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ПРИТЧА Л.Н. ТОЛСТОГО «ЧЕМ ЛЮДИ ЖИВЫ» КАК ИСТОЧНИК ДЛЯ РОМАНА А.И. СОЛЖЕНИЦЫНА «РАКОВЫЙ КОРПУС»

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Аннотация

В литературоведении существует устоявшаяся концепция типологической связи произведений Льва Толстого и Александра Солженицына. Но относительно немногие исследования посвящены обнаружению этих сходств в конкретных произведениях. Статья посвящена сопоставительному анализу притчи Л.Н. Толстого «Чем люди живы», взятого из *народных рассказов* 1880-х годов и знаменитого романа А.И. Солженицына «Ракровый корпус».

Ключевые слова: притча, философская проблематика, сопоставительный анализ, повествовательные особенности.

...the whole meaning of existence—his own and of everyone in the world—came to his mind. The image he saw did not seem to be embodied in the work or activity, which occupied them, which they believed was central in their lives, and by which they were known to others. The meaning of existence was to preserve unspoiled, undisturbed, and undistorted the image of eternity with which each person is born...

Cancer Ward, Chapter 30

At the beginning of *August 1914*, the first “knot” of what would become his 5,000 page epic novel of Russia’s experience in the opening days of World War I, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn introduces his readers to the young student Isaakii, who four years earlier had made a pilgrimage to the Tolstoy estate at Iasnaia Poliana to pay homage to the venerated seer and unparalleled artist and teacher of ethics. As he stands among the linden and birch trees of the estate, Isaakii unexpectedly recognizes the eighty-two year old, white haired living icon characteristically dressed in the traditional peasant shirt he often wore in imitation of the simple habits and ways of his peasant laborers. Having encountered his idol, it soon becomes clear that Isaakii has made this pilgrimage not to address the famous author of *Anna Karenina* or *War and Peace*, but to challenge the writer of the popular proverb-parable, “What Men Live By” (1881)¹. Written in the

¹ Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr, translated by H.T. Willets. *August 1914*. Farrar, Strauss and Giroux: New York 1989. While Vladimir Dal’s *Posloviety russkogo naroda* does not list this particular proverb in his collection, printed in 1861, the expression has become proverbial since the publication of Tolstoy’s famous short story. In his essay *What I Believe / V chom moya vera*, 1882), Tolstoy culled what might be described as five essential moral imperatives from Jesus’ “Sermon on the Mount” (Matthew, v-vii): (1) do not be angry; (2) do not lust; (3) do not swear; (4) do not resist the evil doer with force; (5) love all people. Of significance both for Tolstoy’s short story as well as a key chapter title in Solzhenitsyn’s later novel, *Cancer Ward*, is the fact that, unlike the first 4 commands, this last injunction (to love all people) is the only one of the five, which is listed as a positive command and stands as a proverbial statement for the majority of Tolstoy’s best known stories for the people: *What Men Live By*, *Two Old Men*, *The Three Hermits*, and *Where Love is, There is God Also*. Like many of his *Stories for the People*, *What Men Live By* includes a number of proverbs, popular sayings and other forms of popular wisdom. The interrogative title of this story (posed as a question in the Russian original) takes the form of a parable, which by the closing lines of the account is answered by the Angel Michael.



form of a parable on the theme of love, Tolstoy's famous story adapts an account long known in various versions from the Talmud, the Apocrypha, the Koran, and the Arabian Nights, and reflects Tolstoy's keen interests in the 1880s, following the publication of *Anna Karenina*, in a type of didactic literature penned by writers from the Russian educated classes for a more popular and less educated readership. The plot revolves around a story in which the angel Michael has been sent by God to live on earth as a human and to learn the customs and manners of men. By story's end Michael comes to realize that man lives by acts of kindness, self-sacrifice, and love, and that this love for one's fellow man is a manifestation of the living God. Having recently abandoned his belief in and writing of lengthy, "upper-class" novels like *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy endeavored to create a more idealistic form of writing, intended to enlighten the Russian masses "rather than to profit by entertaining them"². It was to this new, post-epic writer that Isaakii addresses his twentieth-century doubts about the ability of a modern society to live by love alone. Challenging his venerable teacher, Isaakii timorously inquires: "Lev Nikolaevich, are you sure you are not overestimating the power of love in the human being? Or at least whatever part of it that remains in contemporary man. What if love is not so strong or necessary after all that it can triumph—then your teaching lacks... is extremely premature? If so, ought we not to envisage some intermediate stage, ask less of people to start with and then try to awaken them to universal benevolence?" To Isaakii's heartfelt query the aged Tolstoy of Solzhenitsyn's novel replies, "Love is the only way. No one has invented a more foolproof method (16–17)".

This early chapter of *August 1914* in many ways trenchantly recalls Solzhenitsyn's second novel, *Cancer Ward*, written less in the form of what may be described as a Tolstoyan proverb-parable and more in the style of a modern "polyphonic" novel in which a central theme echoes throughout the novel in the individual voices and tragic experiences of a large cast of *dramatis personae*. Despite the obvious separation in time, it can be argued that what has famously become Tolstoy's proverb-question in "What Men Live By" organically functions to create the underlying structure of Solzhenitsyn's later novel as well as to thematically enhance and reiterate the answer to the central question earlier raised in Tolstoy's proverb title.

It should come as no surprise that the twentieth-century Nobel-Prize winning author Solzhenitsyn bears such a close relationship both to Tolstoy the "thinker and seer" as well as to the master author of countless short stories, famous plays, and epic novels. Literary scholars have long noted the affinity between the nineteenth-century Tolstoy and his twentieth-century counterpart, Solzhenitsyn³. Not that the two are linked merely by long, scraggly beards or reputations as didactic seers of moral truths: it can be argued that, while the two authors' biographies and social origins could not have been more dissimilar, in a variety of ways much of Tolstoy's fiction seems to have provided models for some of Solzhenitsyn's own stories. Kathryn Feuer, for example comments on how descriptions in Tolstoy's short story "The Woodfelling" suggest the account of a single

² For an informative discussion of this phase of Tolstoy's literary career, see Jahn, Gary R. "Tolstoy As a Writer of Popular Literature". In: Orwin, Donna Tussing, ed.: *The Cambridge Companion to Tolstoy*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2002, pp. 113–126.

³ See, for example, Michael Scammell's discussion in his *Solzhenitsyn: A Biography*. W.W. Norton & Company: New York 1984, p. 582.

day in the life of Ivan Denisovich, the eponymous hero of Solzhenitsyn's first novel. She makes similar cases for the appearance of Tolstoyan structural and narrative features as well as elements of his language and style in a number of Solzhenitsyn's novels and short stories⁴. As we shall see, the closest tie between the two authors and their literary works resides in their mutual affection for the philosophical, ethical, and didactic wisdom of the Russian proverb⁵. In this regard Solzhenitsyn shared a similar distaste with Tolstoy for the state of Russian literary language contemporary to each of the two writers. As Gary Jahn has insightfully observed, by the 1880s Tolstoy had come to decry much of the popular literature *written for the people* for its "untalented and stupid manner" and further noted that "that standard Russian literary language was distinctly inferior to that of the common people themselves"⁶. Nearly a century later in a 1965 article which appeared in the Union of Soviet Writers' weekly *Literary Gazette*, "Cabbage Soup is Enriched With Sour Cream, Not With Tar / Ne obychai dyogtem shchi belit', na to smetana"⁷, Solzhenitsyn lodges the same charge against the state of contemporary Soviet prose suggesting, like Tolstoy, a simpler form of Russian language to replace the awkward, impoverished language of socialist realism. Both authors identified in the form of the people's Russian proverb a serviceable vehicle for enriching their literary works. Tolstoy, for example, in his popular period of *stories for the people*, based many of his roughly two dozen story plots on the ethical teachings of Christ, taken primarily from "The Sermon on the Mount" as appeared in Matthew, v-vii and Luke, vi. At the center of Tolstoy's best-known *stories for the people* is the thematic message to love all people. One of the most famous of these stories is the proverb-parable, *What Men Live By*.

As the title of Solzhenitsyn's novel suggests, the plot of *Cancer Ward* relates the lives and life stories of a socially diverse group of cancer patients as they undergo therapy for their respective illnesses. Helen Muchnic tellingly observes that the novel comprises both a drama of mortality, a race with time not so much for life but, rather, for an understanding of life itself.⁸ Over the course of a period of a brief two months, readers learn the philosophical and political theories of a broad cross-section of Soviet society, ranging from Uzbek and Tadzhik peasants to Communist Party officials, cancer-ridden high-school students, and the story's protagonist, Oleg Kostoglotov (the Russian translation of "bonechewer"), a seasoned veteran of the Great Patriotic War as well as eight years of Stalin's *gulag* camp system. In addition to this rich cross-section of Soviet society, doctors, nurses, and orderlies in the hospital system figure prominently in the action of the story. Similar to Isaaki's pressing question to the figure of Tolstoy in *August 1914*, the

⁴ See her article "Solzhenitsyn and the Legacy of Tolstoy". In: *Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. Critical Essays and Documentary Materials*. In: Dunlop, John R./ Hough, Richard/ Klimoff, Alexis (eds.): Collier Books: New York: 1973, pp. 129–146.

⁵ See, my article "The Tolstoy 'Connection': Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *In the First Circle* Through the Prism of Peasant Proverbs in *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*." In: *Proverbium: Yearbook of International Proverb Scholarship* 30, 2013, pp. 151–170.

⁶ Jahn (2002, p. 116).

⁷ *Literaturnaya gazeta*, 4, November, 1965. Reprinted in *Solzhenitsyn: Sobranie sochinenii*, V, Posev-Verlag: Frankfurt/Main 1970, pp. 261–267. Solzhenitsyn wrote this article in response to a piece that the eminent Soviet scholar and academician V. V. Vinogradov had written in the same journal earlier that year, commenting that Soviet literature lacked sharp and graphic representation, colors and aphoristic language. In commenting on the literary language of Tolstoy in the 1850s and 1860s, Vinogradov further noted that Tolstoy had introduced new styles incorporating the colloquial, popular, and peasant language.

⁸ "Cancer Ward: Of Fate and Guilt." In: *Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: Critical Essays and Documentary Materials*, p. 279.



cancer patients of Wing 13 are deeply invested in the question of “what men live by” and especially for them the corollary of “how men die”. While a superficial reading of the novel might suggest a metaphorical parallel universe linking the cancer ward to Stalin’s failed political, social, and economic system, a more careful analysis reveals a multi-layered inquiry into the meaning of man’s existence and by what human and personal values a person is able to survive his or her life.

In Tolstoy’s parable *What Men Live By*, God has taken away the powers of a disobedient angel and sent him to earth with the goal to learn “the three truths: what dwells in man, what is not given to man, and what men live by”⁹. Tolstoy’s angel, Michael learns the answer to the first truth when a master cobbler and his wife make sacrifices to feed and house him and even give him a job, proving that love is present among men even in the midst of personal hardship. Working as a shoemaker a few years later, Michael solves the riddle of the second question when a local nobleman orders a pair of boots made of the finest leather, only to die a few hours later: “It is not given to man to know his own needs”¹⁰. To the riddle of the third question, Michael learns that “Though it seems to men that they live by care for themselves, in truth it is love alone by which they live”¹¹.

Nearly a half century later, Solzhenitsyn arguably has modernized Tolstoy’s proverb parable in the form of his novel, *Cancer Ward*, by using his predecessor’s short story as the point of departure for a much more nuanced and complicated treatment of the proverb question Tolstoy initially posed in his nineteenth-century story, which Leonid Rzhevsky describes as “the most important structural axis of the novel”¹². Traditionally taking the form of a short allegorical, often biblical story (for example, the *Good Samaritan* or the *Prodigal Son*) designed to demonstrate some truth, religious principle, or moral lesson, the parable form fully suited Tolstoy’s creative interests and didactic needs during the period of his writing in the 1880s.¹³ Solzhenitsyn, however, chooses to update his master’s preference for the biblically moralistic parable by combining it with the equally didactic tale of life in a Soviet-era cancer clinic. After all, wonderful as it is, Tolstoy’s parable of Simon the cobbler and Michael the Angel scarcely applies to a far more modern and Soviet society in the twentieth century.

For purposes of limited space, I would like to consider how this parable applies to only a few of the main *dramatis personae* in Solzhenitsyn’s *Cancer Ward*. They, like a whole host of other characters in the novel, distinguish his more modern and innovative method of story telling through an intricate polyphony of individual responses to Tolstoy’s original proverb question: by what values or personal codes do men live, a question which each of the ward’s patients ultimately must answer over the course of the novel. Written in the form of a series of portraits of various individuals and their disparate views on the meaning of life, Solzhenitsyn’s novel clearly uses as its point of departure the troubling

⁹ Tolstoy, L.N., translated by Louise and Aylmer Maude. *Walk in the Light and Twenty-Three Tales*. The Plough Publishing House: Farmington, PA 1998, p. 143.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 144.

¹² *Solzhenitsyn: Creator and Heroic Deed*. University of Alabama Press: Alabama 1978. p. 73.

¹³ For more on this period of Tolstoy’s writing, see: Jahn, 2002, pp. 113-126; Christian, R. F. *Tolstoy: A Critical Introduction* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1969, pp. 263-270.

moral question at the heart of Tolstoy's didactic parable. In Part One of the novel, for example, Solzhenitsyn introduces us to Efrem Podduev, an unsavory opportunist and former Red Army soldier, who we later learn had personally and proudly executed seven members of the Constituent Assembly during the Civil War period in Russia. Further incriminating Podduev's moral sense of values we learn that this liar, cheat, and manipulator has long been haunted by memory of an event shortly following the war, when he had needlessly forced a prisoner work crew to continue digging on a bitterly cold winter day when they were faint and weak from starvation. For years he has been haunted by one of the young prisoners forcing his nearly frozen lips open to tell Efrem: "All right, chief. It'll be your turn to die one day" (207). In subsequent years Efrem singularly indulges in a life of debauchery and wanton womanizing with little to no regard for those whom he callously injured or whose lives he had carelessly ruined. Having wandered aimlessly across Russia over the course of some four decades, Podduev now has been sentenced to an ominous death decree of inoperable tongue cancer. Similar to Tolstoy's story "The Death of Ivan Ilyich", Solzhenitsyn arguably confronts the opportunist Efrem, in Chapter Eight of the novel, tellingly titled "What Men Live By", with impending death as a spiritual vehicle of sorts for purposes of the latter's moral quest. Under the evolving impact of certain death and the spiritual lessons he has just learned from Tolstoy's didactic parables, Podduev gradually achieves a spiritual regeneration of sorts. He painfully realizes that "the whole of his life had prepared [him] for living, not for dying" (97). Robbed of his former "taste for the free life" of an aimless and unscrupulous womanizer, he is suddenly confronted with the realization that not only has his life failed to prepare him for death, but that alone and abandoned he must seek some form of consolation and promise for the future. Ironically, he turns to a book that fellow patient, Oleg Kostoglotov, had "palmed off" on him one evening at the hospital ward. Prior to the onset of his cancer, Podduev never would have turned to stories with titles like "Work, Illness, and Death," "The Chief Law", "Three Old Men," or "Go into the Light While Light There Is," but now faced with death he quietly reads through the entire volume of stories and finds that they somehow "spoke to him". He is particularly struck by one titled *What Men Live By* – oddly enough the very question that he had been pondering himself for the past several weeks. While not as short as the other stories in the volume, this one "...read easily from the start, speaking softly and simply to [his] heart" (102).

Taken off guard by the book's title-riddle, Efrem naively consults his fellow patients for their thoughts on its meaning. Military veterans Sibgatov and Ahmadjan predictably respond with the opinion that uniforms, rations, and military supplies constitute what all men live by. The youngster Dyomka, who had originally brought Tolstoy's collection of stories to the hospital ward without taking the necessary time to read them, unconvincingly suggests that air, then water, then food would meet the needs for all men to survive in life. Predictably, the life-long laborer Proshka opines that one's professional skill would suffice in meeting one's life needs. Having thought a bit more, Sibgatov, "one of Beria's boys", adds that one's homeland – "living in the place you were born" – best addresses Tolstoy's parable of *What Men Live By*. The driven and



ambitious geologist Vadim Zadyrko declares that one's "creative work" for the sake of technological progress best defines the kind of values one needs in order to live. True to his knee-jerk Marxist-Leninist beliefs, the NKVD bureaucrat Pavel Rusanov rudimentarily responds: "There's no difficulty about that. Remember: people live by their ideological principles and by the interests of their society" (107). Confused and dismayed by how close the bald-headed, sycophantic Rusanov had come to capturing the message of the parable, Efrem informs his ward-mates that the answer to the riddle, according to Tolstoy, indeed resides in "not by worrying about [one's] own problems but by love of others" (107). Over the course of several chapters Podduyev apparently finds comfort and hope in his newly found understanding of life.

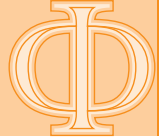
Taking Podduyev's moral journey an important step beyond the simplistic and spiritual Tolstoyanism of which Rusanov condescendingly accuses Efrem, Solzhenitsyn subsequently subjects the former happy-go-lucky opportunist to a troubling and disturbing challenge to his newly found sense of hope and salvation. To Kostoglotov's medical textbook (*Pathological Anatomy*) claim that there may be a link between the development of tumors and the central nervous system leading to possible cases of self-induced healing and resolution of the tumor, Podduyev responds, "I suppose for that you need to have ... a clear conscience" (136). The fundamental significance of the role of conscience in one's life—a major, underlying theme in all of the Solzhenitsyn's literary works—accounts for Efrem's sense of despondency as he sighs hoarsely: "I've mucked so many women about, left them with children hanging round their necks. My [tumor] will never resolve" (138). If the medical article is correct that spontaneous healing is possible only for people with a pure conscience, Podduyev understands only too well that no amount of Tolstoyan philosophy of moral perfection can save his desperate and cancer-ridden life. Solzhenitsyn employs a well-known Russian proverb a few chapters later to suggest a gradual deterioration in Efrem's newly found optimism as he lies immobile in his hospital bed, no longer reading from Tolstoy's hopeful parable, now merely tapping one finger against the book. To the orderly's entreaty to take some breakfast, Podduyev despondently replies, "*It's no good licking the dishes if you haven't eaten enough at the table/Ne naelsya – ne nalizhesh'sya*" (205). Indeed, a few chapters later the crude and unfeeling orderly, Nelya, callously announces that Efrem had "...shut up shop, he bought his lunch, he did... It happened yesterday at the railway station, just by the ticket office. They've just brought him in for a post-mortem" (259). Having learned of Efrem's death, everyone in the ward became plunged in thought as though examining his own chances for survival.

The engaging yet grim story of the former agriculture professor, Alexei Shulubin, forms a second tier of plot development in *Cancer Ward's* take on Tolstoy's proverb parable *What Men Live By*. Not appearing until the second half of the novel, the tall and stooped Shulubin suffers from cancer of the rectum, whose surgical treatment most certainly will necessitate a life-long colostomy bag. He makes clear that even if he should survive this surgery, the humiliating stench of the bag will render him foul and offensive to all who come into contact with him. In a key discussion with Kostoglotov, Shulubin insinuates that this physical stench may be a just by-product of the moral

foulness that has defined his entire adult and professional life. A graduate of the leading agricultural institute in Russia, the Timiriazev Academy, Shulubin became a lecturer at the University of Moscow, where on orders from his superiors he saved himself by confessing and renouncing his “mistakes” as well as of others who had been accused of propounding subversive doctrines: “They suggested we reshape anatomy, microbiology, and neuropathology to fit in with the doctrines of an ignorant agronomist and an expert in horticulture. Bravo! I agreed! I voted in favor” (438). Consequently, he was demoted from the rank of professor to that of assistant professor and made to change his field from agriculture to biology. Before long the lugubrious man of science was further demoted to librarian, where he was repeatedly called upon to burn ideologically unorthodox books. Having remained quiet during these intellectual purges for the sake of his wife and children, Shulubin now realizes the error of his ways and feels the justice of the physical suffering that has brought him to the cancer ward. Placing blame solely on himself he quotes Pushkin’s famous lines: “In our vile times/... Man was, whatever his element,/Either tyrant or traitor or prisoner!” (439). Since he had never been a prisoner or a tyrant, Shulubin concludes that he is a traitor--both to himself as well as to his country. Oleg’s proverbial response to his friend’s self-incrimination does little to placate the latter: “*A storm breaks trees, it only bends grass/Lomaet v buriu derev’ia, a trava gnyotsia*” (439,482)¹⁴. Similar to Efrem Podduyev’s existential epiphany that transpired earlier in the novel (although via more of an intellectual rather than a spiritual path), Similarly to the angel Michael in Tolstoy’s earlier tale, Shulubin later describes to Kostoglotov the role of *love* in ordering one’s life. Acknowledging his role in the Terror Years of the 1930’s and the subsequent shame he experienced for his cowardice, Shulubin asserts that the insanity of Stalin’s regime cannot be blamed on socialism alone. Positing, instead, an “ethical socialism” as a necessary factor in the design of a socialistic economic society, Shulubin brings to mind the moral of Tolstoy’s parable: “One should direct them [the people] toward mutual affection. A beast gnawing at its prey can be happy too, but only human beings can feel affection for each other, and this is the highest achievement they can aspire to” (447).

Oleg Kostoglotov, arguably the central protagonist of Solzhenitsyn’s novel, similarly sounds a key chord in the author’s treatment of Tolstoy’s proverb-question – *What Men Live By*. Like the other patients in this cancer clinic, Oleg has been stricken by a life-threatening form of cancer, but in his case he is confronted by an even more existential dilemma: is his strain and the location of his cancer worth treating if, ultimately, its treatment means that he will most likely become impotent, unable to satisfy women and to create a family? This particular dilemma, a grave consideration for any individual, takes on an added dimension for Kostoglotov due to the fact that for the first time in more than four years of service in the Great Patriotic War followed by another eight years of exile in a GULAG camp Oleg can contemplate a more productive life as a father of children and now has even made the acquaintance of two promising candidates with whom to enter into married life. Adding even more existential grist to his personal dilemma, Kos-

¹⁴ Mokienko V.M., Nikitina T.G., Nikolaeva E.K. *Bol’shoi slovar’ russkikh poslovits* OLMA media grupp: Moskva 2010, p. 100.



toglotov raises the stakes of his decision whether to take or to refuse his cancer treatment by challenging the cancer clinic's claim that medical science has the right to make this decision for him:

Even before this I thought a lot about the supreme price of life, and lately I have been thinking about it even more. How much can one pay for life, and how much is too much?

It's like what they teach you in school these days, "A man's most precious possession is his life. It is only given to him once." This means that we should cling to life at any cost. But the camps have helped many of us to establish that the betrayal or destruction of good and helpless people is too high a price, that our lives aren't worth it. Some said it was a price one could pay, and maybe it is. But what about this price? To preserve his life, should a man pay everything that gives it color, scent and excitement? (299-300)

When one of the women whom Oleg considers a good prospect for a future marriage, his primary doctor Vera Gangart, inquires why he feels so "awful," Oleg accusingly responds: "It's my morale that's awful. Awful because I know that I'm paying too high a price for my life, and that even you—yes, you—are involved in the process and are deceiving me." (335) The resolution of Kostoglotov's existential dilemma occupies the major portion of this novel, and brings a more twentieth-century response to Tolstoy's original proverb-question: at what price and by which values do we humans live our lives.

A fellow cancer ward patient, Aleksei Shulubin, like so many of the cancer patients in this novel, shares many of the same doubts as Oleg Kostoglotov and struggles with similar issues regarding Tolstoy's seminal question about the fundamental values by which men live. In a key chapter in the second half of the novel, for example, the two patients argue about which of the two has suffered more over the course of his life. Kostoglotov, having survived the challenges of war and the horrors of the GULAG, stands certain that he has suffered more and, therefore, that his lot in life has been the more difficult and challenging. Once he convinces Oleg of the shame and ignominy that he has endured over a lifetime of having to yield to the Soviet state, Shulubin easily wins this dubious context of "who has suffered more."

I saved myself only because I bowed low and kept silent. I kept silent for twenty-five years—or maybe it was twenty-eight, count them up yourself. First I kept silent for my wife's sake, then for my children's sake, then for the sake of my own sinful body. But my wife died. And my body is a bag full of manure—they're going to drill a hole in it on one side. And my children have grown up so callous it's beyond comprehension... We were supposed to confess our 'mistakes'? I confessed them! We were supposed to renounce them? I renounced them! A certain percentage managed to survive, didn't they? Well, I was part of that percentage (442–443).

While not as central a character as Zoya, the seventy-five year old Dr. Oreshchenkov similarly strikes an important chord in the novel's commentary on the kind of values human beings must possess in order to survive. Occupying the position of the cancer clinic's chief diagnostician and most renowned specialist, Dormidont Tikhonovich Oreshchenkov placed little value on medical degrees and doctoral dissertations, claiming that if a man was called an Honored Scientist, it was the end of him as a doctor as he was bound to be more caught up in medical conferences and the writing of books than tend-

ing to the pains and discomforts of his patients. In his opinion once a practicing doctor relies on his professional pedigree, he loses contact with the most important aspect of his profession—the ability to diagnose and to treat everyday, run-of-the-mill patients. It is to him that one of the novel's multiple protagonists, Ludmila Afanasyevna Dontsova, turns for diagnosis of her cancer. Having seen Dontsova to the door and confirmed her worst fears and suspicions, Oreshchenkov returns to his rocking chair of “black bentwood and yellow wickerwork” to take a steadily increasing and necessary rest:

His body demanded this chance to recoup its strength and with the same urgency his inner self demanded silent contemplation free of external sounds, conversations, thoughts of work, free of everything that made him a doctor. Particularly after the death of his wife, his inner consciousness had seemed to crave a pure transparency....At such moments an image of the whole meaning of existence...came to his mind. The image that he saw did not seem to be embodied in the work or activity which occupied them, which they believed was central to their lives, and by which they were known to others. The meaning of existence was to preserve unspoiled, undisturbed and undistorted the image of eternity with which each person is born (431–432).

This telling and emotional scene trenchantly brings to mind a similar description from Solzhenitsyn's first full-length novel, *In the First Circle*, where the aging painter Ippolit Kondrashov captures Gleb Nerzhin's attention with his painting of “The Castle of the Holy Grail”. Confident that his own experiences in life were infinitely more important and meaningful than the imaginative fantasies of this idealistic painter, Gleb nevertheless finds himself strangely drawn to the painting. Similarly to Efrem Podduev's and Dr. Oreshchenkov's musings about the real and important values in every man's life, Kondrashov explains what it is that appeals to Nerzhin in his painting:

Every man is born with a sort of inner essence... It is, so to speak, the innermost core of the man, his essential self. No ‘being,’ nothing extraneous, can determine him. Moreover, every man carries within himself an image of perfection, which is never dimmed and which sometimes stands out with remarkable clarity! And reminds him of his chivalrous duty (333).

This “image of perfection” brilliantly captured by Kondrashov's painting suggests an intriguing parallel to what Dr. Oreshchenkov understands to be the meaning of existence: both reflect on a freeing of sorts from earthbound cares and preoccupations in favor of a return toward one's initial sense of perfection, beauty, and eternity.

As noted earlier, unlike the more openly didactic Tolstoy, Solzhenitsyn characteristically embodies his proverb message in a polyphonic structure of a fugue-like theme entoned by an entire series of similar voices all striking the same chord. This is certainly true for a large number of lesser but no less engaging personalities in the novel. The experience of the young nurse, Zoya, for example, resonates with that of so many of the patients and hospital personnel at the cancer clinic. Young and beautiful she understandably is the object of constant attention and unrestrained ogling from the young men in her life. Not at all a prude, Zoya soon tires of the meaningless pawing she suffers at the hands of her male contemporaries, all of whom strike her as totally disinterested in any form of a more permanent and meaningful relationship. Unlike her girl friends at the



medical school who considered that “everything possible should be grabbed from life immediately and with both hands”, Zoya, however felt that “it was never the real thing. It all lacked that stable, deliberate continuity which gives stability to life, indeed gives life itself” (158). Her strong character requires a sense of balance and harmony that defines the moral fabric of the life she yearns for. Unlike the countless Efrem Podduyev’s of this world who live by no other values than immediate personal and sensual gratification, Zoya’s moral code dictates that the life she hopes to establish must be a meaningful and purposeful one. Ironically, one could argue that she partially suspends this code when she decides to withhold the daily Sinestrol intramuscular injections Oleg requires in order to survive his cancer—at a risk, however, of sexual impotence.

The novel’s underlying question of what men live by similarly touches the lives of a wide variety of other patients and doctors in this brilliant narrative, bringing to mind the important comment Solzhenitsyn made at the proceedings of a session of the secretariat of the Board of the Union of Soviet Writers, held on September 22, 1967, where he observed that “the task of the writer is to select... universal and eternal questions, the secrets of the human heart and conscience, the confrontation of life with death, the triumph over spiritual sorrow” as the subject matter for one’s novels¹⁵. This description nearly fifty years ago aptly applies to the Russian author’s novel *Cancer Ward* in which Solzhenitsyn renders Tolstoy’s response to his proverb parable, *What Men Live By*, into an eternal question posed in a fugue of common experiences shared and endured by more than a dozen patients and doctors in a Tashkent hospital in the middle of the last century and, indeed, by countless readers of this novel today.

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‘WHAT MEN LIVE BY’: LEO TOLSTOY’S PROVERB-PARABLE AS A SOURCE FOR ALEKSANDER SOLZHENITSYN’S NOVEL, CANCER WARD

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Abstract

Scholars have long agreed about a close affinity existing between the literary works of Leo Tolstoy and those of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. While relatively few studies have compared the nature of these similarities in specific works written by the two authors, this article will make a claim for a real tie between one of Tolstoy’s proverb parables, “What Men Live By”, taken from the period of his 1880’s *stories for the people*, and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s famous novel, *Cancer Ward*.

Keywords: *parable, philosophic issues, comparative analysis, narrative peculiarities.*

¹⁵ Cited by Nicholson, Michael. “Solzhenitsyn and Samizdat”. In: *Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: Critical Essays and Documentary Materials*, 1975, p. 64.