiver. While Levin stands at one end as the unsuccessful caregiver, and Kitty on the other as the ideal caregiver, Varenka occupies the space between them as the adequate but not entirely successful caregiver. Varenka may seem at first glance like the ideal caregiver, with her restrained composure and "natural" disposition to caregiving, but Tolstoy shows that it is the vivacious Kitty who is best able to meet the needs of the dying person.

Immobilized by mortal anxiety and fear of death, Levin proves to be an exceptionally inadequate caregiver to his dying brother. While Kitty busies herself cleaning and organizing Nikolai's room, changing his clothes, and bathing his emaciated body, Levin watches from afar, trapped by his morbid thoughts and emotional distress:

It never entered his head to analyze the details of the sick man's situation, to consider how that body was lying under the quilt, how those emaciated legs and thighs and spine were lying huddled up, and whether they could not be made more comfortable, whether anything could not be done to make things, if not better, at least less bad. It made his blood run cold when he began to think of all these details.<sup>602</sup>

Although Levin is aware of Nikolai's declining health since the beginning of the novel, he is still reluctant to "look calmly at his brother; he could not himself be natural and calm in his presence...he smelt the awful odor, saw the dirt, disorder, and miserable condition, and heard the

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<sup>602</sup> Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, 449. («Ему и в голову не приходило подумать, чтобы разобрать все подробности состояния больного, подумать о том, как лежало там, под одеялом, это тело, как, сгибаясь, уложены были эти исхудалые голени, кострецы, спина и нельзя ли как-нибудь лучше уложить их, сделать что-нибудь, чтобы было хоть не лучше, но менее дурно. Его мороз пробирал по спине, когда он начинал думать о всех этих подробностях» [Толстой, *Анна Каренина*, 490]).

groans, and felt that nothing could be done to help.”<sup>603</sup> For Levin, the physical aspects of disease overpower his ability to empathize with his Nikolai’s desire for closeness and sympathy: “The sick man kept his brother’s hand in his own. Levin felt that he meant to do something with his hand and was pulling it somewhere. Levin yielded with a sinking heart: yes, he drew it to his mouth and kissed it,” yet Levin is unable to suppress his grief in his brother’s presence, and “shaking with sobs and unable to articulate a word, went out of the room.”<sup>604</sup> Towards the very end, however, Levin is finally able to set aside his own discomfort and fulfill his brother’s need for intimacy. ““Don’t go away,”” Nikolai says to him and “held out his hand. Levin gave him his.”<sup>605</sup>

Levin’s anxiety at Nikolai’s deathbed, however, comes from more than just terror of beholding a decaying body or from the seediness of the hotel—he is foremost overwhelmed by the existential significance of death and its ability to annihilate all of life’s meaning. Levin is essentially trapped in what Heidegger later identifies as Authentic Anxiety, and as a result, cannot bear being in his brother’s presence. Recalling the feeling of horror that Nikolai’s nearness to death inspired in their last meeting, Levin thinks,

death, which was here in this loved brother, groaning half asleep and from habit calling without distinction on God and the devil, was not so remote as it had hitherto seemed to [Levin]. It was in himself too, he felt that. If not today, tomorrow, if not tomorrow, in thirty years, wasn’t it all the same! And what was this inevitable death—he did not know, had never thought about it, and what was more, had not the power, had not the courage to think about it. ‘I work, I want to do something, but I had forgotten it must all end; I had forgotten—death.’<sup>606</sup>

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<sup>603</sup> Ibid. («Левин не мог спокойно смотреть на брата, не мог быть сам естествен и спокоен в его присутствии...он не видел и не различал подробностей положения брата. Он слышал ужасный запах, видел грязь, беспорядок и мучительное положение и стоны и чувствовал, что помочь этому нельзя» [ibid]).

<sup>604</sup> Ibid, 451. («Большой удержал в своей руке руку брата. Левин чувствовал, что он хочет что-то сделать с его рукой и тянет ее куда-то. Левин отдавался, замирая. Да, он притянул ее к своему рту и поцеловал. Левин затрясся от рыдания и, не в силах ничего выговорить, вышел из комнаты» [493]).

<sup>605</sup> Ibid, 456. («—Не уходи, —сказал Николай и протянул руку. Левин подал ему свою» [598]).

<sup>606</sup> Ibid, 317. («Смерть, неизбежный конец всего, в первый раз с неотразимою силой представилась ему. И смерть эта, которая тут, в этом любимом брате, спросонков стонущем и безразлично по привычке

Nikolai's visit to Levin's estate months before is marked by both men's refusal to discuss openly and honestly the fact that Nikolai is dying. Back in the dingy hotel room, Levin finds it intolerable to sit by Nikolai's side as he is "setting off" (a euphemism that Nikolai trades in for dying). Yet Levin's fervent deliberations on the nature of death prove futile, for he does not arrive at any reconciling or comforting realizations. Similarly to Marya, who at her brother and father's deathbed can only think of her own grief, Levin's misery prevents him from empathizing with his dying brother and from caring for him in the way he wishes to be cared for.

Indeed, Levin's inability to step outside himself and be present with Nikolai during his last days is the greatest hinderance to his being a good caregiver. He is paralyzed by fear and sadness and is "absolutely convinced that nothing could be done to prolong his brother's life or to relieve his suffering...and this made it still more painful for Levin. To be in the sick-room was agony to him, not to be there still worse."<sup>607</sup> The narrator stresses that Levin's paralysis results directly from his own faulty conviction in his own impotence, a vicious and self-fulfilling prophecy which is ultimately rooted in selfishness and self-indulgence. Levin "felt" and "was convinced" that nothing can be done for Nikolai, and yet Kitty's caregiving proves the very opposite. What Nikolai needs is both physical support, which Kitty masterfully identifies and fulfills, and a recognition of suffering demonstrated through empathy and expressions of intimacy. Much in the same way as Ippolit, Nikolai craves others' recognition of his suffering but his pride prohibits him from articulating his desperate need for compassion. One would think that Levin, who shares this prideful nature with his brother, would be able to acknowledge this

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призывавшем то бога, то черта, была совсем не так далека, как ему прежде казалось. Она была и в нем самом—он это чувствовал. Не нынче, так завтра, не завтра, так через тридцать лет, разве не все равно? А что такое была эта неизбежная смерть, —он не только не знал, не только никогда и не думал об этом, но не умел и не смел думать об этом. «Я работаю, я хочу сделать что-то, а я и забыл, что все кончится, что смерть»» [349]).

<sup>607</sup> Ibid, 448. («Он был убежден несомненно, что ничего сделать нельзя ни для продления жизни, ни для облегчения страданий... Быть в комнате больного было для него мучительно, не быть еще хуже» [490]).

trait in Nikolai and tailor his caregiving accordingly. Levin's inability to enter into Nikolai's world, or in other words, his failure to act as an empathetic witness to his brother's suffering distinguishes him as an incapable caregiver.

Perhaps Levin's conception of ideal caregiving is providing Nikolai with the spiritual support he himself evidently lacks. He realizes that he "felt utterly cold, and was not conscious of sorrow nor of loss, less still of pity for his brother. If he had any feeling for his brother at that moment, it was envy for the knowledge the dying man had now that he could not have."<sup>608</sup> What Levin fails to understand is that it is he himself who desperately needs existential answers, not Nikolai, and Levin's projection of his own desires and needs onto his dying brother only complicates Nikolai's dying experience. While Levin is envious of Nikolai's existential clarity derived from being near death, Nikolai's burning eyes betray "the stern, reproachful expression of the dying man's envy of the living."<sup>609</sup> In order to be the caregiver Nikolai needs him to be, Levin must overcome his own mental limitations and emotional blocks to acknowledge Nikolai's need for empathy, intimacy, and a recognition of his suffering, not to provide him with an existential solution to death.

When it comes to identifying positive caregivers in *Anna Karenina*, it would seem at first glance that Varenka, the ward of the rich and pious Madame Stahl, is the ideal caregiver. Indeed, that is what the heartbroken and dejected Kitty seems to think after she arrives at the German spa town Bad Soden to recover from depression (incorrectly diagnosed as early-stage tuberculosis) brought upon by spurned love. When she makes Varenka's acquaintance, Kitty's attitude

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<sup>608</sup> Ibid, 465. («И, странное дело, он чувствовал себя совершенно холодным и не испытывал ни горя, ни потери, ни еще меньше жалости к брату. Если было у него чувство к брату теперь, то скорее зависть за то знание, которое имеет теперь умирающий, но которого он не может иметь» [498]).

<sup>609</sup> Ibid, 1070. («...на лице его установилось опять строгое укоризненное выражение зависти умирающего к живому» [490]).

towards herself and her life is irrevocably changed. In Varenka, Kitty sees the ideal woman to which she hopes to aspire. Varenka's modesty and kindness serve as goalposts for Kitty, who considers Varenka to be a selfless, perfect angel:

Varenka, alone in the world, without friends or relations, with a melancholy disappointment in the past, desiring nothing, regretting nothing, was just that perfection of which Kitty dared hardly dream. In Varenka, she realized that one has but to forget oneself and love others, and one will be calm, happy, and noble. And that was what Kitty longed to be.<sup>610</sup>

Varenka's "natural and sweet" disposition and her compassion in caring for others serve as a beacon of hope for Kitty's own spiritual transformation.<sup>611</sup> Yet what the reader knows about Varenka is exclusively filtered through Kitty's own perceptions, all of which are biased and (initially) akin to worship. When she arrives at Soden, Kitty is spiritually and emotionally lost and considers herself to be selfish and immature. In upholding as Varenka the moral and spiritual ideal, Kitty longs to shed her own juvenility and to become a mature and compassionate woman.

Kitty's energy and vivaciousness contrasts starkly with Varenka's modest, quiet temperament. While Kitty basks in the glow of compliments and admiration, Varenka appears to be "utterly unmoved by [praise]. Her only motive is to avoid refusing and to please."<sup>612</sup> Kitty marvels at Varenka's dignified nature, and wonders: "what is there in her? What is it that gives her the power to look down on everything, to be calm independently of everything? How I should like to know it and to learn it from her!"<sup>613</sup> Instead of being jealous of Varenka or threatened by her seemingly effortless modesty, Kitty is inspired and determined to learn all she

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<sup>610</sup> Ibid, 203. («Но зато Варенька, одинокая, без родных, без друзей, с грустным разочарованием, ничего не желавшая, ничего не жалевавшая, была тем самым совершенством, о котором только позволяла себе мечтать Кити. На Вареньке она поняла, что стоило только забыть себя и любить других, и будешь спокойна, счастлива прекрасна. И такую хотела быть Кити» [225]).

<sup>611</sup> Ibid, 119. («просто, мило» [218]).

<sup>612</sup> Ibid, 200. («А ей совершенно все равно. Ее побуждает только желание не отказать и сделать приятное маман» [222]).

<sup>613</sup> Ibid. («Что же в ней есть? Что дает ей эту силу пренебрегать всем, быть независимо спокойною? Как бы я желала это знать и научиться от нее этому» [ibid]).

can from her. Kitty “felt that in [Varenka], in her manner of life, she would find an example of what she was now so painfully seeking: interest in life, a dignity in life”<sup>614</sup> Kitty considers Varenka’s caregiving to be the clearest indication of her virtue and begins to emulate her behavior and manners.

Despite Kitty’s effusive praise of Varenka’s good nature, however, the narrator underscores several reasons why Varenka’s altruism is not as genuine as Kitty thinks. Varenka is indeed restrained and thoughtful, yet her selflessness is questioned by the narrator and eventually by Kitty herself. The narrator affirms Kitty’s opinion of Varenka as “natural” in introducing Varenka in the novel: “The Russian girl looked after Madame Stahl, and besides that, she was, as Kitty observed, on friendly terms with all the invalids who were seriously ill, and there were many of them at the springs, and [she] looked after them in the most natural way.”<sup>615</sup> Nevertheless, the narrator implies that Varenka’s natural caregiving comes more from years of practice than from innate goodness or an ability to empathetically witness another’s suffering. Varenka’s benefactor Madame Stahl is revealed to be too ill to walk for most of Varenka’s life, and that the responsibility for her care has fallen primarily on Varenka. However, Varenka cares not just for her benefactress but also for the other patients at Soden without complaint and with quiet dignity.

While Kitty berates herself for desiring compliments and praise, the narrator implies that Varenka also enjoys such praise. After Varenka dissolves a dispute between the ill Nikolai Levin and his doctor, she is praised by Princess Shcherbatskii for her handling of the situation. In

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<sup>614</sup> Ibid, 195. («Кити чувствовала, что в ней, в ее складе жизни, она найдет образец того, чего теперь мучительно искала: —интересов жизни, достоинства жизни» [216]).

<sup>615</sup> Ibid. («Русская девушка ухаживала за мадам Шталь и, кроме того, как замечала Кити, сходилась со всеми тяжелобольными, которых было много на водах, и самым натуральным образом ухаживала за ними » [ibid]).



response, Varenka “flushed a little [and said] ‘I don’t remember. I don’t think I did anything.’”<sup>616</sup>

The word used by the narrator to describe her flush [покраснела] is repeated when discussing Kitty’s frequent blushing from pleasure.<sup>617</sup> This small detail implies that Varenka also basks in the joy of compliments, but unlike Kitty, she attempts to suppress her emotions not only from others, but also from herself. Varenka’s behavior, then, is not as natural as she would like others to think.

Similarly, in the description of her physical beauty, the narrator contrasts Varenka’s porcelain-like appearance with Kitty’s freshness: Varenka is “a creature without youth; she might have been taken for nineteen or for thirty. If her features were criticized separately, she was handsome rather than plain, despite the sickly hue of her face. She would have been a good figure, too, if it had not been for her extreme thinness and the size of her head, which was too large for her medium height.”<sup>618</sup> Indeed, this description makes Varenka out to be something akin to a doll—a life-like portrayal of something ultimately artificial. The narrator remarks on Varenka’s lack of sexuality, claiming that Varenka “would have been unattractive to men also from the lack of just what Kitty had too much of—of the suppressed fire of vitality, and the consciousness of her own attractiveness.”<sup>619</sup> Despite her quiet dignity and altruism, Varenka is more of an ideal than a real human being, while the prideful Kitty is genuine and flawed; qualities which only contribute to her charm.

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<sup>616</sup> Ibid, 198. («Варенька покраснела.—Я не помню, я, кажется, ничего не делала, —сказала она» [219]).

<sup>617</sup> Ibid. («Кити покраснела от радости» [220]).

<sup>618</sup> Ibid, 195. («М-Не Варенька эта была не то что не первой молодости, но как бы существо без молодости:— ей можно было дать и девятнадцать и тридцать лет. Если разбирать ее черты, она, несмотря на болезненный цвет лица, была скорее красива, чем дурна. Она была бы и хорошо сложена, если бы не слишком большая сухость тела и несоразмерная голова по среднему росту» [216]).

<sup>619</sup> Ibid, 195. («Кроме того, она не могла быть привлекательною для мужчин еще и потому, что ей недоставало того, чего слишком много было в Кити,—сдержанного огня жизни ивсознания своей привлекательности» [216]).

Conversely, Varenka acts more like a professional nurse than a caregiver, for while she responds appropriately to the physical needs of her patients, she fails to inspire in them any emotional or spiritual change. The narrator remarks on Varenka's care for the ill patients at Soden, noting that she was either "taking the children of a Russian family home from the springs, or fetching a shawl for a sick lady, and wrapping her up in it, or trying to interest an irritable invalid, or selecting and buying cakes for tea for someone."<sup>620</sup> Despite her dedication to the sick patients, however, Varenka fails to leave behind any sort of remarkable impression. Kitty, on the other hand, who may not know as much as Varenka about providing care, is missed by the patients when she is not around.

For Tolstoy, Varenka the nurse is not the ideal caregiver: there is something fundamental lacking in her care which Kitty has in abundance, namely, a sense of vitality. Yet Kitty's vitality, despite its inspiring and comforting the patients for whom she cares, eventually becomes problematic. In one case, Kitty is barred from caring for the artist Petrov when his wife becomes jealous of "the timid, softened look with which he gazed at [Kitty]."<sup>621</sup> However, the narrator underscores Kitty's success in caring for the sick artist, as Petrov returns to life in her presence. Kitty is ashamed and distressed, particularly when she recalls "the strange feeling of compassion and awkwardness, and later of a sense of her own goodness, which she had felt at [caring for Petrov]."<sup>622</sup> Kitty feels revulsion for herself also for her "unmistakable [pride] of playing the part of a sister of mercy in that family."<sup>623</sup> She realizes that the caregiving abilities which come so

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<sup>620</sup> Ibid, 196. («...или она уводит с вод детей русского семейства, или несет плед для больной и укутывает ее, или старается развлечь раздраженного больного, или выбирает и покупает печенье к кофею для кого-то» [217]).

<sup>621</sup> Ibid, 205. («Она вспоминала этот робкий, умиленный взгляд, которым он смотрел на нее» [227]).

<sup>622</sup> Ibid. («...и странное чувство сострадания и неловкости и потом сознания своей добродетельности, которое она испытывала при этом» [ibid]).

<sup>623</sup> Ibid, 204. («Кити, очевидно, гордилась тем, что исполняла в этом семействе обязанности сестры милосердия» [226]).

“naturally” to Varenka, do not in fact, come as spontaneously to Kitty. She remembers “the efforts she had made at first to overcome the repugnance she felt for [Petrov], as for all consumptive people, and the pains it had cost her to think of things to say to him.”<sup>624</sup> This realization only furthers the divide between her and Varenka and leads Kitty to acknowledge a certain truth about herself: that she cannot deny her own nature. Kitty understands that she has suppressed her own personality to become more like Varenka. In recognizing her own ingenuine performance as a self-denying caregiver, Kitty accepts herself, flaws and all, and thus learns never to suppress her spiritedness again. This vitality is her power, for she uses it in her reconciliation with Levin which ultimately leads to her family happiness. Her vivacity also helps her become a successful caregiver to Nikolai, for she brightens his last days with her compassion and attention.

The tension between Kitty’s vitality and Varenka’s chastity reaches an apex near the end of Kitty’s time in Bad Soden and spurs an emotional discussion between the two friends about the nature and responsibilities of caregiving. Once Varenka reveals that Kitty is no longer welcome at Petrov’s residence, Kitty is distraught. “It serves me right, because it was all sham; because it was all done on purpose, and not from the heart” she says tearfully to Varenka, “What business had I to interfere with outsiders? And so it’s come about that I’m a cause of quarrel, and that I’ve done what nobody asked me to do. Because it was all a sham! a sham! a sham!”<sup>625</sup> In her shame, Kitty admits that she cared for others in an attempt “to seem better to people, to myself, to God; to deceive everyone. No! now I won’t descend to that. I’ll be bad; but anyway

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<sup>624</sup> Ibid, 205. («Она вспоминала свое усилие в первое время, чтобы преодолеть отвращение, которое она испытывала к нему, как и ко всем чахоточным, и старания, с которыми она придумывала, что сказать ему» [227]).

<sup>625</sup> Ibid, 212. («Поделом за то, что все это было притворство, потому что это все выдуманное, а не от сердца. Какое мне дело было до чужого человека? И вот вышло, что я причиной ссоры и что я делала то, чего меня никто не просил. Оттого что все притворство! притворство! притворство!» [236]).

not a liar, a cheat.”<sup>626</sup> She admits to Varenka that she sees her as “perfection” [совершенство] but is hurt by the fact that Varenka sees Kitty as a project. Kitty tells her that she, Kitty, “can’t act except from the heart, and you act from principle. I liked you simply, but you most likely only wanted to save me, to improve me.”<sup>627</sup> Varenka is hurt by such an accusation, but she does not deny it.

Yet, amid her distress, Kitty cuts to the heart of the tension inherent in caregiving: Varenka cares for the sick patients at Soden not out of love or genuine care but solely out of principle. But does Varenka have a choice? Like Sonya in *War and Peace*, Varenka is economically and socially disadvantaged and is forced to prove her worth through her actions and in her service to others. Also like Sonya, Varenka is silent to any injustice perpetrated against her and adheres to the Christian doctrine of turning “the other cheek when one [is] smitten.”<sup>628</sup> The narrator in *War and Peace* explicitly mentions Sonya’s proclivity for sacrifice, noting that “to sacrifice herself was Sonya’s habit. Her position in the house was such that only by sacrifice could she show her worth...she has been happily conscious that [her acts of self-sacrifice] raised in her own esteem and in that of others.”<sup>629</sup> While Sonya sacrifices her personality in favor of chastity (by staying faithful to Nikolai even when he is married), Varenka surrenders her personality for charity and being of use to others. Unlike Kitty and Natasha who are privileged, adored, and free to express themselves without consequences, Varenka and Sonya are painfully aware that their dependent positions prohibit them from showing their true selves.

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<sup>626</sup> Ibid. («Чтобы казаться лучше пред людьми, пред собой, пред богом, всех обмануть. Нет, теперь я уже не поддамся на это! Быть дурною, но по крайней мере не лживою, необманщицей!—Да кто » [ibid]).

<sup>627</sup> Ibid, 213. («Я не могу иначе жить, как по сердцу, а вы живёте по правилам. Я вас полюбила просто, а вы, верно, только затем, чтобы спасти меня, научить меня!» [237]).

<sup>628</sup> Ibid, 204. («подставить другую щеку » [226]).

<sup>629</sup> Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 1029. («Жертвовать собою для счастье других было привычкой Сони. ЕЕ положение в доме было такого, что только на пути жертвованья она могла высказать свои достоинства...во всех действиях самопожертвованья, она с радостью сознала, что она...этим самым возвышает себе цену в глазах других» [Толстой, *Война и мир*, 540]).

While the narrator of *Anna Karenina* does not divulge Varenka's opinion of Kitty's privilege, the narrator of *War and Peace* remarks that Sonya "felt jealous of Natasha who had never...needed to sacrifice herself, but made others sacrifice themselves for her and yet was beloved by everyone."<sup>630</sup> Like Natasha, Kitty garners respect and admiration by simply being herself, and like Sonya, Varenka understands that the only way she will be seen and appreciated is in her value to others.

It seems that Varenka is aware of her own motives and of her own limitations. This conversation marks a turning point in their friendship and in Kitty's character development. Under Varenka's tutelage, Kitty learns that a successful caregiver does indeed act from principle. Yet Kitty realizes that a *truly* successful caregiver is someone who acts from the heart as well. When she leaves Soden, Kitty does "not give up everything she had learned, but she became aware that she had deceived herself in supposing she could be what she wanted to be. Her eyes were, it seemed, opened; she felt all the difficulty of maintaining herself without hypocrisy and self-conceit on the pinnacle to which she had wished to mount."<sup>631</sup> The next time Kitty acts as a caregiver, it is for her dying brother-in-law. In her caregiving, Kitty acts from the heart (for she loves Nikolai as an extension of her husband and accepts him as her family) and from duty to ease his suffering.

To Levin, the Kitty he fell in love with is ethereal and elegant—In the sick-room Kitty transforms into someone Levin himself is unable to become: from his "poetic, exquisite Kitty" into a nurse.<sup>632</sup> She is focused, sensitive, and empathetic, acting both from her heart and from a

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<sup>630</sup> Ibid. («[Соня] почувствовала зависть к Наташе, никогда не испытывавшей ничего подобного, никогда не нуждавшейся в жертвах и заставлявшей других жертвовать себе, и всё-таки всеми любимой» [ibid]).

<sup>631</sup> Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, 213. («Она не отреклась от всего того, что узнала, но поняла, что она себя обманывала, думая, что может быть тем, чем хотела быть. Она как будто очнулась; почувствовала всю трудность без притворства и хвастовства удержаться на той высоте, на которую она хотела подняться» [Толстой, *Анна Каренина*, 237]).

<sup>632</sup> Ibid, 437. («поэтическая, прелестная Кити» [478]).

sense of duty to her husband and to alleviating Nikolai's suffering. "I feel that it's my duty to be with my husband when he's in trouble," she tells Levin.<sup>633</sup> Kitty assumes the role of caregiver so effortlessly that Nikolai remarks, "'Your Katya' [...gazing at Kitty with admiration]. 'I'm much better already...why, with [her] I should have gotten well long ago. How nice it is!'"<sup>634</sup> Even though she barely knows Nikolai, Kitty immediately recognizes how the disordered mess of Nikolai's room reflects his inner life, one marked by chaos and neglect. "'I am afraid you are not quite comfortable here,' she said, turning away from his fixed stare, and looking around the room."<sup>635</sup> For Kitty, attending to Nikolai's needs is a duty: "since she had not the slightest doubt that it was her duty to help him, she had no doubt either that is possible, and immediately set to work. The very details, the mere thought of which reduced her husband to terror, immediately engaged her attention."<sup>636</sup> By tidying his physical surroundings, Kitty demonstrates her love, care, and recognition of the dying man's suffering, which has a profound effect on Nikolai's emotional state:

returning with the bottle, Levin found the sick man settled comfortably and everything about him completely changed...[there] was no dust visible anywhere, a rug was laid by the bedside. On the table stood medicine bottles and decanters tidily arranged, and the linen needed was folded there. On the other table by the patient's bed there were candles and drink and powders. The sick man himself, washed and combed, lay in clean sheets on high raised pillows, in a clean night-shirt with a white collar about his astoundingly thin neck, and with a new expression of hope looked fixedly at Kitty.<sup>637</sup>

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<sup>633</sup> Ibid, 444. («Я чувствую, что мой долг быть с мужем, когда он в горе» [485]).

<sup>634</sup> Ibid, 450. («—твоя Катя... Мне гораздо уж лучше... Вот с вами я бы давно выздоровел. Как хорошо!» [492]).

<sup>635</sup> Ibid, 448. («Я боюсь, что вам здесь не совсем хорошо, — сказала она, отворачиваясь от его пристального взгляда и оглядывая комнату» [490]).

<sup>636</sup> Ibid, 449. («И так как в ней не было ни малейшего сомнения, что она должна помочь ему, она не сомневалась и в том, что это можно, и тотчас же принялась за дело. Те самые подробности, одна мысль о которых приводила ее мужа в ужас, тотчас же обратили ее внимание» [491]).

<sup>637</sup> Ibid. («Вернувшись со стклянкой, Левин нашел уже больного уложенным и все вокруг него совершенно измененным. Тяжелый запах заменился запахом уксуса с духами, который, выставив губы и раздвув румяные щеки, Кити прыскала в трубочку. Пыли нигде не было видно, под кроватью был ковер. На столе стояли аккуратно стклянки, графин и сложено было нужное белье и работа broderie anglaise Кити. На другом столе, у кровати больного, было питье, свеча и порошки. Сам больной, вымытый и причесанный, лежал на чистых простынях, на высоко поднятых подушках, в чистой рубашке с белым воротником около неестественно тонкой шеи и с новым выражением надежды, не спуская глаз, смотрел на Кити» [492]).

Kitty's loving and dutiful care softens Nikolai's hardened demeanor and gifts him with the first respite he has had in years. If Nikolai was rejected and vilified during his life, as he is dying, he is shown kindness and respect, qualities necessary to achieving a good death. Kitty also forms a deep emotional bond with Nikolai in the few hours she has known him. Levin, who has known his brother all his life and struggled to understand his motives and feelings, immediately notices the closeness between them. Levin observes that "no one could make out what he said but Kitty; she alone understood. She understood because she was all the while mentally keeping watch on what he needed."<sup>638</sup> Unlike Levin who is disgusted by his brother's physical state, Kitty lovingly wipes the sweat off his brow and respects his needs for privacy when changing his shirts. Even during Nikolai's bouts of emotional ferocity and anger, Kitty is calm and collected.

Tolstoy upholds Kitty as an example of an ideal caregiver not just for her attunement to Nikolai's physical needs, but especially because death is not horrifying to her the way it is for her husband. She directs her energy into addressing Nikolai's emotional and physical needs instead of brooding on the existential and philosophical significance of death like Levin. This is not to say that Kitty fails to understand death or grasp its importance and significance. On the contrary, the narrator makes it quite clear that Kitty *does* comprehend the magnitude of death: "the proof that [she] knew for a certainty the nature of death lay in the fact that [she] knew without a second of hesitation how to deal with the dying, and [was] not frightened of them."<sup>639</sup>

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<sup>638</sup> Ibid. («Никто не расслышал того, что он сказал, одна Кити поняла. Она понимала, потому что не переставая следила мыслью за тем, что ему нужно было» [ibid]).

<sup>639</sup> Ibid, 451. («Доказательство того, что они знали твердо, что такое была смерть, состояло в том, что они, ни секунды не сомневаясь, знали, как надо действовать с умирающими, и не боялись их» [493]).

Levin, on the other hand, is “afraid of death, and [was] absolutely at a loss of what to do when people were dying.”<sup>640</sup>

Like Natasha who does not think of herself when caring for Andrei, Kitty also “evidently did not think of herself, and had no time to think about herself: she was thinking about [Nikolai]...She smiled and sympathized with him and petted him.”<sup>641</sup> Conversely, Levin is at a loss of how to comfort this brother. He thinks that discussing “outside things seemed to him shocking, impossible, to talk of death and depressing subjects—also impossible. To be silent, also impossible.”<sup>642</sup> Kitty, however, is not concerned with propriety. She realizes that the most helpful thing she can do for Nikolai is to treat him as naturally and kindly as possible. Tolstoy sharply contrasts Kitty’s caregiving behavior with Levin’s: “Kitty thought, and felt, and acted quite differently. On seeing the sick man, she pitied him. And pity in her womanly heart did not arouse at all that feeling of horror and loathing that it aroused in her husband, but a desire to act, to find out all the details of his state, and to remedy them.”<sup>643</sup> While both Kitty and Levin feel pity for the dying man, Kitty’s experience of the emotion is externalized, while Levin’s experience of the emotion is immediately directed inward towards himself.

Thus, in *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy deepens the image of a successful caregiver—in contrast to *War and Peace* in which he merely contrasts Marya as the unsuccessful caregiver with Natasha who represents the ideal, Tolstoy builds something of a triangle between the

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<sup>640</sup> Ibid. («Левин же и другие, хотя и многое могли сказать о смерти, очевидно не знали, потому что боялись смерти и решительно не знали, что надо делать, когда люди умирают» [ibid]).

<sup>641</sup> Ibid. («Она и про себя рассказывала и про свою свадьбу, и улыбалась, и жалела, и ласкала его» [ibid]).

<sup>642</sup> Ibid, 451. («Говорить о постороннем ему казалось оскорбительным, нельзя; говорить о смерти, о мрачном—тоже нельзя. Говорить о постороннем ему казалось оскорбительным, нельзя; говорить о смерти, о мрачном—тоже нельзя. Молчать—тоже нельзя» [494]).

<sup>643</sup> Ibid, 449. («Кити думала, чувствовала и действовала совсем не так. При виде больного ей стало жалко его. И жалость в ее женской душе произвела совсем не то чувство ужаса и гадливости, которое она произвела в ее муже, а потребность действовать, узнать все подробности его состояния и помочь им» [491]).



ineffective caregiver Levin, the adequate but imperfect caregiver Varenka; and the successful ideal caregiver, Kitty. In the scenes at Soden, Tolstoy shows that Varenka, despite her modesty and dedication to her patients, is not an ideal caregiver particularly because she cares for others solely from of duty and not from of a genuine sense of empathy which comes from the heart. Ultimately, Kitty's realization of her own vitality allows her to understand that caregiving must be done from love and sympathy, as well as from duty. And yet, life force and vitality continue to be important for Tolstoy's understanding of successful caregiving. For the author, vitality is an energy through which life is affirmed and death is accepted. Thus, life-force remains at the core of Tolstoy's thinking about death being an integral part of a life.

Caregivers in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*:  
Praskovya Fedorovna, Gerasim, and Articulating an Acceptance of Death

In *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, the next work of Tolstoy's in which he pays considerable attention to the role of the caregiver, an acceptance of death becomes the caregivers' central issue in providing good care. In the midst of the overwhelming darkness that death casts upon life, Tolstoy finds one antidote: the ardent faith observed by Russia's "simple people"—the peasants. The fact that Tolstoy chooses the peasant Gerasim as the communicator of this truth is therefore incredibly important to the overall understanding of *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. It is no longer women (and especially aristocratic women) that inspire existential clarity in the dying patient but peasants, or people removed from the corruption of society. "Faith is the knowledge of the meaning of human life, whereby the individual does not destroy himself but lives," Tolstoy explains in *My Confession*, and so, "faith is the force of life."<sup>644</sup> Gerasim thus serves as an emblem of faith, which Ivan Ilyich accesses only in the very last moments of his life.

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<sup>644</sup> Tolstoy, *My Confession*, 61.

In *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, Ivan Ilyich's emotional torment at his approaching death serves as the preliminary step in his ultimate moral and spiritual transformation. While much scholarly attention in the fields of literature and medicine has focused on Ivan Ilyich's first-hand experience of dying, the actions of his caregiver Gerasim have garnered less critical and more practical attention. Indeed, Gerasim's caregiving actions for the dying man have received consideration in end-of-life courses, nursing programs, and in medical training across the world. A 2010 study shows that nursing and medical students who read *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* identify how "Gerasim's contribution to the care of Ivan Ilych revealed the importance of compassion and empathy...Gerasim was notable for 'comforting the dying patient,' showing 'kindness,' 'compassion,' 'honesty,' and 'understanding,' providing 'good treatment,' and being 'supportive' and all the while acting as Ilych's [sic] 'constant companion and carer.'" <sup>645</sup>

Gerasim's successful caregiving, in particular his kindness and attentiveness, is contrasted sharply with the actions of Ivan Ilyich's family who see his sufferings as vexing and burdensome.

During his illness, Ivan sees for the first time the spiritual and moral destitution that plagued his healthy life. His family becomes hateful to him, as do his friends, former pleasures, and even his beloved profession. Above all, Ivan Ilyich is distressed by the "the deception, the lie, which for some reason [his family, friends, and doctor] all accepted, that he was not dying but was simply ill, and that he only needed to keep quiet and undergo a treatment and then something very good would result."<sup>646</sup> Ivan Ilyich bitterly realizes that his wife and daughter consciously ignore the truth of his condition: they "were in a perfect whirl of visiting, did not

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<sup>645</sup> Tolstoy, stories, and facilitating insight in end-of-life care: Exploring ethics through vicarious experience, 519.

<sup>646</sup> Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, 71. («Главное мучение Ивана Ильича была ложь,— а, всеми почему-то признанная ложь, что он только болен, а не умирает, и что ему надо только быть спокойным и лечиться, и тогда что-то выйдет очень хорошее» [Толстой, *Избранные повести и рассказы*, 133]).

understand anything of it and were annoyed that he was so depressed and so exacting, as if he were to blame for it.”<sup>647</sup> Ultimately, his family refuses to set aside their own needs to care for the dying patriarch. What’s even more disturbing to Ivan Ilyich is their refusal to acknowledge the many ways in which their loved one is suffering.

Ivan Ilyich’s wife Praskovya Fedorovna is particularly selfish—one could even debate whether she qualifies as a caregiver at all, as she only acknowledges her husband’s physical and emotional pain during his very last moments and not over the course of his dying experience. For the most part, Praskovya Fedorovna downplays the severity of her husband’s illness, only admitting that he is ill when she thinks he does not hear her. Still, she does minimally attend to his needs, often speaking to him with an “especially sad and exceptionally kind expression” and checking in on him frequently, yet her actions arise more out of a sense of obligation than out of a genuine desire to help him.<sup>648</sup> It is difficult to say when, if ever, Praskovya Fedorovna shows any honest vulnerability or tenderness towards her husband. As Stephen J. Pope points out, “Ivan's wife is either pretending or lying all the time: about her feelings for Ivan, her concern for his health, and her grieving over his death.”<sup>649</sup> There is a chasm of misunderstanding between them, one that has been deepened by years of disagreements and quarrels.

While Ivan understands that their romance and intimacy has vanished, he still hopes for some semblance of sympathy from his wife, but Praskovya Fedorvna continues to minimize his suffering at almost every turn: “Praskovya Fedorovna's attitude to Ivan Ilyich's illness, as she expressed it both to others and to him, was that it was his own fault and was another of the

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<sup>647</sup> Ibid, 48. («Домашние—главное жена и дочь, которые были в самом разгаре выездов, —он, видел, ничего не понимали, досадовали на то, что он такой невеселый и требовательный, как будто он был виноват в этом» [124]).

<sup>648</sup> Ibid, 55. («...с особенно грустным и непривычно добрым выражением...» [126]).

<sup>649</sup> Steven J. Pope, “Compassion and Self-Deception: The Unity of Love and Truthfulness in Leo Tolstoy’s ‘Death of Ivan Ilyich,’” *The Annual Society of Christian Ethics* 19 (1999): 117.

annoyances he caused her.”<sup>650</sup> Above all, Ivan Ilyich is repulsed by his wife because her self-serving actions are grotesquely transparent: when she comes to see him, she “asked how he was, but, as he saw, only for the sake of asking and not in order to learn about it, knowing that there was nothing to learn—and then went on to what she really wanted to say”<sup>651</sup> Ivan understands, with vitriol in his heart, that “everything [Praskovya Fedorovna] did for him was entirely for her own sake, and she told him she was doing for him what she actually was doing for herself.”<sup>652</sup> Ivan Ilyich’s daughter similarly takes little notice of her father’s physical and spiritual torment, and “came in in full evening dress, her fresh young flesh exposed (making a show of that very flesh which in [Ivan’s] own case caused so much suffering), strong, healthy, evidently in love, and impatient with illness, suffering, and death, because they interfered with her happiness.”<sup>653</sup>

Yet there is one member of the family who is moved by Ivan Ilyich’s suffering and who pities him—his son Vasya. Vasya is young, similar in age to Nikolenka from *Childhood*, and witnessing his father’s suffering is presumably traumatic for him. Trailing after his family, the young boy enters his father’s chambers and Ivan Ilyich recognizes the “terribly dark shadows...under his [son’s] eyes, the meaning of which Ivan Ilyich knew well.”<sup>654</sup> He understands that his son is distraught over losing his father, and although Ivan Ilyich did not give much thought to his son in his healthy days, he realizes in his illness that “Vasya was the only

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<sup>650</sup> Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, 49. («Прасковьи Федоровны было такое к болезни мужа, что в болезни этой виноват Иван Ильич и вся болезнь эта есть новая неприятность, которую он делает жене» [Толстой, *Избранные повести и рассказы*, 124]).

<sup>651</sup> Ibid, 82. («Она присела, спросила о здоровье, как он видел, для того только, чтоб спросить, но не для того, чтобы узнать, зная, что и узнавать нечего, и начала говорить то, что ей нужно было» [138]).

<sup>652</sup> Ibid, 81. («Она все над ним делала только для себя и говорила ему, что она делает для себя то, что она точно делала для себя как такую невероятную вещь, что он должен был понимать это обратно» [ibidem 137]).

<sup>653</sup> Ibid, 83. («Вошла дочь разодетая, с обнаженным молодым телом, тем телом, которое так заставляло страдать его. А она его выставляла. Сильная, здоровая, очевидно, влюбленная и негодующая на болезнь, страдания и смерть, мешающие ее счастью» [139]).

<sup>654</sup> Ibid. («За ним вполз незаметно и гимназистик в новеньком мундирчике, бедняжка, в перчатках и с ужасной синевой под глазами, значение которой знал Иван Ильич» [ibidem]).

one besides Gerasim who understood and pitied him.”<sup>655</sup> Vasya does not lie to his father along with the rest of his family. While Praskovya Fedorovna and Ivan Ilyich’s daughter pointedly ignore Ivan’s rapidly declining health, Vasya notices his father’s symptoms and reacts to them with fear and sadness. Although Vasya does not articulate that his father is dying (to himself or to his father), it is evident that he grasps the severity of his father’s illness. Even though he is young, innocent, and does not yet understand the meaning of death, Vasya recognizes that his father is suffering. Ivan Ilyich keeps his desires to be pitied “as a sick child is pitied” to himself, yet he wishes ardently for someone to acknowledge his difficult situation, and “longed to be petted and comforted.”<sup>656</sup> It is important to note here that Ivan Ilyich desires more than just pity, despite what he admits to himself. Ivan Ilyich understands that Vasya pities his father, but also finds it “dreadful to see the boy’s frightened look of pity.”<sup>657</sup> Vasya may be too young to understand the complexity of his father’s wish, but in recognizing his father’s pain, he acts as an empathetic witness to his father’s dying.

Gerasim, on the other hand, calmly and unflinchingly cares for Ivan Ilyich as his physical state deteriorates. Susan L. Taylor discusses what makes Gerasim such a special, attentive caregiver, arguing that Gerasim represents a particular type of caregiving that “has as its goal the care and nurture of the individual patient [as opposed to a caregiving whose]...aim is to cure the patient.”<sup>658</sup> He is dedicated to Ivan Ilyich in a way that the medical professionals in his life fail to be. Even further, Gerasim is essentially a stranger to Ivan Ilyich—the narrator does not disclose the nature of their relationship before Ivan falls ill, but it is safe to assume that their relations

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<sup>655</sup> Ibid. («Кроме Герасима, Ивану Ильичу казалось, что один Вася понимал и жалел» [ibid]).

<sup>656</sup> Ibid, 73. («...хотелось того, чтоб его, как дитя больное, пожалел бы кто-нибудь. Ему хотелось, чтоб его приласкали, поцеловали, поплакали бы над ним, как ласкают и утешают детей» [134]).

<sup>657</sup> Ibid, 56. («И страшен был его испуганный и соболезнующий взгляд» [139]).

<sup>658</sup> Susan L. Taylor, “The Gerasim Model of Caregiving: Reflections on Tolstoy’s Novella ‘The Death of Ivan Ilyich.’” *Death Studies* 21, no. 3 (1997): 302.

were superficial and minimal at best and could best be categorized as a professional relationship. Yet in caring for Ivan Ilyich, Gerasim fosters an intimacy with the dying man that is alien to Ivan Ilyich—never in his adult life did Ivan feel anything resembling care and respect for his dignity.

In describing Gerasim and his caregiving, Tolstoy links him to the other caregivers in his works. Like Natasha, Gerasim takes care to temper his emotions at the dying man's side, so as not to overwhelm him. He is also described as full of life and inner strength like Natasha and Kitty and he restrains “the joy of life that beamed from his face” when caring for Ivan Ilyich.<sup>659</sup> When he holds Ivan Ilyich's legs on his shoulders throughout the night, Gerasim refuses to leave the dying man's side, even at Ivan's insistence. Natasha similarly sits at Andrei's side throughout the night, fighting off her own fatigue in case he should need her help. Gerasim sacrifices his own physical comfort to attend to the dying man during the last weeks of his life, but he does not consider it a sacrifice. For him, holding Ivan Ilyich's feet on his shoulders is but a small act of compassion, while for Ivan, it means the world.

Like Kitty, Gerasim is guided by practical sense and a duty to alleviate the dying man's discomfort, while also being motivated by a genuine desire to help ease his suffering. In this way, Gerasim is more like Kitty than Varenka, who cares for others in hopes of being noticed and appreciated. Gerasim, on the other hand, cares for Ivan Ilyich from a sense of compassion, for as he puts it, “he did not think his work burdensome, because he was doing it for a dying man and hoped someone would do the same for him when his time came.”<sup>660</sup> When Ivan Ilyich apologizes for the imposition he thinks he is causing his caregiver, Gerasim waves away his

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<sup>659</sup> Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, 68. («[Герасим] очевидно, сдерживая, чтобы не оскорбить больного, радость жизни, сияющую на его лице, — подошел к судну» [Толстой, *Избранные повести и рассказы*, 131]).

<sup>660</sup> *Ibid.*, 72. («...выражая этим то, что он не тяготится своим трудом именно потому, что несет его для умирающего человека и надеется, что и для него кто-нибудь в его время понесет тот же труд» [134]).

words. “If you weren't sick it would be another matter, but as it is, why should I grudge a little trouble?” he says kindly to Ivan Ilyich.<sup>661</sup> Like Nikolai Levin, Ivan Ilyich is ashamed of his own body and so Gerasim, like Kitty, takes care to respect the dying man’s dignity. Kitty looks away to protect Nikolai’s dignity, (“I’m not looking!” [Kitty says] putting his arm in...[for she] heard and saw that [Nikolai] was ashamed and uncomfortable at being naked before her”).<sup>662</sup> Similarly, Gerasim keeps “from looking at his sick master out of consideration for his feelings.”<sup>663</sup> Gerasim recognizes his master’s anguish, and Ivan Ilyich realizes that “no one felt for him, because no one even wished to grasp his position. Only Gerasim recognized it and pitied him. And so Ivan Ilyich felt at ease only with him.”<sup>664</sup> Ivan comprehends that Gerasim “alone understood the facts of the case and did not consider it necessary to disguise them, but simply felt sorry for his emaciated and enfeebled master.”<sup>665</sup>

While it is important to point out the power discrepancies between Ivan Ilyich as master and Gerasim as servant, the narrator implies that Gerasim’s caregiving arises more from his own kindness than out of a sense of obligation. Unlike Varenka who is also socially disenfranchised and whose caregiving is noted by those around her, Gerasim’s caregiving is virtually unnoticed by everyone in the household except for Ivan Ilyich. “It’s alright, sir. I’ll stay a while,” Gerasim says, and even when Ivan Ilyich commands him to leave him, Gerasim does not go far: Ivan

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<sup>661</sup> Ibid. («Вы не извольте беспокоиться, Иван Ильич, выплюсь еще»; или когда он вдруг, переходя на «ты», прибавлял: «Кабы ты не больной, а то отчего же не послужить?» [ibid]).

<sup>662</sup> Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, 1074. («» []).

<sup>663</sup> Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, 68. («не глядя на Ивана Ильича, —очевидно, сдерживая, чтобы не оскорбить больного» [Толстой, *Избранные повести и рассказы*, 132]).

<sup>664</sup> Ibid, 72. («...он видел, что никто не пожалеет его, потому что никто не хочет даже понимать его положения. Один только Герасим понимал это положение и жалел его. И потому Ивану Ильичу хорошо было только с Герасимом» [134]).

<sup>665</sup> Ibid. («Кабы ты не больной, а то отчего же не послужить?» [133]).

Ilyich “waited until Gerasim had gone into the next room and then restrained himself no longer and wept like a child.”<sup>666</sup>

There is more to Gerasim’s caregiving than just his physical acts and calming demeanor—it is his articulation of his acceptance of death, something that Natasha and Kitty themselves do not explicitly express. For Gerasim, death is as natural as the setting of the sun at nightfall. Natasha fails to verbalize an acceptance of death at all while Kitty implies that Nikolai’s death can be delayed, maybe even avoided entirely. In fact, both Natasha and Kitty mask their acceptance of their patients’ impending deaths from the dying men, and even attempt to inspire hope of their recovery. In the days following Andrei’s death, Natasha is overwhelmed by grief and replays a conversation she had with Andrei in his last days: in response to his visible pain, Natasha says: ““This can’t go on—it won’t. You will get well—quite well.””<sup>667</sup> After he dies, Natasha recalls with shame Andrei’s “long, sad, and severe look at those words, and understood the meaning of the rebuke and despair in that protracted gaze.”<sup>668</sup> Kitty also tries to inspire hope of recovery in Nikolai, and for a time, Nikolai believes her “accounts of the marvelous recoveries [that] she had heard of.”<sup>669</sup> Who knows, stranger things have happened, Natasha and Kitty seem to think of the dying men’s predicaments. Gerasim, on the other hand, does not try to assuage Ivan Ilyich’s fears of death nor does he try to kindle any hope for recovery. Instead, he simply and candidly states “We shall all of us die one day, so why should I grudge a little trouble?”<sup>670</sup>

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<sup>666</sup> Ibid, 88. («Ничего, посижу-с» [140]).

<sup>667</sup> Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 1159. («Это не может так продолжаться, этого не будет, вы будете здоровы-- совсем» [Толстой, Толстой, *Война и мир*, 607]).

<sup>668</sup> Ibid. («Она вспомнила продолжительный, грустный, строгий взгляд его при этих словах и поняла значение упрека и отчаяния продолжительного взгляда» [ibid]).

<sup>669</sup> Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, 454. («Левин знал тоже, что Кити усилила эту надежду еще рассказами о слышанных ею необыкновенных исцелениях.» [Толстой, *Анна Каренина*, 496]).

<sup>670</sup> Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, 72. («—Все умирать будем. Отчего же не потрудиться?» [134]).



The narrator underscores Gerasim's empathetic and observant nature to show that his caregiving for Ivan Ilyich is motivated above all by respect for human dignity, not just by love or concern. Gerasim puts himself in the dying man's shoes, and in this way, he becomes an empathetic witness to his dying experience. This, for Tolstoy, is the last piece of the puzzle of what makes a successful caregiver. To openly and bravely face death and to articulate its certainty is a courageous and merciful act: in accepting death, Gerasim helps alleviate the horror Ivan Ilyich feels and helps dispel "the lie" that poisoned Ivan's last few months. In stating the truth, Gerasim respects Ivan's dignity. This in turn gives Ivan Ilyich the courage to face and accept his death.

In the face of Ivan Ilyich's deep existential Anxiety and feelings of spiritual abandonment, Gerasim reaffirms God's presence. During his illness, Ivan Ilyich feels thoroughly forsaken and "wept like a child. He wept on account of his helplessness, his terrible loneliness, the cruelty of man, the cruelty of God, and the absence of God."<sup>671</sup> The novella, however, is not religious in its undertones. While there has been ample debate on the nature of divine themes in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, ultimately the message in the novella is a metaphysical one. Gerasim serves as a prophet for the spiritual truth of acceptance of death. Ivan Ilyich realizes that what is most painful for him in his illness is denial of death, coming from himself, from his family, and from his doctors. Gerasim alone rejects this denial. Even after Ivan Ilyich's death, Gerasim continues to spread the message to those who are still spiritually blinded. As Ivan Ilyich's closest childhood friend Pyotr Petrovich leaves Ivan's funeral, he speaks briefly with Gerasim. "It's a

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<sup>671</sup> Ibid, 88. («н плакал о беспомощности своей, о своем ужасном одиночестве, о жестокости людей, о жестокости Бога, об отсутствии Бога» [140]).

sad affair, isn't it?" Pyotr says to the young man.<sup>672</sup> "It's God's will," Gerasim replies simply, showing his white teeth, "We shall all come to it someday."<sup>673</sup>

As Tolstoy's ideas regarding caregiving mature, he distances himself from his original understanding of the successful caregiver as acting primarily from the heart. Indeed, the distance between the caregiver and the dying person continually widens across Tolstoy's literary career, and it is evident that the writer comes to consider other caregiving values as more important at the end of life. For example, Natalia Savishna's love for Nikolenka's mother is that of a mother for her child whom she raised since infancy; Natasha's love for Andrei is romantic; Kitty's love for Nikolai is familial; and finally, Gerasim, as Ivan Ilyich's servant, arguably feels a more abstracted Christian love—like that of Platon Karataev, this kind of love is detached, unfocused, and can best be understood as love for humanity. Tolstoy uses these differing levels of intimacy between caregiver and the dying person to question what lies truly at the heart of successful caregiving. As the caregivers become more detached, their selfless actions carry more weight.

Let us take the example of Gerasim holding Ivan's feet on his shoulders throughout the night and apply it to the other caregivers in order to examine Tolstoy's focus on selfless care. If it were Natalia Savishna in his place, one could argue that her motherly love would make this act a give-in, for a mother would do anything to ease her child's suffering. In Natasha's case, the situation gets more complicated. She does not *need* to take over Andrei's caregiving: there are doctors and nurses who can attend to him, but she chooses to do so out of her romantic love for him. Similarly, Kitty is not required to care for Nikolai—Levin actually attempts to dissuade her from accompanying him to his brother's deathbed but she insists on joining him. She claims that she joins her husband out of concern for *his* wellbeing, but when she arrives at Nikolai's room,

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<sup>672</sup> Ibid, 14 («Жалко?» [107]).

<sup>673</sup> Ibid. («Божья воля. Все там же будем» [ibid]).

she immediately takes over his caregiving duties without being asked or expected to. Levin, in fact, assumes that she will stay out of the way and is initially embarrassed at her presence among the “rough folk” at the hotel. Gerasim also is not obligated to care for Ivan Ilyich. Although it is unclear whether he was instructed by Praskovya Ivanovna to care for the dying man or if he did it out of genuine concern for his suffering, it *is* clear that Gerasim goes above and beyond in his caregiving.

Ultimately, successful caregiving for Tolstoy rests upon one critical value—selflessness. While the caregivers’ genuine love, sense of duty, and acceptance of death influence the *kind* of care they provide, it is selflessness which truly determines the *quality* of that care. Natalia Savisha, Natasha, and Kitty’s care is selfless to varying degrees, but they are propelled by their own affection for the dying people which stems from motherly, romantic, or familial love. This love makes their caregiving automatic and unreflective. Gerasim’s selflessness is more genuine than that of the other caregivers. In other words, Gerasim exemplifies *true* selflessness, one that is not mitigated by obligation or attachment, but out of a genuine desire to help without receiving anything in return. This kind of selflessness best represents the abstract love that Tolstoy endorsed in his later years. Through his portrayal of caregiving, Tolstoy represents the pinnacle of his ideal morality in Gerasim. Natalia Savishna, Natasha, and Kitty, while embodying varying degrees of selflessness, nevertheless represent Tolstoy’s evolving ideas on moral goodness in their care for the dying characters.

Ulitskaya's Caregivers:  
Mediators and Protectors at the End of Life

Since its publication in 1999, many critics have compared Ulitskaya's *The Funeral Party* to Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*.<sup>674</sup> Both authors explore existential questions regarding the good death in their works and focus particularly on illustrating the dying process as a quest for truth and clarity in the face of the great unknown. *The Funeral Party*, however, is more than just Ulitskaya's reinterpretation of Tolstoy's famous novella. While both works feature a dying protagonist confronting an untimely death in the presence of caregivers, Alik and Ivan Ilyich's roads to death diverge at the crossroads of existential transformation: Ivan Ilyich undergoes a spiritual change in his last moments which allows him to experience a good death, while Alik stays exactly as he is until the very end, already poised towards a good death. And while critics have focused their analyses on Ivan Ilyich's and Alik's end-of-life experiences, none have examined the similarities between the dying men's caregivers.

What stands out as the clearest distinction between Ulitskaya and Tolstoy's end-of-life narratives is Ulitskaya's portrayal of the caregivers' internal worlds. While Tolstoy's Gerasim is opaque and idealized, Ulitskaya's caregivers are complicated, flawed, and ultimately human. Their thoughts and emotions take center stage, revealing how conflicting but ultimately enriching caregiving for a dying loved one can be. In his works, Tolstoy upholds caregivers as moral examples, privileging their selfless acts and natural ability to provide care for the dying person. He judges his ineffective caregivers like Marya, Levin, Varenka, and Praskovya

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<sup>674</sup> In his review of the novella for The New York Review of Books, M. G. Lord examines the parallels between the two narratives, noting that both authors uphold "the inadequacy of medicine" in their treatment of end-of-life issues (M. G. Lord, "80 Percent Nudity"). Bradley Gorski argues that Ulitskaya is "an heir to the carefully observed realism of Tolstoy's masterpiece" in her portrayal of the dying Alik's final days (Bradley Gorski, "Russian's Heirs to Tolstoyevsky," *Institute of Modern Russia* [September 28, 2015], <https://imrussia.org/en/nation/2428-russias-heirs-to-tolstoyevsky>).

Fedorovna for their inability to set aside their own needs and fears to attend to the vulnerable dying person. Ulitskaya, on the other hand, is less concerned about portraying the successful caregiver. In presenting Nina, Valentina, and Irina at Alik's deathbed, she shows that caregiving for a dying loved one naturally inspires feelings of grief, terror, and confusion. Tolstoy's focus on the moral dimension of caregiving is secondary to Ulitskaya, who instead shows that caring for someone in their last days is less about moral good and more about love. Both authors, however, uphold the importance of attuned care and empathic witnessing as necessary qualities for caregiving for the dying.

Alik's caregivers attend to different aspects of his care, with his wife Nina focusing on his spiritual wellbeing and his lover Valentina attending to his physical needs. His former lover Irina (and the mother of his daughter Maika) is physically and emotionally removed from the other caregivers. She barely says a word to Alik in his final days ("Oh, so you're dying, she thought; you died for me a long time ago"), but she nevertheless pays his bills and represents him in ongoing legal battles over his paintings.<sup>675</sup> Although Irina cannot entirely set aside her pain over their unfinished love story as Natasha can, nor her resentment at his absence in her daughter's life, she supports him by diligently by caring for his artistic legacy, thereby ensuring that his memory lives on after his death. This aspect of caregiving—the protection of the dying person's legacy—is one that Tolstoy overlooks in his portrayal of successful caregivers. While Natasha, for example, is distraught at Andrei's death, she lives on without much mention of him. The same goes for Kitty and Gerasim.

Alik's caregivers, just like Tolstoy's, vary in their success at caring for him as he drifts closer to death. Each caregiver in Ulitskaya's work represents a different caregiving modality.

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<sup>675</sup> Ulitskaya, *The Funeral Party*, 7. («Казалось бы, ну и помри. Ты для меня уже давно умер...» [Улицкая, *Веселье похороны*, 11]).

Nina, the ethereal former model who spends her life escaping the material world in favor of a spiritual one, concerns herself with Alik's metaphysical wellbeing. Valentina takes responsibility for Alik's physical aspect of his caregiving; she is the most proactive out of all the other caregivers in caring for his body—washing him, holding him, changing his catheter and his clothes. Finally, Irina assumes another caregiving role, one not explored by Tolstoy: Irina is Alik's financial caregiver, in that she takes responsibility for his financial debts as well as for his artistic legacy. While Alik is sure to live on in the minds and hearts of his lovers and friends, Irina's dedication to his memory ensures that he will be remembered as an artist.

Nina stands out as one of the least helpful caregivers in Alik's surrounding circle. As Alik's body atrophies from a mysterious and undiagnosable disease, Nina's caregiving concerns are rooted in the spiritual realm. Irina, who views Nina with contempt for her dependence on Alik for all matters—be they financial, emotional, or physical—marvels at how her “infinite helplessness clearly aroused in others, especially men, a heightened responsibility.”<sup>676</sup> Indeed, Alik's caregivers find themselves caring not only for Alik but for Nina as well, plying her with alcohol to help her sleep, checking on her emotional wellbeing, and ultimately assenting to her decisions once Alik loses control of his mental faculties. Even after his death, Alik's caregivers are not permitted a moment to grieve, for they are now responsible for protecting the fragile Nina: Fima “led [Nina] out of the bedroom. Valentina was already bringing her a drink.”<sup>677</sup>

The novella's first mention of “Nina with her gold cross and long hair” accentuates her connection to the spiritual and religious realm.<sup>678</sup> ““Alik, [get baptized] for me, please I beg you...get baptized and everything will be alright. And the medicine will work,”” Nina entreats

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<sup>676</sup> Ulitskaya, *The Funeral Party*, 28. («именно своей безграничной беспомощностью она возбуждала в окружающих, особенно в мужчинах, чувство повышенной ответственности» [34]).

<sup>677</sup> *Ibid*, 121. («Он вывел ее из спальни. Валентина уже тащила ей ее питье» [152]).

<sup>678</sup> *Ibid*, («Нинка в длинных волосах и золотом кресте...» [5]).

him, “She took his weak hand in both of hers and gently kissed his freckled fingers. ‘And you won’t be afraid.’”<sup>679</sup> In many ways, Nina projects her own fear of death onto her husband, who has clearly made peace with his terminal situation. Nina, who herself has attempted suicide three times, tells Irina that she wants to protect Alik from the darkness of death. “You can’t imagine what the darkness is like, it’s impossible to describe...” she says, “I don’t want him to go off into nowhere. I want God to accept him.”<sup>680</sup> Nina’s fear of death manifests itself in her focus on procuring healing herbs for Alik. While it is clear to all that Alik’s situation is past the point of any medical intervention—magical or not—Nina is determined to save him. She sees her caregiving responsibilities not as providing him with comfort and support but in bringing him back to life.

In Alik’s final hours, Nina rubs the putrid oils and herb concoctions on his body, talking incessantly of the trips they will take once he is cured, which roots her in the Inauthentic realm of denying death. “They don’t understand a thing, these doctors,” she assures him as he takes his last gasping breaths, “We’ll cure you with these herbs, the herbs will get you on your feet, they’ve raised worse than you! Alik, Alik, say something. Damn the night, you’ll be better tomorrow, you’ll see.”<sup>681</sup> On his deathbed, Alik is more concerned about Nina’s feelings than his own, and to appease her anxiety, he agrees to meet with both a priest and a rabbi to discuss faith, religion, and salvation. While Alik weaves his special brand of humor into the solemn discussion, he makes it clear that he is not interested in receiving a spiritual education. The only answer he hopes to receive from the spiritual advisors is how to placate his wife. “I feel sorry for

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<sup>679</sup> Ibid, 125. («— Крестись, и все будет хорошо, и лечение поможет— Она взяла в обе руки его расслабленную кисть и слабо поцеловала веснушчатую руку. —И страшно не будет» [30]).

<sup>680</sup> Ibid, 32. («Я не хочу, чтобы он уходил в никуда. Я хочу, чтобы его Бог принял. Ты не представляешь себе, какая это тьма... Это нельзя себе представить...» [40]).

<sup>681</sup> Ibid, 109, 110. («Они ни черта не понимают, эти врачи. Мы тебя травой поднимем, еще не таких поднимали... еще не таких лечили...» [139]).

my wife, she's crying," he confesses, "What shall I do, Rabbi?"<sup>682</sup> Thus Nina, despite her good intentions, complicates Alik's dying experience. She performs the opposite of attuned care: she is unable to act as an empathetic witness, for she (like Marya and Levin before her) is too consumed with her own fears of death to sympathize with Alik's desire for peace at the end of life.

Nina's caregiving is most successful when she respects and upholds Alik's desires to die at home. Her wish to see him cured implies that she is willing to go to great lengths to keep him alive, yet she adamantly refuses to send him to the hospital when the ambulance is called. She acts as his advocate in this end-of-life scenario, thereby allowing him to die a good death at home surrounded by loved ones. Thus, while Ulitskaya paints Nina as a faulty caregiver, the fact that she protects his wish to die at home proves that Nina has Alik's best interests at heart. In his final moments, she sets aside her own fears of death to guide his soul into the afterlife, thereby acting as a mediator between life and death. Nina is privileged to witness Alik's "death is finished" moment, where she hears him declare "Nina, I am completely better now."<sup>683</sup> After he dies, all she "could remember was that he had gotten better, and that he was no longer alive."<sup>684</sup>

Alik's lover Valentina stands out as the most traditional caregiver, in that she concerns herself mostly with ensuring his physical comfort and wellbeing. Like Natasha and Kitty in Tolstoy's works, Valentina "worked quickly, with a practiced hand," and the narrator admits that she is one of the "women, born nurses, whose hands know everything in advance and don't need to be taught."<sup>685</sup> In introducing Valentina, the narrator accentuates her corporeal nature (the

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<sup>682</sup> Ibid, 57. («Жалко жену. Плачет. Что мне делать, раббай?» [61]).

<sup>683</sup> Ibid, 119. («Нина, я совершенно выздоровел...» [151]).

<sup>684</sup> Ibid, 135. («Со дня смерти Алика она помнила только две вещи: что он выздоровел и что его больше нет» [166]).

<sup>685</sup> Ibid, 15. («Делала все Валентина быстро, опытной рукой. Бывают такие женщины, у которых руки все наперед знают, их и учить ничему не надо, медсестры от рождения» [20]).



narrator's initial description of her red bra), and her sexual and loving relationship with Alik provides him with the closure he needs as he confronts his death.<sup>686</sup> As Nina denies the certainty of her husband's death and in convincing him to think seriously about his spiritual health, Valentina pays no attention to this aspect of the end of life. Instead, she is mindful of his physical discomfort, instinctively knowing how to turn his emaciated body to prevent bed sores and infections from developing. Those around Alik focus themselves with other matters, be they financial, domestic, or emotional, but Valentina sits at Alik's side "massaging his bloodless legs, and it seemed to her that a little life was coming back into the muscles."<sup>687</sup> She turns "Alik on his side and [rubs] his back" in hopes of animating his limbs out of their paralyzed state.<sup>688</sup>

In a parallel to Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, Valentina provides Alik with the love, and empathy that Ivan Ilyich desperately wished for in his last days. As she cradles Alik's head in her arms, Valentina feels "all of a sudden, tears of pity welled up for his poor head, looking helpless against her chest like a baby who hasn't yet learnt to hold it up. Never in their long affair had she felt such a keen, searing desire to hold him in her arms, to carry him, or better still to hide him in the depths of her body and protect him from this damnable death which had already so manifestly touched his arms and legs."<sup>689</sup> Despite their sexual relationship, Valentina also represents a motherly force and energy for Alik, for she effortlessly steps into the role of the nurturing, tender, and devoted caregiver.

In her final act of caregiving, Valentina acts as a mediator between Alik's last stage of consciousness and his detachment from the world of the living. In their last conscious exchange,

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<sup>686</sup> Ibid, 3. («Валентина в красном бюстгальтере» [5]).

<sup>687</sup> Ibid, 21. («Валентина массировала его пустую ногу, и ей казалось, что в мышцах немного прибавляется жизни» [27]).

<sup>688</sup> Ibid, 23. («Валентина сбросила простыню и, залезши за спину Алика, села, опершись об изголовье» [18]).

<sup>689</sup> Ibid, 14. («Никогда за время их долгого романа не испытывала она такого острого и живого чувства: держать его в руках, на руках, а еще лучше—спрятать его в самую глубину своего тела, укрыть от проклятой смерти, которая уже так явно коснулась его рук и ног» [18]).

Valentina lifts Alik up to help him drink water to satiate his rapidly dehydrating body. “She brought the cup to [Alik’s] lips. He sipped and coughed. She lifted him up and tapped his back...Valentina moved him again tapped his back. She gave him the tube and again he coughed, longer this time, and couldn’t clear his throat. She wet a flannel and put it in his mouth. His lips were slightly cracked. ‘Shall I rub something on your lips?’ she asked. ‘On no account. I hate grease. Give me your finger instead.’”<sup>690</sup> Valentina understands that her physical caregiving is now at an end—there is no more that she can offer him except the sexual intimacy that he requests. Valentina “put her finger between his dry lips and he moved his tongue over it. It was the only touch left to him now; it looked as though his would be the last night they made love. They both thought about it. ‘I shall die an adulterer,’ he said quietly.”<sup>691</sup> She also responds to his needs without him having to articulate them, such as putting on his favorite Scott Joplin record to drown out the noisy city below. In acting as an empathetic witness, Valentina is the most “successful” of all the caregivers at Alik’s deathbed. She anticipates his physical and sexual needs and provides the attuned care he so desperately needs as he drifts closer to death.

When it comes to Irina, she stands as the most removed of all Alik’s caregivers. In fact, she barely interacts with him during his final days, communicating only with Nina and silently paying his bills without anyone noticing. The narrator reveals that “Irina had had no discussions with Alik about his impending death or his past life” yet she “couldn’t explain to herself how she too had spent almost every free minute of her time for the last two years in his noisy, disorderly

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<sup>690</sup> Ibid, 75. («Он снова набрал в рот воды и снова закашлялся. Такое бывало и раньше. Валентина снова его потрясла, постучала по спине. Снова дала трубочку. Он опять начал кашлять и кашлял на этот раз долго, все никак не мог раздышаться. Тогда Валентина смочила водой кусочек салфетки и положила ему в рот. Губы были сухие, в мелкую трещинку. —Я помажу тебе губы? —спросила она. —Ни в коем случае. Я ненавижу жир на губах. Дай палец» [94]).

<sup>691</sup> Ibid. («Она положила палец ему между сухих губ — он тронул палец языком, провел по нему. Это было единственное прикосновение, которое у него еще оставалось. Похоже, это была последняя ночь их любви. Оба они об этом подумали. Он сказал очень тихо: —Умру прелюбодеем...» [95]).

lair.”<sup>692</sup> Her love for him is quiet and restrained, and she lets Alik’s other lovers and admirers take center stage in caring for him. After his death, Irina continues to protect Alik’s artistic legacy. “It seems Alik was a good artist after all,” she tells her daughter, and dedicates herself to championing his rights in his ongoing legal proceedings with an art gallery hoping to acquire his works.<sup>693</sup>

#### Concluding Remarks:

In their portrayal of caregivers for the dying, Tolstoy and Ulitskaya both uphold the importance of attuned care and empathic witnessing. Natasha, Kitty, and Gerasim effortlessly understand Andrei, Nikolai, and Ivan Ilyich’s needs, be they physical, emotional, or spiritual, and they dedicate themselves to meeting those needs at the expense of their own. Tolstoy shows that this sacrifice comes from genuine love for the dying men, not from any social obligation. While Natasha’s care is motivated by her romantic love for Andrei and Kitty’s is propelled by familial love and duty to ease Nikolai’s suffering, Gerasim’s love for Ivan Ilyich is the Christian love for humanity. Tolstoy’s unsuccessful caregivers, on the other hand—Marya, Levin, and Praskovya Fedorovna—struggle to empathically witness the dying person’s suffering and are thereby unable to provide the attuned care that they so desperately need. Marya and Levin’s fear of death and grief immobilize them at Andrei and Nikolai’s side, something which the dying men notice. Praskovya Fedorovna is the most selfish of the unsuccessful caregivers, focusing only on her own needs and blaming Ivan Ilyich for the imposition he causes her.

Tolstoy’s goal in portraying the successful caregiver is to accentuate the moral dimension of caring for the dying. He upholds those who are full of life and spirit such as Natasha, Kitty,

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<sup>692</sup> Ibid, 30. («Но теперь Ирина вряд ли могла объяснить себе самой, что заставляет ее проводить в шумном беспорядочном Аликовом логове каждую свободную минуту вот уже второй год» [38]).

<sup>693</sup> Ibid, 153. («Похоже, он все-таки был хороший художник» [190]).

and Gerasim as moral examples for the living precisely because they are so willing to set aside their own vitality and needs to attend to the dying person, which for him represents the ultimate act of selflessness. The unsuccessful caregivers whom he judges for their selfishness are morally reprehensible to varying degrees because the privilege their own needs over those of the dying person. In her novella, Ulitskaya presents Valentina as the most Tolstoyan of her caregivers. She intuitively understands Alik's needs without him ever having to articulate them and she pities him like a sick child the way Ivan Ilyich wishes to be. Like Natasha and Kitty, Valentina's caregiving comes naturally to her, and she selflessly sets aside her needs to care for her dying lover, propelled by love and duty to ease his suffering.

Yet Ulitskaya inverts Tolstoy's conception of the ideal caregiver as a spiritual teacher in her portrayal of Nina, who is so focused on Alik's salvation that she disregards his actual needs, which are physical support and emotional peace. Alik's absence of fear as he drifts closer to death does not stem, as Tolstoy would think, from ardent faith in God's will. While Gerasim's articulation of faith catalyzes Ivan Ilyich's spiritual transformation and allows him to experience a good death, Nina's faith complicates Alik's dying experience. Thus, Ulitskaya challenges Tolstoy's understanding of the ideal caregiver, showing that what is important at the end of life is honoring the dying person's wishes, even if they contradict one's own. In the very end, however, Nina does prove herself to be a good caregiver to Alik because she protects his desire to die at home. She stands up for him when he is no longer able to articulate his wants and needs and keeps him company in his final moments.

Ulitskaya asserts that caregiving depends on more than just selflessness in setting aside one's needs during the dying person's final days. In fact, she shows that in caring for a dying loved one, it is natural to experience conflicting thoughts and emotions, to feel overwhelmed,

and to be confused about the “right” course of action in her portrayal of Irina. Irina is the most conflicted of all Alik’s caregivers—she still holds resentment and anger at him for their romantic past, yet she nevertheless carries on his legacy and supports him financially when he is no longer able to provide for himself. Her expression of love for him is her commitment to his memory, something that Tolstoy excludes from his discussion of successful caregivers. Irina may not be wetting Alik’s lips or cleaning his catheter like Valentina, nor is she protecting his wishes like Nina. She does, however, make sure he lives on and that the work that he poured his heart and soul into continue to inspire others for years to come.

Ultimately, Ulitskaya shows that successful caregiving rests upon more than just selflessness and a natural talent for caring for dying patients. She agrees with Tolstoy that caregiving is about empathically witnessing the loved one’s dying experience and tailoring one’s care to meet their needs. While Tolstoy is stricter about who qualifies as a successful caregiver, Ulitskaya is more accepting. Over the years, Tolstoy drifts further and further away from the idea of love as an important aspect of caregiving to the point where his version of ideal love is one of detached love for humanity. Ulitskaya, on the other hand, shows that love has everything to do with successful caregiving. Alik’s speech at his funeral in which he thanks his caregivers shows exactly that: the women who attend to his illness do so out of love for him, no matter how complicated that love is. In her portrayal of caregivers, Ulitskaya argues that one need not be a perfectly attentive and responsive caregiver to help the dying person achieve a good death.

## Conclusion

Over the last two hundred years, Russian writers have delved deep into life's most pressing mystery: the nature of death and how best to confront the terrifying fact of our mortality. They show that in our healthy lives, we have the privilege to ignore the certainty of our deaths, to push it out of our minds in favor of more uplifting thoughts. Upon receiving a terminal diagnosis, however, we face the limits of our freedom. No longer can we ignore the pressing existential questions that we have shelved throughout the years of healthy life. We are forced to reckon with our choices and to ask ourselves, who are we really? What have we contributed to the world? Were our lives meaningful? By focusing on the experience of being terminally ill, Russian writers explore the overwhelming despair that arises when we confront "the end." This despair paralyzes us emotionally, but ultimately provides us with the opportunity to rediscover purpose and meaning and to find courage in the face of annihilation.

Nineteenth-century authors Turgenev, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky plumb the existential depths in their search for a concept of the "good death." Turgenev's upper-class protagonists consider their peasant neighbors with admiration and perplexity, marveling at their ability to accept mortality without fear and trepidation. He shows that the peasants' communion with nature and their sense of themselves belonging to a greater *mir* allows them to "die decently," in considering death as a solemn rite, as natural as the changing of the seasons. Tolstoy, who is perhaps the greatest explorer of death in Russian literature, delves even further into the terrifying experience of confronting death through his characters Prince Andrei, Levin, and Ivan Ilyich, in portraying how one can "die beautifully." He shows that Anxiety in Authentic moments allows for the possibility of spiritual renewal and the discovery of important existential truths. Tolstoy's investigation into the bleak hopelessness of being near death illuminates that one still holds

incredible power to change oneself (even in the very last moments) if one is willing to take a leap of faith into the unknown. Dostoevsky portrays “dying virtuously” in Markel’s death, upholding the notion that death is an opportunity for connection with others as opposed to an isolating individual experience. To experience such a virtuous death, Dostoevsky argues that we must rediscover faith in God and approach death with a sense of gratitude for life in order to die peacefully. In their presentation of terminal illness, Turgenev, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky show that certainty of death is an opportunity to rediscover meaning. They show that even in the face of death, which presents us with the limits of our freedom, we still have the power to choose what kind of people we want to be in courageously accepting our fate.

In the twentieth-century, Solzhenitsyn and Ulitskaya uphold the importance of patients’ agency when battling a terminal diagnosis. A good death is more than just accepting death, as it was for the nineteenth-century writers: in the Soviet and American context, it is deciding how and where one wants to die and having those wishes respected. Solzhenitsyn’s Kostoglotov fruitlessly fights for his right to die on his own terms, arguing that being forced to undergo unwanted treatment is a worse fate than death. Ulitskaya’s Alik is one of the only characters in Russian literature whose end-of-life wishes are respected. His caregivers fight for his right to die at home, and he can greet his death with peace, serenity, and joy. Self-determination and autonomy become important aspects of the end-of-life experience, particularly in the Soviet and American context where death is considered a failure of medicine, and Solzhenitsyn and Ulitskaya show the importance of a positive doctor-patient relationship and supportive caregivers in allowing the dying person to die decently, beautifully, and virtuously.

End of life is more than just the patient’s individual experience of dying. In presenting the doctor and caregivers’ perspectives on terminal illness, I have shown that these figures are

intimately connected to the end-of-life experience, and that an examination into the act of dying is incomplete without them. The doctor who treats the disease is propelled by the altruistic goal of curing their patient but is unprepared to handle the intricacies of their illness, especially when they consider a terminal diagnosis to be representative of their “failure” and the limits of modern medicine. When it comes to confronting terminal illness and death, Chekhov and Solzhenitsyn show that doctors struggle with authentically encountering their own mortality, perhaps more so than their patients do. In representing the fractured doctor-patient relationship, both authors question what qualities define a “good doctor” at the end of life, ultimately asserting that a successful doctor to the dying is one who can empathically witness and attend to their patient’s illness instead of only to their disease.

When it comes to providing dying people with the care they desperately need as they confront their deaths, Russian writers uphold the caregiver as the most important figure in one’s end of life experience. Tolstoy focuses on the moral dimensions of caregiving, showing that setting aside one’s needs in attending to the dying person is the ultimate act of selflessness. By empathizing and being attuned to the dying patient’s needs, the caregiver can tailor their care to create a safe, supportive environment for the person to experience a good death. Ulitskaya inherits Tolstoy’s discussion of caregiving but presents it as a more complicated experience than Tolstoy did in his novels. For Ulitskaya, caregiving is more about expressing love and support than it is about moral goodness, and she illustrates the tensions inherent in caring for a dying loved one. Ultimately, end of life is a communal experience, one that is shared and experienced by the dying person, their doctor, and their caregiver.

In “The Final Chapter,” I have investigated the experience of terminal illness from the perspectives of the patient, doctor, and caregiver as they are presented in Russian Realist writing.



In analyzing these authors' understandings of the good death, I have shown that existential meaning, respect for dignity and autonomy, empathic witnessing, and attuned care are vital aspects of the good death. The experience of terminal illness is lonely, isolating, and terrifying for the dying person, but the support of their doctors and caregivers can equip them with the strength and conviction they need to confront their mortality, accept their fates, and die peacefully.

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