

STEPHEN KING'S DEBT TO TOLSTOY

All the time I was reading Stephen King's novella, *Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption*, I had the feeling I had read it before. I hadn't and I hadn't seen the film either, but there was something about it that seemed familiar. A few months later I bought a book of short stories by Tolstoy in a second-hand bookshop and realised why. The first story in the book, *God sees the truth but waits*, was one that I had read before but forgotten and it was where Stephen King got his idea from.

A merchant on his way to a fair stays the night at an inn. He shares a meal with another guest, they retire to their rooms, the merchant gets up early and continues his journey. Later in the day he is overtaken by soldiers and arrested on suspicion of the murder of the man he met at the inn who has been found with his throat cut. They search his luggage and find a blood-stained knife. He is tried, found guilty, flogged and sent to prison in Siberia. To cut a short story even shorter, the real murderer turns up in the same prison twenty-six years later. The merchant has the opportunity, when he sees the prisoner digging an escape tunnel, to take his revenge by telling the guards, but he does not and the two men are reconciled. The murderer confesses his guilt, but the merchant dies before he can be released.

If you know Stephen King's book, you will recognise the bare bones of the story. You will notice too that Stephen King's version has a different ending. Andy Dufresne, who takes the place of Tolstoy's merchant, is the one who digs the tunnel and escapes. It's Andy, not God, who knows the truth but waits and in the end gains his freedom. Stephen King borrowed the plot, but not the moral.

Tolstoy's short story, only nine pages long, is really a fable. He deliberately leaves out all the circumstantial and psychological detail that Stephen King puts back in and that we expect from any novelist, not least Tolstoy himself. The other stories in the collection, drawn from various volumes published in the last thirty years of Tolstoy's life, are mostly fables too, some based on folk tales, others of his own invention. After writing *Anna Karenina* he dismissed his own novels and novels in general as mere entertainment. The only things he had written worth keeping, he said, were *God sees the truth but waits* and the story that comes after it in my collection, *A prisoner in the Caucasus*. The purpose of art was to educate, not merely to entertain.

When Thomas Hardy stopped writing novels, it was because of the hostile reception to *Jude the Obscure* which, he said, had 'cured him of any further interest in novel-writing'. In Tolstoy's case, the hostility was entirely his own. He set aside his self-imposed ban on the novel to write one late masterpiece, *Resurrection*, in 1899, when he was seventy. It tells the story of Prince Nekhlyudov, a young aristocrat who is called to serve on the jury at the trial of a woman accused of murder and recognises her as the servant girl he seduced in his youth and then abandoned. The rest of the book recounts his increasingly desperate and ultimately futile attempts to make amends. Tolstoy's last novel, like Hardy's, had a mixed reception. The censor made heavy cuts and his wife called it 'repulsive'.

He spent the next ten years of his life writing pamphlets and going slowly mad, like a character in one of his own novels, or rather one of Dostoyevsky's, dressing as a peasant, growing his beard, preaching and being generally obnoxious to his wife and anyone else who disagreed with him. The years between *Anna Karenina* and *Resurrection* had been spent writing short stories with a moral. Perhaps in the end even he stopped believing in them.

It was George Orwell, in his essay *Lear, Tolstoy and the Fool*, who attributed the vituperative attack on Shakespeare that Tolstoy made in an essay he wrote at this time, in which *King Lear* was the object of his most scathing criticism, to the ageing writer's subconscious identification with the deranged old king. 'The ending of his life, the sudden unplanned flight across country, accompanied only by a faithful daughter, the death in a cottage in a strange village, seems to have in it a sort of phantom reminiscence of *Lear*.'

For Tolstoy as for Lear, it was the absence of a moral, life's refusal to explain itself, a loss of faith in the humanity he wanted to believe in, that drove him mad. In the last chapter of *Resurrection*, Prince Nekhlyudov, defeated in his quest for redemption, paces up and down his room, thinking over what he has been through. 'All the horrible evil he had seen over the last months, and today particularly, at that awful prison, ruled triumphant, and he could discern no possibility of conquering it or even of knowing how to conquer it... Was he, Nekhlyudov, mad, or was it the people who considered themselves wise and did all these things, who were mad?'

In the absence of an answer, Tolstoy plucks one out of the air and puts it in Nekhlyudov's hand in the form of a copy of the New Testament which falls open conveniently at Matthew, chapter xviii. 'Nekhlyudov sat staring at the light of the lamp that had burned low, and his heart stopped beating. Recalling all the monstrous confusion of the life we lead, he pictured to himself what this life might be like if people were taught to obey these commandments, and his soul was swept by an ecstasy such as he had not felt for many a day.'

The only way Tolstoy can bring his five hundred page novel to a conclusion is by giving it an ending such as he might have written for one of his nine page fables. 'That night an entirely new life began for Nekhlyudov...' It is the sort of ending we expect in a fairy tale, not a novel.

Stephen King made a long story out of a short one, but I can't help thinking that what he left out was more important than what he put in. I don't think Tolstoy would have liked *Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank redemption* any more than I did.

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