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**Jefferson J. A. Gatrall**

# CHILD MURDER, PEASANT SINS, AND THE INFANTILIZING OF EVIL IN TOLSTOY'S *THE POWER OF DARKNESS*

In *The Power of Darkness* (*Vlast' t'my;* 1886), Tolstoy examines the nature of human evil in the unlikely context of the Russian peasantry, a class with a privileged relation to the Good throughout most of his oeuvre. Tolstoy's first major play chronicles Nikita's rise as a philandering laborer who succeeds to the fortune of his peasant employer (Pyotr) through a murder that is conceived by his mother (Matryona) and carried out by his employer's wife (Anisya). After marrying Anisya, Nikita descends into drunkenness, seduces his sixteen-year-old stepdaughter, Akulina, and fathers her child. Many commentators—taking their cue from the play's subtitle, "If the claw is caught, the bird is lost" (*kogotok uviaz, vsei ptichke propast'*)—have followed the logic of Tolstoy's plot in search of an original sin, usually locating it somewhere in the confrontation between a backward peasantry and the forces of progress, especially money—a bane of civilization that corrupts the play's characters from without.[1] This same logical sequence can be reversed so as to foreground not the causes of evil but its victims. Nikita's final and greatest crime is the killing of Akulina's newborn. Here Tolstoy's oft-disparaged moralism proves no less groundbreaking than his play's cutting-edge naturalism. Through an artistic strategy of moral provocation, *The Power of Darkness* contributes to a modern revaluation of evil through the figure of the murdered child, a tradition that runs from Swift to Dostoevsky to the photojournalism of twentieth-century warfare.

As if corroborating Tolstoy's ear for the moral sensibilities of his contemporaries, the prospect of a child murdered onstage figured prominently in the early reception of the play. In December 1886, Tolstoy sent a manuscript of *The Power of Darkness* to the "spiritual censorship" (*dukhovnaia tsenzura*) in Moscow, which promptly put a block on both its publication and performance. In response, Tolstoy rewrote the scenes surrounding the infanticide from act IV, which the censor had "crossed-out in red pencil."[2] As originally written, Nikita,

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*Jefferson J. A. Gatrall is an Assistant Professor at Montclair State University. He has published articles on Chekhov, Dostoevsky, and Proust and is coeditor (with Douglas Greenfield) of* Alter Icons: The Russian Icon and Modernity *(Penn State Press, forthcoming).*

overwhelmed, drunk, and unequal to the task, is gradually coaxed by Matryona into digging a grave for Akulina's newborn in the cellar adjoining his peasant hut. His mother's motives are pragmatic: a scandal over an illegitimate child conceived in near-incestuous circumstances would not only scuttle Akulina's imminent betrothal but also jeopardize Nikita's claim to Pyotr's fortune. Matryona is soon joined by Anisya, who arrives with the newborn wrapped in burlap. After being taunted by his wife, who "throws him the baby" (4:14),[3] Nikita descends into the cellar—out of sight but not earshot—and kills the baby by crushing it under a board. In the first variant of act IV, the murder of Akulina's newborn thus occurs largely onstage. This represents a significant departure not only from the precedent of Euripides' *Medea*—Tolstoy would be frequently compared to the ancients in early reviews[4]—but to most modern dramas involving infanticide and child abandonment, beginning with Heinrich Leopold Wagner's *Die Kindermörderin* (1776) and including Goethe's *Faust* (1808), Aleksei Pisemsky's *A Bitter Fate* (*Gor'kaia sub'dina;* 1859), and Gerhart Hauptmann's *Rose Bernd* (1903). In breaking with this tradition of offstage child murder, Tolstoy's first variant instead anticipates the outsize public and official outrage occasioned by the stoning to death of a baby in Edward Bond's *Saved* (1965). As one censor put it, "the whole of act IV" in *The Power of Darkness* "is unlike anything that has ever appeared anywhere on stage. . . . You need nerves of steel to withstand it."[5]

The second variant of act IV breaks from the conversation between Nikita and Matryona just before Anisya's entry with the newborn. The baby is never in view, as the scene moves instead inside the peasant hut. There Nikita's second stepdaughter—Anyutka, a ten-year-old—directs probing questions about the night's events to the laborer Mitrich, who warms himself by lying on a stove. In the guise of a chorus, Anyutka thus gives voice to the horror and meaning of a spectacle unseen. In submitting to the strictures of the censorship, Tolstoy, with characteristic bravado, wrote that he was willing to "soften" act IV, but only so long as "such changes made it better."[6] Over the past century the second variant has indeed frequently proved the choice of directors in Russia and abroad.[7] In it a baby murdered is replaced with a child coming to terms with that horror, while the grotesqueries of a crime scene give way to a peasant's home hearth, a setting more in keeping with Tolstoy's poetics of continuity.[8]

In each variant, the murder of a child lies at the end of a long series of "sins" (*grekhi*) on the part of peasant characters. Indeed, both figures in this climactic scene, the peasant-murderer and the murdered child, are crucial for unraveling the intricate valuations at work in Tolstoy's modern morality play. In terms of the peasant figure, Nikita and his accomplices function as emblematic representatives of an original, "youthful" humanity. This held true for both Tolstoy and his critics, though generally for different reasons. In Tolstoy's own calculus, the spectacle of infanticide dramatizes the peasant's susceptibility to moral corruption through the foil of the child, a figure likewise inherently good yet less variable in value. By contrast, the play's early critics—notably at its world premiere in Paris—widely viewed Tolstoy's peasants as "childlike," that is, as beings too primitive to understand their own actions, let alone appreciate

the merits of the play they inhabit. In Russia, official measures were in fact taken to protect actual peasants from seeing the play, one whose moral lessons, or rather dangers, were deemed too sophisticated for rural audiences to digest properly. In other words, the figure of the peasant, both onstage and as a potential audience, was subject to a rhetorical and even institutional process of infantilization, one with marked classist overtones. The infanticide scene in act IV was fraught with ideological significance for all those with a supposed stake in the peasant's moral well-being: the play's author, publishers, translators, directors, performers, censors, and critics. The figure of Tolstoy's peasant-murderer thus lies at the nexus of the play's internal moral architectonics and the paternalism of a divided political and cultural elite toward "the people."

As for Nikita's victim and value-double, Akulina's newborn emerges—through the theatrical equivalent of a ritual sacrifice—as a sacral figure, one inviolate in essence even as it is violated in fact. The play's first censors and critics in St. Petersburg, Moscow, and Paris argued at length about whether and how infanticide should be represented on the stage. Yet aside from one or two characters in the play itself, critics from all sides tacitly acknowledged Akulina's death as a moral wrong of the highest order. This conspicuous unanimity obscures the complexity of Tolstoy's intervention over a pressing contemporary problem, one categorized as a sin, crime, or social disease, depending on the authority in question. Here the term *hamartiology*—the doctrinal study of sin—can be usefully adapted from traditional theology. Tolstoy, already an iconoclastic religious thinker of global notoriety, broke with the hamartiologies of the church, the courts, and the academy through a competing interpretation of the causes and significance of infanticide. In a larger sense, finally, the spectacle quality of his infanticide scene in *The Power of Darkness* veils the inner workings of a thoroughly modern revaluation, one that Tolstoy did not so much invent as render scandalously explicit for his audiences. Through the means of theatrical violence, Tolstoy casts infanticide as a benchmark sin, transforming the Matthean "massacre of the innocents" into the highest expression of manifest evil for modernity.

## Two Readings and a World Premiere

*The Power of Darkness* is a play written not just about peasants but for peasants. In the half-decade after *Confession* (*Ispoved';* 1879), Tolstoy, in addition to denouncing church and state in theological tracts, devoted his creative energies primarily to folktales intended for peasant consumption, cofounding in 1884 the immensely prolific people's press Posrednik ("the intermediary"). The erstwhile novelist's turn to the theatre—first with the temperance play *The First Distiller* (*Pervyi vinokur;* 1886), followed by his "drama" *The Power of Darkness*—belongs to this same broad intervention in the moral education of the Russian peasantry. On 11 November 1886,[9] more than forty peasants gathered in the first floor of Tolstoy's Yasnaya Polyana residence to listen to a reading of *The Power of Darkness*, still in manuscript form. Aleksandr Stakhovich, a fellow landowner and theatre enthusiast, provided a dramatic reading of the first four acts; as he had trouble deciphering the handwriting, it was left to Tolstoy to

continue with the final act, in which Nikita, prompted by the words of his God-fearing father, Akim, repents of his sins before the whole village. The peasants listened in silence save for the occasional burst of laughter from a certain Andrei, a kitchen servant. Tolstoy solicited Andrei's opinion at the end of the reading: "What can I tell you, Lev Nikolaevich. Mikita[10] handled the thing smart at the beginning, but then he went and messed it all up."[11]

Andrei's summary judgment has haunted twentieth-century criticism of *The Power of Darkness*, outweighing the praise of such luminaries of the theatre as Ibsen, Maeterlinck, and Shaw.[12] The peasants had seen through their former master's morality play. Be that as it may, Tolstoy was well aware of the ironies involved in the evening's peculiar power dynamic. Not only were two noblemen imitating peasants, but—what was more unusual—peasants were becoming empowered as a theatre audience. According to Stakhovich's account, Tolstoy complained afterward that Andrei "had ruined everything": "To him you're a general, he respects you; you give him three-ruble tips . . . and suddenly you cry out, act like you're drunk: of course he's going to laugh and thus prevent the peasants from truly understanding the worth of the play—the more so, as the majority of the listeners take him for an educated man."[13] In the first public performance of *The Power of Darkness*, the relation between teacher and pupil was indeed highly ambiguous. On the one hand, the peasants of Yasnaya Polyana were presented with instructive examples of characters not unlike themselves, characters who used their proverbs and spoke the dialect of their native Tula district.[14] Andrei himself had been one of Tolstoy's favorite pupils. On the other hand, the peasants were placed in the paradoxical position of being the natural source of their own enlightenment. In *Confession*, Tolstoy describes finding the true meaning of life in "the life of the people": "The activity of the laboring people [*narod*], who produce life, seemed to me the only real work. And I understood that the meaning given to that life is the truth, and I accepted it."[15] It was only in becoming peasant that Tolstoy could fulfill his duty as a writer: that is, to teach. Thus the peasant philosophers of that evening included not just the character Akim or even the critic Andrei, but Tolstoy himself, who, unlike his coperformer Stakhovich, would have been dressed like his audience. As thousands of yearly visitors to Yasnaya Polyana observed, Tolstoy, a repentant nobleman, played the part of the peasant in his daily life, plowing his own fields and wearing a peasant tunic (a theatrical gesture that the high-caste Gandhi would later adopt).

In short, the figure of the peasant lies at the center of a double-sided ideological configuration: first, Tolstoy's peasants are characters who, in a metonymic fashion, function as (true or false) representatives of the Russian peasantry as such; second, peasants make up an audience that receives either benefit or harm in being exposed to images of its darker self. This configuration, one in which mimesis and moral effects reinforce each other in a Platonic manner, would be modulated in subsequent readings and performances of *The Power of Darkness* in Russia and abroad. With each new modulation, moreover, the peasants themselves—whether as an impressionable audience or as representatives of early humanity—would become increasingly infantilized.

This infantilization had very real institutional consequences. What would be missing in subsequent performances of *The Power of Darkness* were actual peasants in the audience. Plays about peasants had enjoyed popularity in mainstream Russian theatre since at least midcentury, while professional actors with peasant backgrounds were not uncommon in the major companies of Moscow and St. Petersburg, especially in the wake of the Emancipation Reform of 1861.[16] Many early productions of *The Power Darkness* in Russia and abroad included provincial or peasant actors.[17] Tolstoy nevertheless wished to go further by helping to develop a repertoire for the growing *narodnyi teatr* movement, that is, "folk" or "people's" theatre aimed at peasant and working-class audiences. Tolstoy had originally written *The Power of Darkness* with Mikhail Lentovsky's Skomorokh in mind, a recently founded people's theatre in Moscow where the repertoire and ticket price were tailored to Russia's new peasant-consumers.[18] Tolstoy was also actively engaged in the development of "village theatre" (*derevenskii teatr*) closer to home; as he argued, "in the village there is a rightful place for theatre and it can fulfil a great service by enlightening and ennobling the people."[19] Yet the reading at Yasnaya Polnaya would be the last performance of *The Power of Darkness* before peasants for nearly eight years.

During this hiatus, the play's peasant audience did not so much disappear as become virtual. This is especially clear in the way that Tolstoy's allies initially exploited the purported ignorance of the play's first audience. After the religious censor's initial block on *The Power of Darkness*, Stakhovich and Vladimir Chertkov, a leading Tolstoyan and cofounder of the populist publisher Posrednik, were dispatched to St. Petersburg, where in the early months of 1887 they brought their campaign on behalf of a peasant play to the most exclusive drawing rooms of Russian high society. Their campaign was fought on two fronts, as the censors for theatre and publication belonged to separate bodies. On both fronts the censors held the bar higher for requests concerning peasant venues—that is, the people's theatre and the "people's press" (*narodnoe izdanie*)—than for their respective gentry equivalents. For his part, Stakhovich gave private readings of *The Power of Darkness* before members of St. Petersburg's political and cultural elite; on each occasion he told a set anecdote about his "reading . . . at Yasnaya Polnaya," relating how the peasants "hadn't understood and didn't value" the play. In other words, there was no point banning a play that lay "beyond the comprehension of the masses."[20] This "ruse" (*khitrost'*)—as Stakhovich called it—was also conveyed by Chertkov to E. M. Feoktistov, head of the "general censorship" (*obshchaia tsenzura*) in charge of publishing in Russia. Ironically, then, Andrei's damning judgment was popularized through the tireless efforts of Tolstoy's surrogates, and a former serf became an unsurpassed authority on Tolstoy's play only inasmuch as it was in danger of losing its intended peasant audience altogether.

Stakhovich's ruse was successful on the publication front. In his initial review, the censor Feoktistov, focusing in particular on the scene of the infanticide, had raised the twin specter of misrepresentation and bad influence: Tolstoy's peasants were "impossible in their cynicism" and would have a "depressing influence on the public."[21] Feoktistov initially appeared willing to

permit an expurgated edition for publication—one that greatly gutted the first variant of act IV—but refused to grant the same privilege to the people's press Posrednik. Chertkov, an aristocrat of considerable standing in his own right, seems to have won Feoktistov over in the end. In any case, by February 1887, *The Power of Darkness*—including the two variants of act IV, which were arranged one after the other—was published with minor alterations in both the general and the people's press. For mere kopecks apiece, Posrednik sold tens of thousands of copies of the play throughout Russia in a matter of months; to these sales were added best-selling editions from other publishing houses, as Tolstoy disavowed the petty mercantilism of copyright.[22]

The play's fortunes on the Russian stage proved less favorable. On 17 January 1887, Stakhovich, at the Dashkov-Vorontsov family estate, gave a dramatic reading of *The Power of Darkness* before Tsar Aleksandr III as well as several members of his family and inner circle. The tsar proclaimed the play a "wondrous thing" (*chudnaia veshch'*), and act IV made such a "strong impression" that Stakhovich was asked to reread it.[23] Over dinner afterward, Stakhovich repeated his usual anecdote about the peasant audience of Yasnaya Polyana, interpreting their ignorance in light of the legacy of serfdom (which the tsar's father had ended): "Tolstoy has devoted almost his whole life to the people . . . given up literary works for pedagogical activities in Yasnaya Polyana schools, wrote scores of stories for the people . . . [yet] even Tolstoy can't overcome the night of 500 years of ignorance. . . . The people still haven't grown up enough [*ne doros*] to understand and value *The Power of Darkness.*"[24] In a telling rhetorical move, Stakhovich here conflates the peasantry with adolescence, even if, as he hastens to add, Count Tolstoy "had too much love for the people to talk to them as if they were children." The tsar, as father of the people, was apparently pleased to learn that Yasnaya Polyana had such "good peasants"—peasants who, in failing to understand *The Power of Darkness*, had known their station in life better than their former master. Indeed, it was not the peasantry whom the tsar envisioned as the play's appropriate audience. Passing over even privately owned theatres (*chastnoi teatr*), Aleksandr III granted permission for *The Power of Darkness* to appear on the imperial stage. He went so far as to recommend that the imperial theatrical companies of Moscow and St. Petersburg join forces in the production.

The tsar himself was nevertheless already part of a larger court masquerade. In reading *The Power of Darkness*, Stakhovich deliberately sought to rein in his performer's instinct to "read well," lest he convey the play's horrors too effectively. Crucially, the tsar was treated to the more genteel, second variant of act IV. Thus Stakhovich's reading before the tsar in January differed considerably from the one before peasants two months earlier. Through an additional subterfuge, Count Vorontsov, the night's host, had passed on to the tsar a rare manuscript copy of the play containing only the second variant, that, as Stakhovich puts it, "avoids the murder of the child onstage."[25] A few weeks later the first published versions of *The Power of Darkness* appeared. Konstantin Pobedonostsev, the tsar's powerful religious advisor, wrote an urgent letter to his majesty describing the "horror" he had experienced upon reading the play (including, presumably, both variants of act IV). He expressed his concern for

the well-being of the imperial stage, which would suffer a "fall" should *The Power of Darkness* appear on it, as well as for the morality of the peasantry: "at this minute Tolstoy's drama is being published thanks to the *people's* press [*v vide* narodnogo *izdaniia*] in an enormous quantity of copies, which are being sold for 10 kopecks on every street corner: soon it'll be all over Russian and will be in the hands of everyone, high and low."[26] The tsar reconsidered, as a result of which the play was canceled shortly before the first rehearsals at the Imperial Aleksandrinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg. Tolstoy's allies were unable to reverse this decision, though not for lack of effort. In 1894, for example, the influential publicist and theatre owner Aleksei Surovin commissioned a young Konstantin Stanislavsky—with Tolstoy's approval—to rewrite and merge both variants of act IV for a proposed production in St. Petersburg.[27] Under Aleksandr III, performances of *The Power of Darkness* were nevertheless confined to the private salons of high society.

In his letter to the tsar, Pobedonostsev remarked that "even Zola hasn't gone to such a vulgar degree of realism."[28] Zola was, in fact, among the first in France to learn of *The Power of Darkness*, and he communicated about the play with the director André Antoine, then in the process of scheduling the first season of the Théâtre-Libre. In passing beyond the jurisdiction of the Russian censorship, Tolstoy's peasants proved less compelling as an audience *in potentia* than as representatives of some larger reality, whether Russia, *l'homme sauvage*, or both. This shift occurs already in the translator's foreword to the first French edition, which appeared in June 1887. There Ely Halpérine-Kaminsky praises Tolstoy for his "surprisingly exact description of the mores of the muzhiks in their own language." At the same time, Halpérine recounts for his French readership a certain "characteristic anecdote" gleaned from the Russian press concerning the first reading at Yasnaya Polyana. Putting Stakhovich's ruse to new purposes, Halpérine argues that Tolstoy had hoped to moralize to "the masses"; unsuccessful in his mission, the play ended up instead as a "marvelous work of art," one whose real audience is not the uncomprehending peasant but the "city-dweller" (*citadin*)—"the artisan and the bourgeois"—whom Tolstoy had otherwise "deliberately ignored."[29]

Halpérine's double gesture—accentuating the representative value of Tolstoy's peasants while gentrifying the play's audience—anticipated the reception of Antoine's production eight months later. *La Puissance des ténèbres* premiered on 12 February1888 at the Théâtre Montparnasse. In a lengthy review, Count Melchior de Vogüé, author of *Le Roman russe* (1886) and the reigning French authority on Russian culture, designated the premiere a bona fide "event": "From the far side of the city, two or three hundred literati adventured to the unsettling vicinity of Gaîté, near the Montparnasse cemetery, in order to hear 'the bones of a small child crack.'" Vogüé, who had initially feared that Tolstoy would meet his "Waterloo," instead witnessed an "Austerlitz" (peculiar praise for the author of *War and Peace*).[30] In retrospect, Antoine called his production of *The Power of Darkness* the "culminating point" of Théâtre-Libre's inaugural season.[31] Among his many supporters, he found an especially receptive audience at *Figaro.* There the literary critic Octave Mirbeau defended Antoine against

conservative attacks on his production, while Francois Magnard, the paper's editor, invited the director to perform several scenes from the play at a special "fête" at the luxurious Hôtel du Figaro. In the announcement in *Figaro*, the names of the evening's distinguished guests were published alongside exotic details of the hotel's interior, which had been redecorated to bring out the fête's "Russophile character": "[Antoine's] hearty [troupe] will reenact, before an elite public [*public d'élite*], their success at the Théâtre-Montparnasse."[32]

The play's no less elite opponents also transformed Tolstoy's peasant into an emblematic figure of Russianness. Foreseeing this danger, Halpérine himself led a campaign against the staging of *The Power of Darkness.* Two days before the premiere, Halpérine published an article in *La Nouvelle Revue* in which he argued that Tolstoy's violent play would provide French audiences with a false impression of the "morality of Russia as a whole."[33] For his preemptive attack, Halpérine solicited the views of Alexandre Dumas (fils), Victorien Sardou, and Émile Augier, "les trois Grands" of French theatre. In their replies, all three praised Tolstoy's play yet expressed grave doubts as to its adaptability for the stage, and especially before "our French spectator," who, as Dumas puts it, eschews the "harshness and obscenities" of the "Aeschylean and Shakespearean variety."[34] Thus whereas Halpérine worried about misrepresentations of his homeland on a foreign stage, Dumas sought to protect his native stage from foreign elements. Either way, Tolstoy's peasants not only signified Russia; they were best left there.

In addition to chauvinism, Antoine, who sought to introduce at least one foreign drama a year at the Théâtre-Libre, confronted formidable technical obstacles in his reproduction of the Russian peasant in Paris. Perhaps Halpérine's most damaging tactic was simply to label the play "untranslatable." On this matter Halpérine had even sought out the opinion of Zola, who, indeed, agreed that the Russian expat's translation was unfit for the stage. Ironically, the least translatable character proved to be Akim, the play's peasant philosopher. In the Russian, Akim speaks simple truths in short, faltering sentences, relying as much on proverbs as on placeholders. Not unlike the *cri de la nature* of Rousseau's *homme sauvage*, Akim thus approaches a universality of meaning the less his language betrays worldly sophistication. Beneath a surface simplicity, Akim's speech habits nevertheless belie Tolstoy's dialectal intricacies. Halpérine had not even bothered to translate Akim's rustic "ta-ye"—a placeholder that serves as a syntactical crutch almost every time the former serf speaks.

Faced with an allegedly "untranslatable" script, Antoine took the unusual step of commissioning a second translation. Isaac Pavlovsky, a Russian journalist and self-styled "nihilist," along with Oscar Méténier, then a young dramatist of naturalist persuasion, worked in tandem over Tolstoy's Russian, the first translating it into French and the second into argot. Although this meant converting a peasant dialect into an urban one, the resulting script nevertheless brought the speech habits of the lower classes, including their profanities, to the Parisian stage. In keeping with the Théâtre-Libre's programmatic naturalism, Antoine also went to considerable lengths to re-create the setting of a Russian peasant hut (*izba*) onstage, borrowing "authentic costumes" from exiled political

refugees and purchasing "real Russian objects" at antique shops for décor.[35] As Vogüé testifies, "for the first time on the French stage I saw costumes borrowed from the daily life of Russia, without any operatic embellishment."[36]

What drew the most consistent criticism, even from some of Antoine's allies, was his decision to perform the first variant of act IV. As Halpérine notes in a survey of the Russian press, the influential journal *Messenger of Europe* (*Vestnik Evropy*) had warned that a child's onstage "assassination" would generate a "pernicious influence," one not unlike the "pathological demoralization" of a public execution.[37] In France, onstage murder, proscribed by neoclassical canons, was laden with its own particular significance, having long been a point of contention between partisans of the "well-made" play on one side and romantic and later naturalist dramatists on the other. As early as Alexandre Soumet's *Norma, ou l'infanticide* (1831), which was written in the wake of the fabled "battle of *Hernani*," a mother had scandalously prepared to knife her own children in plain view of French theatregoers (she changes her mind only at the last moment). One critic of *The Power of Darkness* pointed to the unflattering precedent of the crowd-pleasing "mélo," where infanticides can be seen, as well as to the tragedies of Adolphe Dennery.[38] Tolstoy was nevertheless generally viewed as an outsider to this dispute, and thus drew less rebuke from critics than did Antoine. Vogüé, pitting the playwright against the director, agreed with "the general opinion" that Antoine "had made an error in not performing the variant proposed by Tolstoy for the terrible scene from act IV": "we are shown the murder and burial of the newborn in the cellar, with a long insistence on 'the bones cracking' and with all the obligatory props—a small mannequin, spade, dim lantern."[39]

As Halpérine had feared, moreover, many critics viewed the savagery of the play's violent subject matter as an accurate reflection of the Russian peasant as such. In a review of Halpérine's edition of *The Power of Darkness*, Jules Lemaître, the critic and dramatist, notes that

> it's a long way, a long way, over there, in the immense Russia. . . . [T]here the peasants are more primitive, live closer to the earth, and are more ignorant than the least peasants in France; the poor creatures roll around in their narrow brains [*dans leurs cerveaux étroits*] only a very small number of ideas, which are prey to elementary instincts and over which the 'power of darkness' rules.[40]

In a similar vein, Vogüé emphasizes the differences "in the oriental brain and in ours" (*dans le cerveau de l'Oriental et dans le nôtre*): "who could imagine two beings further apart than a Parisian of our day and a muzhik of Tula, this sorrowful and dark child from an oriental race, living in the middle ages [*ce triste et obscur enfant d'une race orientale, demeuré en plein moyen âge*]."[41] Vogüé and Lemaître, in their concern with comparative anatomy, update a long-standing cliché regarding Russian otherness, one that conflates the country's geographical size and location with a temporal backwardness. Such a conflation is also implicit in the unfavorable review of the critic Francisque Sarcey, for whom the play's characters "are beasts with human faces, who eat bread instead of grazing on

grass."[42] The Russian political exile Mikhail Achkinasi, to cite one last example, evokes instead a "fatalité moderne." Yet he, too, repeats the same spatiotemporal configuration: "Tolstoy . . . has painted in ineffaceable traits those sides [of Russian life] that are the darkest in all of European civilization. In all countries of Europe, the men whom society lets stagnate in ignorance . . . offer the spectacle of that desperate struggle in which Tolstoy's heroes convulsively writhe, and accomplish the same crimes, the same atrocities."[43] Whether untouched by civilization or cruelly left behind, Tolstoy's peasants, in their ignorance and savagery, belong to a younger stage of human development than the critics who write about them.

This rhetorical link between peasants and youth is not incidental. The play's early performance history underscores the political reality behind the Russian peasant's lingering cultural disenfranchisement after the Emancipation. The political elite of St. Petersburg worked to bar the childlike peasant from seeing *The Power of Darkness*, even after the ban on performances was eased in 1895, while the cultural elite of Paris, happy to fête Count Tolstoy as one of their own, consigned his peasants to the infancy of humanity. In the wake of Antoine's success, Tolstoy's peasant play was seen by bourgeois audiences in Geneva, Amsterdam, Milan, Rome, Turin, Venice, Genoa, and—following the death of Aleksandr III—St. Petersburg. Yet productions intended for peasant audiences continued to encounter official resistance, as indicated in a secret circular to provincial police from the Ministry of the Interior: "there have been attempts recently to stage even in the countryside, in noncompliance with established laws, folk performances [*narodnye spektakli*] of productions that were previously prohibited but now permitted for the imperial and private theatres, including Count L. N. Tolstoy's drama *The Power of Darkness.*'"[44] Not all folk performances of the play were proscribed, however. In October 1895, almost exactly eight years after the already legendary reading at Yasnaya Polyana, Lentovsky was granted permission to perform *The Power of Darkness* at the Skomorokh in Moscow, with provincial actors onstage and real-life peasants in the audience. As an eyewitness later recounted, the play was an "indisputable success" with the "public at the Skomorokh": "the cheap seats were full, while the more expensive ones went empty. . . . The repeat performances . . . demonstrate that, at least here, the great author's drama found an audience worthy of appreciating it."[45]

## Infanticide as Spectacle

In *The Power of Darkness*, the child and the peasant occupy opposite sides in the same archetypal drama of origins. Whereas the peasant, a figure of early humanity, proves most emblematic as a moral agent, the child, in suffering violence, reveals its sacred value as an absolute victim. Nikita's murder of Akulina's newborn in act IV thus conjoins maximal expressions of active and passive evil, enabling Tolstoy to probe not only the sources of "darkness" (*t'ma*) but also the effects of its "power" or "reign" (*vlast'*).[46] These effects extend to those who witness the spectacle of infanticide. At the time that the play was written, the concept of infanticide was still in flux in Russia and across Europe,

as a Christian emphasis on the sins of adultery and fornication coexisted in uneasy relation to a growing scientific and popular preoccupation with the psychology of "the criminal." As an artist and religious thinker, Tolstoy intervenes on both sides of this divide in *The Power of Darkness.* Crucial to Tolstoy's intervention, moreover, is the act of putting infanticide on public display. By staging infanticide as a moral provocation, Tolstoy places the burden of interpreting its meaning on a captive audience. Thus his own response to the murder of Akulina's newborn hardly delimits the range of its possible meanings. On the contrary, the spectacle of infanticide is refracted through multiple frames of reference, frames that depend less on the literal text of Tolstoy's script than on a collision of value systems in the public space of the theatre.

Tolstoy's treatment of infanticide in *The Power of Darkness* finds ample precedent in the Enlightenment laboratory of morals. As the cultural historian Josephine McDonagh demonstrates, infanticide, as "an event capable of raising deep human emotions," appears frequently in eighteenth-century treatises on morality, especially those in which sympathy is privileged over reason.[47] In *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1755), for example, Rousseau describes the natural pity aroused in a bystander who watches helplessly as a "vicious animal" tears a child from its mother's arms and then "mash[es] its frail limbs with its murderous teeth." The bystander's pity, indeed "anguish," precedes conscious reflection in the "pure movement of nature": "pity is what will prevent every robust savage from robbing a weak child."[48] Across the Channel, Adam Smith argued instead in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) that the "practice" of infanticide is common to "all savage nations." Still, even as he reserves the sentiment of pity for civil man, Smith does not at all dispute the extraordinary affective force of infanticide: "can there be greater barbarity than to hurt an infant? Its helplessness, its innocence, its amiableness, call for the compassion of an enemy."[49] Whether or not the savage was adverse or prone to killing children, the spectacle of infanticide represented a limiting case for speculating on the origins of human morality.

In act IV of *The Power of Darkness*, Tolstoy, substituting the peasant for the savage, restages this Enlightenment thought experiment for a nineteenth-century audience. As is already implicit in Rousseau's "helpless bystander" or Smith's "compassionate enemy," the spectacle of infanticide in the play involves not only a child and its murderer but a captive audience capable of moral response. Indeed, Tolstoy's moral provocations in *The Power of Darkness* reverberate against the background of a shifting *communis sensus.* As Eve Levin documents, the earliest evidence of infanticide in Russia can be found in medieval ecclesiastical literature, where it was long categorized as a sexual offense, one in which illegitimacy compounded the sin of murder.[50] By the mid-nineteenth century, however, the last codified ties between child murder and sins of the flesh were being broken. Thus after the penal code of 1845, illegitimacy became for the first time a mitigating factor in the sentencing of Russian women convicted of infanticide. Such leniency was not available to convicted married women, who, like common murderers, generally received hard labor for life in Siberia.[51]

After the major Court Reforms of 1864, moreover, cases of infanticide (but not child abandonment) began to be tried before a jury. As with other categories of criminals, accused child murderers were acquitted at high rates in the newly formed Russian jury system, and their trials attracted wide coverage in the press. Public sympathy lay very often with the accused, which in this case meant especially poor, unwed mothers. In addition to highlighting the shame and social stigmatization such women faced, many forensic psychiatrics and crime journalists—among them Dostoevsky[52]—pointed to the common psychological disorientation accompanying pregnancy and childbirth as a major predisposing factor in infanticide. One Russian critic of *The Power of Darkness*, sifting through available legal statistics, even attempted to prove that Nikita's murder of Akulina's newborn was unrepresentative, as it was Russian women, not Russian men, who are known to kill their children. In keeping with progressive opinion, he explained that such women murder their newborns either as a result of (1) a fear of the "consequences of an illicit love" or (2) "a sort of delirium provoked by the pains of childbirth."[53]

In *The Power of Darkness*, Tolstoy nevertheless forgoes the popular figure of the fallen woman. Where Tolstoy's play converges with more mainstream representations of infanticide, both fictional and otherwise, lies not with the gender but the class of its child murderer. By the turn of the nineteenth century, infanticide, thanks to the work of Malthus and others, had been reconceptualized as a means of population control. That infanticide might have a scientific rationale did not render it any less "barbaric," however. Many different types of so-called primitive society—whether real or speculative—could be associated with infanticide. In his *Sociological Etudes* (1873), for instance, S. N. Yuzhakov, one of the founding fathers of Russian sociology, reserves infanticide for those societies where "communal marriage," the lowest of his five evolutionary stages of "sexual selection," is the norm.[54] Moreover, those contemporary societies where infanticide was thought to be most common—especially China and India—tended to be agrarian and non-Western.[55] As Stephen P. Frank argues, the notion that infanticide was a "quintessential *peasant* crime" was widespread among late nineteenth-century Russian criminologists.[56] In an 1893 article on the "woman-criminal" in Russia—to select an example written within a few years of Tolstoy's play—the criminologist I. Foinitsky marshals judicial statistics to demonstrate that rural women were much more likely to commit infanticide than their peers from other social groups: "the peasant woman [*zhenshchina-seianka*] is found to be a great degree more prone to bloody, familial [crime] . . . than the city woman."[57]

For those members of the Russian intelligentsia who sought to "go to the people," sociological research on infanticide supported the need for reform. In "Infanticide in the Poltava District" (1870), one of the earliest scientific articles on the subject in Russia, A. Zhukovsky calls infanticide "the greatest sickness in the social organism." From the perspective of "social hygiene," as he puts it, infanticide, far from being a crime, should be viewed as a disease, one that arises from poverty and ignorance and that would be best treated with improved natal and postnatal care in rural hospitals.[58] In *The Life of "Ivan," Sketches on Peasant*

*Life* (1900), to take one last example, the pioneering ethnographer Olga Semenova-Tian'-Shanskaya claims that "incidents of the murder of illegitimate newborns are not at all infrequent" in the Russian countryside. Forgoing statistics for the immediacy of narrative, she recounts several incidents in order to reveal for her urban readership how young peasant women conceal the corpses of their murdered babies: "they'll strangle the tiny baby and throw it either in the river (with a stone on its neck), or into thick hemp, or they'll bury it somewhere in the courtyard or the pig sty."[59]

With *The Power of Darkness* Tolstoy thus entered a shifting and contentious public discourse over the meaning of infanticide. For all the surface grotesqueries of Nikita's murder, Tolstoy's literary intervention in this discourse was highly nuanced. For Tolstoy, the killing of a child by a peasant is not just tragic but unnatural. In their true nature, both figures tend to occupy the upper echelons of the writer's moral universe. In his monograph on nineteenth-century Russian peasant dramas, Andrew Donskov persuasively argues that *The Power of Darkness* differs from its predecessors less in its use of rural dialect than in Tolstoy's "*intense* belief in the greatness of peasant philosophy, in peasant interpretation of life."[60] In the play itself, it is Akim, Nikita's plainspoken, God-fearing father, who, as most critics agree, assumes the mantle of peasant philosopher.

Tolstoy's belief in the moral perfection of the child is at least as intense as his faith in the peasantry. One recent critic, writing of the outsize influence of Tolstoy's *Childhood* trilogy in Russian cultural history, goes so far as to credit the writer with inventing the nation's myths of happy childhood.[61] Happy or not, children are inherently good in Tolstoy's fiction, and the more so the younger they are. Near the end of an 1862 pedagogical article on "how peasant children write," for example, Tolstoy mounts a revealing defense of the child's natural aptitude for learning. He begins with a standard formulation of prelapsarian innocence, writing that "children have not eaten the fruit of the tree of good and evil." His revaluation of the child nevertheless quickly passes beyond biblical gloss to a far more modern authority, as he endorses, or rather rewrites, Rousseau's positive view of human nature from the first book of *Émile:*

> A healthy child is born into the world, fully satisfying the demands of unconditional harmony in relation to truth, beauty, and goodness, which we bear within us; he is near to inanimate things—to plants, to animals, to nature. . . . In all times and with all men, the child is represented as a model of innocence, sinlessness, goodness, truth, and beauty. Man is born perfect—this is a great word uttered by Rousseau, and this word, like a rock, will remain firm and true. In being born, man represents the prototype of harmony, truth, beauty, and goodness.[62]

The infanticide in *The Power of Darkness* dramatizes the uneven extent to which both the peasant and child are susceptible to the forces of evil. Akim must share the stage with the peasant-murderers Anisya and Nikita, not to mention his wife, Matryona, one of the great criminal minds of Russian theatre; yet the play's

two child characters, Anyutka and Akulina's newborn, have no such doubles. On the contrary, Akulina's newborn is a "prototype" (*pervoobraz*), or "first image," the original model of goodness, not a corrupt or imperfect copy (*ikona*). With each new child in the world morality returns to its origins. Anyutka's exemplary conduct in the second variant of act IV—where she passes through a premature and contracted coming of age—further sets in relief Tolstoy's differential valuation of the peasant and child.

What renders the child and, to a lesser extent, the peasant inherently good for Tolstoy is their proximity to life. In *Confession*, Tolstoy famously recounts his years spent searching for God; he eventually comes to realize that "to know God and to live is one and the same thing. God is life [*Bog est' zhizn'*]."[63] In the first variant of act IV, Nikita makes a similar discovery under very different circumstances. After taking Akulina's newborn in his hands for the first time, Nikita comes face to face with the reality that the baby is, as he exclaims, "alive [*zhiv*]!." Anisya and Matryona, his accomplices, acknowledge this simple truth without according it the same significance. Thus his mother waxes philosophical about how some peasants pray for a child "but God doesn't give it to them, only stillborns. . . . But where it's not needed, here it's alive [*zhivoi*]" (4.14). By contrast, Nikita insists that the baby is "alive" even after he's killed it, employing nearly a dozen variations on the root word *zhiv* throughout the cellar scene. The birth of Akulina's baby presents Nikita with an expression of life in its purest form. Unlike his wife and mother, moreover, Nikita experiences the destruction of that life as a crisis of identity. As he puts it in the closing lines of act IV, "I have made my choice in life [*zhizn'*]" (14.16). For Nikita in act V, the only viable alternative to confession is suicide.

Within Tolstoy's cult of life, furthermore, death remains the great problem. As Tolstoy formulates this problem in *Confession*, "is there any meaning in my life that the inevitable death awaiting me does not destroy?"[64] In his literary works, Tolstoy generally seeks to mitigate the discontinuity of death through narrative means. In his early story "Three Deaths" ("Tri smetri"; 1859) or in the case of Platon Karataev in *War and Peace* (*Voina i mir;* 1869), morally sound characters, most often peasants, approach death with acceptance and peace of mind. More problematic for Tolstoy's contemporaries were the death scenes of his spiritually striving characters, especially noblemen (Andrei Bolkonsky, Ivan Ilych, and so forth), whose thoughts he stenographs right up to their last breath, as if listening for truths from beyond the grave. In these first two narrative models, death as passage or death as culmination, the art of dying takes on an ethical dimension, one which sustains life as the strong side in the most elemental of binary pairs.

Third, and at a minimal level of continuity, Tolstoy delineates the full horror of the death of one character from the perspective of an onlooker. Here his aesthetic approaches its most naturalistic: the graphic portrayal of a dead or dying body stages a collapse of meaning. This is evident in Levin's nihilistic response to his brother's death in *Anna Karenina* (1878), or in Tolstoy's reaction to his own brother's death, as recorded in *Confession.* Still, the murder of Akulina's newborn in *The Power of Darkness* provides the most complete instance of death

as rupture in the author's entire oeuvre. Death so completely overshadows any other aspect of the baby's short life—less than a day—that it threatens to constitute, however paradoxically, that life's whole meaning. In Tolstoy's script, Akulina's baby has no name, voice, interiority, or even gender. Its end is nonheroic and unnatural; thus not only is the viability of a death ethic rendered moot, but the physical evil of death is compounded by violence, a moral evil of the highest order for the pacifist Tolstoy. Unlike Rousseau's pietàlike image of a child torn from its mother's arms, finally, the child's sixteen-year-old mother, Akulina—who is described as "slow" (*durakovataia*) and "hard of hearing" (*krepka na ukho*) in the *dramatis personae*—does not make a single appearance during act IV. On the contrary, the pathos of maternal grief, a staple of infanticide dramas from *Medea* to *Rose Bernd*, is entirely circumvented. Instead, the baby dies at the hands of a father whose own horror has conspicuously little to do with any paternal stirrings.

All that survives of Akulina's murdered newborn is the horror of the spectator. In the first variant of act IV, this horror is visceral and immediate. Not only are the breaking of the baby's bones audible to the audience—at least in Antoine's production—but Nikita is himself traumatized by their echoes, which he verbally reenacts several times in the act's final scenes: "How the bones crushed under me . . . Kr . . . Kr . . . "(*kak zakhrustiat podo mnoi kostochki . . . Kr . . . Kr . . .*) (4.14). In the second variant, the role of giving voice to horror falls to the ten-year-old Anyutka. The contentious bone crushing is no longer heard; instead, Anyutka and Mitrich, inside the peasant hut, report on muffled sounds from the adjacent cellar. Unlike her companion, a hardened laborer and former soldier, Anyutka is terrorized by what she correctly surmises is happening outside. As she puts it, "how can it not be terrifying [*zhutko*]?" (4/2.1).

The raw horror of an infanticide nevertheless does not determine its potential meanings. On the contrary, the implications of Nikita's act are as a diverse as those who witness it. The spectacle of infanticide causes a moral rupture into which flow the overcoding of diverging hamartiologies, as Nikita's climactic act becomes alternately a sin or a crime, a social disease or a backward custom. Aside from the play's first audiences, the refractory nature of the play's spectacle violence is already evident in the responses of the peasants onstage. There are no country nihilists in *The Power of Darkness.* Even those who are complicit in the killing of Akulina's newborn refer to this act as a "sin," yet not all of them understand this sin in the same manner, let alone acknowledge their share in it. In urging her son on to murder, Matryona points out to Nikita that the baby is his "sin too," that is, not just Akulina's: "It's best not to sin, but what is to be done?" Anisya, who has her husband's blood on her hands, instead relishes the fact that Nikita too will become a "murderer": "let him know what it's like" (4.12). Akim, although not present at the murder of Akulina's newborn, scolds Nikita for the many sins that precipitate it, including his womanizing, drunkenness, and profligacy: "Sin, I mean, fastens on to sin—drags sin after it, and you're stuck fast [*zaviaz ty*], Mikishka, fast in sin!" (3.15). Thus the "sin" of infanticide is interpreted as something collective or something ostracizing, as a regrettable fact of life, a solitary burden, or a network of binding forces.

As for Nikita, he tacitly accepts his father's view only in the closing lines of the play. Throughout the play he nevertheless reserves the word "sin" for his extramarital affairs with Anisya, Akulina, and Marina (an orphan), respectively. The child he murders represents the last and greatest of his many sins before Akulina, to whom he makes a full confession in act V on the occasion of her wedding. Nikita's conjunction of sex and violence in *The Power of Darkness* is characteristic of a series of scandal-provoking works that Tolstoy wrote toward the end of the 1880s, including *The Devil* (*D'iavol;* 1889), *Father Sergius* (*Otets Sergei;* 1890), and especially *The Kreutzer Sonata* (*Kreitserova sonata;* 1890). For the epigraph of *The Power of Darkness*—which was censored in the initial Russian editions—Tolstoy borrowed Christ's saying to the effect that it is better tear out one's "right eye" than to look at a women "with lust" (Matt. 5:27, 28), an analogy of no small violence in its own right. Putting the subtitle and epigraph of Tolstoy's play together, then, sex, as the hooked claw, leads to the greater evil of violence. In his treatise *Christian Teaching* (*Khristianskoe uchenie;* 1895), Tolstoy makes this causal sequence explicit: "The consequences of the sin of fornication [*grekha bluda*] . . . [include] the destruction of children [*unichtozhenie detei*] in abortion, infanticide [*detoubiistvo*], as well as the abandonment of children."[65]

In his use of the word "sin," as in his pairing of adultery and murder, Tolstoy remains close to the discursive environment of his Orthodox peasant characters in *The Power of Darkness.* Significantly, Akim in act V holds back the village constable, a representative of the state for whom Nikita's confessed murders are first and foremost crimes, till "God's work has been done" (*bozh'e delo otoidet*) (5.2). Still, Tolstoyan sins are not necessarily Orthodox ones, and vice versa. Anyutka's response to infanticide in the second variant of act IV especially reveals Tolstoy's distance from the Orthodox Church. In terms of structure, her conversation with Mitrich bears revealing parallels to Tolstoy's later "Dialogues with Children on Moral Questions" ("Besedy s det'mi po nrastvennym voprosam"; 1907). In these dialogues, children ask questions about "God," "Love," "Death," and so on, in the process revealing, with a certain Socratic irony, that their elders do not know as much as they suppose. In *The Power of Darkness*, Anyutka, aware of her half-sister's pregnancy, similarly directs a series of questions about the night's events to a supposed authority figure, Mitrich, who, for the most part, fails to deflect them or provide an adequate response. When he tries to scare Anyutka to sleep with the "bogeyman" (*detoceka*), she replies by evocatively asking "what sort" of bogeyman he means (4/2.1). As if on cue, her mother Anisya enters looking for a cross. The sight of the cross further prompts Anyutka to open a line of inquiry on the fate of Akulina's newborn in the afterlife. Anyutka first asks Mitrich whether the baby will go to heaven. It soon becomes clear that she is asking for herself as well, as she confesses to wishing that "she, too, could die": "up to 10 [that is, Anyutka's age] you're still a baby, and maybe you can go to God, 'cause if not you'll go to the worst!" (4/2.3).

Through her genuine terror and ostensibly artless questions, Anyutka exposes the moral bankruptcy not only of the adults around her but also of the

doctrine of infant damnation. Whether in its Orthodox, Catholic, or Calvinist form, this doctrine had become increasingly untenable by the nineteenth century. In the first variant of act IV, Anisya returns to the cellar and lays the cross on Akulina's newborn in a makeshift baptism. Thus even as she pressures her husband to commit murder, Anisya protects herself from the grave sin of sending an unbaptized child to hell. In act V, Nikita later confesses outright to the sin of *dushegub'e*, or "destruction of a soul": "I destroyed [*gubil*] . . . the child" (5.2). Tolstoy's ongoing critique of the Orthodox Church—for which he would eventually be excommunicated in 1902—here proceeds in two directions. In a desacralizing movement, Anisya's parodic baptism, along with icon veneration and the swearing of oaths, belongs to a larger polemic against Orthodox ritual in the play. For Anisya, the cross serves as a mere fetish, whereas the sacrament of baptism functions not as an induction into Christian community but as an exculpatory washing of hands.

In the place of infant damnation and ritual baptism, Tolstoy, in a resacralizing movement, substitutes Anyutka's probing questions on the sanctity of a child's soul before God. Through this double movement, Tolstoy effects a complete inversion of values: Akulina's newborn is more sacred than any church that would presume to pour salvific waters on its head. During the last two decades of the nineteenth century, the image of the "dead child" functioned as a sacred value—as well as a gauge for measuring other high values—in the prose of a number of major realist and naturalist writers in Russia and across Europe. In *Brothers Karamazov* (1880), published a few years earlier than Tolstoy's play, Dostoevsky had staged an even more extreme revaluation along similar lines. Through a series of horrific "pictures" (*kartinki*) of abused and murdered children, Ivan Karamazov builds a case for rejecting the world that God has created, one in which the innocent suffer for the sins of the father: "the expiated tears of a single child are worth more than the whole of human knowledge."[66] In *Jude the Obscure* (1896), Hardy describes in detail three children hanging dead in a room—a suicide and double murder, adding, in a valuative vein, that the "horror of the scene" was "consummate."[67] In Zola's *L'Oeuvre* (1886), Claude's final "masterpiece," *Enfant mort*, portrays the corpse of his infant son, with all its disfiguring birth defects. Although the voting members of the Salon reject this scandalous painting, it remains a "unique and sacred object [*chose unique et sacrée*], visible to [Claude] alone."[68] In *Hedda Gabler* (1890), to note a variation on this theme from the theatre, the destruction of Løvborg's manuscript, yet another masterpiece, is repeatedly compared in act III to the killing of a child. The only thing possibly worse would be to lose a child (or a masterpiece) during a night of debauchery, letting it fall into untrustworthy hands, a crime involving the same victim. The contributions of these writers to the literature of infanticide are as distinct as they are substantial. Yet the end result is the similar for each: the dead child attains the level of a sacred iconography for modern art.

With the important exception of the religious censorship, Tolstoy's critique of the church in *The Power of Darkness* received little initial notice. That the murder of a newborn child represented something akin to desecration nevertheless formed conspicuous common ground for the otherwise diverse

responses of the play's first critics and audiences. This act of desecration—whether it was viewed in its first or second variant, as a sin or as a crime, as cutting-edge naturalism or as inexcusable bad taste—prompted virtually no disagreement on the magnitude of the wrong involved. Through the theatrical equivalent of a ritual sacrifice, the child, in dying violently, emerges as the most sacred and inviolate of values.

## The Art of Moral Provocation

In the century and a half of Tolstoy criticism, both in Russia and abroad, the most recurring point held against the writer's otherwise impeccable artistic credentials has been his unabashed moralizing. The moral of the story is a blemish, even an anachronism. For directors, the moral dimension of Tolstoy's plays poses no end of difficulties. As Stanislavsky admits of his doomed 1902 production of *The Power of Darkness*, "[we] didn't give the spiritual side of the play, weren't able to."[69] The play's spiritual side, as Stanislavsky makes clear, is hardly confined to Nikita's confession in act V. In an attempt to grapple with Tolstoy's alleged "mysticism," many early critics tellingly turned to such medieval models as the *mystère* and the morality play.[70] *The Power of Darkness* can indeed be thought of as a modernized morality play, one whose dramatic arc of sin and redemption is undergirded by a thoroughgoing realism—realism here being understood as a historical set of formal strategies played out between a work's producers and audiences. The moral architectonics of the play are not mutually exclusive with the real. Through the artistic ascesis of the "faithful representation," Tolstoy and the play's directors, from the writer's use of Tula dialect to Antoine's elaborate costumes and stage props, not only furnished a public forum for representatives of the Russian peasantry; they also staged the graphic murder of a child in such a way as to provoke the moral response of captive audiences, from the peasants of Yasnaya Polyana to the tastemakers of Paris.

For Tolstoy, nothing could be less devoid of moral significance than violence. The success of the play's climactic infanticide scene is arguably best gauged by the extent to which it did, in fact, provoke audiences. In *The Power of Darkness*, susceptibility to horror represents a minimal yet essential morality. Like Anisya and Matryona, some of the play's first critics, not surprisingly, remained unmoved by the murder of Akulina's newborn. Thus the critic Aleksandr Skabichevsky, in a review of the first Russian edition of *The Power of Darkness*, writes sarcastically of the reductive role of the baby's murder in the play's narrative logic: "the last crime of the heroes of course had to produce the most horrific impression."[71] Tolstoy's moral provocations even elicited at least one full-blown theatrical parody.[72] By contrast, the play's first dramatic readers—Stakhovich in St. Petersburg and Francisque Sarcey in Paris—were among those most affected by the scene of the infanticide. After learning that Tolstoy was rewriting the original scene from act IV, Stakhovich drafted a letter urging him not to give into the censors: "Are you really killing your own dramatic child? . . . To throw out the last scene of act IV is to kill the play. And what a play! I'm going to hear the cracking of those bones my whole life!"[73] Shortly after the

publication of Halpérine's French translation, Sarcey also provided a dramatic reading of the play, this time at a theatre on the Boulevard des Capucines in Paris. Sarcey writes that "during act IV the emotion in the auditorium was so poignant that I lost control of myself, gasps suffocated me, and I had to suspend the reading for a minute or two till calm was restored."[74] As for the second variant of act IV, its horrors, although not as visceral, also succeeded at times in generating a strong audience response. Indeed, Anyutka—a child traumatized by the killing of another child—herself represents a fresh spectacle of horror for the audience. In her account of a salon performance in St. Petersburg in October 1890, Sofia Tolstaya claims that this scene, as played by a talented child actor, made a "tremendous impression": "All the ladies were in tears. One of them said [aloud], 'Non, comme la petite joue, c'est même dommage.'"[75]

In their ability to be provoked, Nikita and especially Anyutka serve as ideal models for Tolstoy's audience. Faced with the crisis of an unwanted child, both are stirred by horror toward the Tolstoyan question of "what is to be done," or, as Anyutka puts it to the outmatched Mitrich, "how must one be?" (*a kak zhe byt'-to?*) (4/2.3). A reluctant murderer, Nikita orders his wife Anisya to take the newborn to a "foundling home" (4.8). His attempt to leave the baby to the care of others proves not just fruitless but—for Tolstoy at least—morally unsatisfying. As David Ransel observes, Tolstoy viewed these foundling homes, where mortality rates ran as high as 90 percent, as little more than "state-arranged infanticide."[76]

Anyutka instead takes responsibility for her half sister's child on herself: "If it lived, I'd nurse it" (4/2.3). The seemingly unlikely prospect of a ten-year-old girl raising a baby on her own found a compelling artistic response in Anton Chekhov's "Sleepy." In this short story, written just a year after *The Power of Darkness*, Varka, a thirteen-year-old nurse, sings lullabies to her employer's baby night after night. No matter how desperately she "wants to sleep" herself, Varka can't because the baby won't stop crying. In the delirium of an enforced insomnia, she comes to the realization that "the enemy is the baby": "it was surprising: how is it she didn't get that before?" Varka's question darkly mimics, even parodies, those of Anyutka, but to opposite effect. In the end, Varka suffocates the baby, after which she herself at last "sleeps like the dead."[77] Chekhov's surprise ending—a rarity among his 600 odd stories and plays—renders the horror of infanticide in subdued tones, displacing it from the realm of metaphysical evil to that of the almost quotidian. Whereas Anyutka is terrified by the murder of a child, Varka, tormented by a living baby, becomes an unsettlingly young child murderer, a figure nowhere to be found in Tolstoy's fiction or drama.

Far from taking umbrage at Chekhov's one-upmanship, Tolstoy later called "Sleepy" a "true pearl," assigning it a high rank in the first of his two categories of true art.[78] In *What Is Art?* (*Chto takoe iskusstvo?;* 1897) and elsewhere, Tolstoy frequently disqualifies from his well-publicized canon works of art that needlessly offend their audiences. Be that as it may, Tolstoy was a master in the art of moral provocation, no more so than in the fiction and drama he produced in the first decade after *Confession* (1879). In *The Power of Darkness*, he scandalizes audiences through a spectacle of surpassing violence, not in order to moralize but to provoke moral response.

In subject matter as in its aesthetics of shock, Tolstoy's morality play is uncannily modern, even modernist. The absolute value of a single child's life—from Enlightenment ethics to nineteenth-century Child Welfare movements to contemporary campaigns to end abortion on one side and the corporal punishment of children on the other—constitutes a relatively recent development in the history of the sacred. In *Three Guineas* (1937), Virginia Woolf, a pacifist in Tolstoy's footsteps, reflects on a graphic photograph depicting children killed by a bomb during the Spanish Civil War: "Photographs, of course, are not arguments addressed to the reason; they are simply statements of fact addressed to the eye."[79] Such raw photographic "facts," which are as liable to serve the cause of war as of peace, nevertheless tap into a hidden rhetoric of the sacred, a rhetoric more forceful than mere argument. The protracted struggle to stage *The Power of Darkness*, first in Russia and then in Paris, attests to the behind-the-scene labors involved in the modern revaluation of the child as a sacred value. Thanks to the stagecraft of such writers as Tolstoy, the figure of the murdered child now strikes the eye as a pure spectacle of overwhelming and self-evident wrong.

## ENDNOTES

1. Andrew Donskov addresses this line of criticism in *The Changing Image of the Peasant in Nineteenth Century Russian Drama* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1972), 125–6. For Russian criticism on the role of money in the play, see S. N. Durylin, "Drama L. N. Tolstogo 'Vlast' t'my,'" *Tvorchestvo L. N. Tolstogo: Sbornik statei* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1959), 203–49, at 210–19; K. N. Lomunov, *Dramaturgiia L. N. Tolstogo* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1956), 128; V. V. Osnovin, *Dramaturgiia L. N. Tolstogo* (Moscow: Vyshaia shkola, 1982), 18.

2. Letter to M. G. Savina, December 1886, quoted in N. K. Gudzii, "Vlast' t'my," in L. N. Tolstoi, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* [hereafter *PSS*], ed. V. G. Chertkov, 90 vols. (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1928–58), 26: 706–7, at 715. Unless otherwise indicated, translations from Russian and French sources are mine.

3. Tolstoi, *Vlast' t'my, ili "Kogotok uviaz, vsei ptichke propast'*," in *PSS*, 26: 123–243. Act and scene numbers are hereafter provided in parentheses.

4. See Eugène-Melchior de Vogüé, "Puissance des ténébres," *Révue des deux mondes* 298 (15 March 1888): 426–45, at 435–7; André Antoine, *"Mes souvenirs" sur le Théâtre-Libre* (Paris: Fayard, 1921), 105.

5. E. M. Feoktistov, quoted in Gudzii, 715.

6. Letter to M. G. Savina, quoted in Gudzii, 715.

7. Concerning recent performances, the first variant was used in both Temur Chkheidze's 2006 production at the Bolshoi dramaticheskii teatr imeni G. A. Tovstonogova in St. Petersburg and Martin Platt's 2007 production at the Mint Theatre in New York.

8. Bakhtin, for instance, defines the Tolstoyan chronotope as one of "biographical time," which "flow[s] smoothly in spaces—the interior spaces—of townhouses and noble estates." Mikhail Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Carol Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 84–258, at 249.

9. Dates from Russian sources refer to the Julian calendar.

10. "Mikita" is one of the colloquial variations on Nikita's name in the play.

11. A. A. Stakhovich, "Klochki vospominanii ('Vlast' t'my', drama L. N. Tolstogo)," *Tolstovskii ezhegodnik* (1912): 27-47, at 38–9. Biriukov, the third cofounder of Posrednik and a

possible attendee that evening, quotes Stakhovich's account and yet identifies the peasant as "Mikh. Fom." Pavel Biriukov, *Biografiia L. N. Tolstogo*, 2 vols. (Moscow: Algoritm, 2000), 2: 72.

12. See Ernest J. Simmons, *Leo Tolstoy* (New York: Vintage, 1960), 2: 321; Simmons, *Tolstoy* (London: Routledge, 1973), 149.

13. Stakhovich, 39.

14. There are five dozen proverbs in the play, more than in any other work of fiction by Tolstoy. See Andrew Donskov, *Essays on L. N. Tolstoj's Dramatic Art* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1988), 78–87.

15. *Ispoved'*, in L. N. Tolstoi, *PSS*, 23: 1-59, at 40.

16. On Russian peasant plays, see Donskov, *Changing Image of the Peasant.* On the subject of peasant actors on the Russian stage, see Laurence Senelick, *Serf Actor: The Life and Art of Mikhail Shchepkin* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1984).

17. See, for instance, Stanislavsky's attempt to incorporate Tula peasants in major roles for his 1902 production. K. S. Stanislavskii, *Sobranie sochinenii v devyati tomakh*, ed. O. N. Efremov, 9 vols. (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1988), 1: 333–6.

18. Gudzii, 708, 725.

19. Tolstoy in S. T. Semenov, *Vospominaniia o L've Nikolaeviche Tolstom* (St. Petersburg: Obshchestvennaia Pol'za, 1912), 137, trans. and quoted in Donskov, *Changing Image of the Peasant*, 120.

20. Stakhovich, 43.

21. E. M. Feoktistov, quoted in Gudzii, 715.

22. For published editions and figures, see Gudzii, 717–20. Even as late as 1898, when a new request for publication was put forward by an independent people's press, one censor deemed *The Power of Darkness* "unsuitable for peasant reading" (726).

23. Stakhovich, 42.

24. Ibid., 43–4.

25. An unnecessary precaution, as it turned out. The tsar admitted to Stakhovich that the play had remained unread on his night table "for a whole week." Stakhovich, 40.

26. Italics in the original. Letter to Aleksandr III, 18 February 1887, in Gudzii, 722.

27. Stanislavskii, 1: 529.

28. In Gudzii, 722.

29. E. Halpérine, in the introduction to his translation, *La Puissance des ténèbres: Drame en cinq actes* (Paris: Perrin, 1887), v–vii.

30. Vogüé, 426, 432.

31. Antoine, 105.

32. "À la Russie," *Le Figaro*, no. 60, Wednesday, 29 February 1888.

33. E. Halpérine, "La 'Puissance des ténèbres' sur la scène française," *La Nouvelle Revue* no. 50 (1 February 1888): 621–29, at 624–5.

34. A. Dumas, quoted in Halpérine, ibid., 626. For Halpérine's campaign against the play, see Francis Pruner, *Le Théâtre Libre d'Antoine: Le Répertoire étranger* (Paris: Lettres modernes, 1956), 24–8.

35. Antoine, 84.

36. Vogüé, 434.

37. In Halpérine, "La 'Puissance des ténèbres' sur la scène française," 622.

38. Adolphe Brisson, in Pruner, 33–4; Octave Mirbeau, "Une Nouvelle pédagogie," *Le Figaro* no. 56 (Saturday, 25 February 1888).

39. Vogüé, 434.

40. Jules Lemaître, "Léon Tolstoï," *Impressions de théâtre*, 1ère série (Paris: Lecene, 1890), 271. Lemaître's review initially appeared on 6 June 1887.

41. Vogüé, 430.

42. Quoted in Pruner, 37.

43. Mikhaïl Achkinasi, "Un Drame populaire du Comte Léon Tolstoi," *Révue d'art dramatique* 6.33 (1 May 1888): 144.

44. Quoted in Gudzii, 725–6.

45. "'Vlast' t'my' na tsene narodnogo teatra," *Biriuch petrogradskikh gosudarstvennykh akademicheskikh teatrov. Sbornik statei*, 1.3 (1918): 33, 34.

46. Like its English equivalent "power," *vlast'* has the secondary meaning of "realm." In the most recent English translation, the play's title is rendered as *The Realm of Darkness*. See Leo Tolstoy, *Tolstoy: Plays*, vol. 2, trans. Marvin Kantor and Tanya Tulchinsky, intro. Andrew Baruch Wachtel (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 1–90.

47. Josephine McDonagh, "Infanticide and the Boundaries of Culture from Hume to Arnold," in *Inventing Maternity: Politics, Science, and Literature, 1650–1865*, ed. Susan C. Greenfield and Carol Barash (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1999), 215–37.

48. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Discourse on the Origin of Inequality," in *The Basic Political Writings*, trans. and ed. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 25–82, at 54, 55; partially quoted in Josephine McDonagh, *Child Murder and British Culture, 1720–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 35.

49. Quoted in McDonagh, "Infanticide," 219.

50. Eve Levin, "Infanticide in Pre-Petrine Russia," *Jarhbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 34.2 (1986): 215–24, at 216–17.

51. David L. Ransel, *Mothers of Misery: Child Abandonment in Russia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 18–19.

52. See the October 1876 issue of *Diary of a Writer*. F. M. Dostoevskii, *Dnevnik pisatelia*, in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, ed. V. G. Bazanov, 30 vols. (Leningrad: Nauka, 1972–90), 23: 136–41.

53. M. S. Kapustin, quoted in E. Halpérine, "La 'Puissance des ténèbres' sur la scène française," 622.

54. Julius F. Hecker, *Russian Sociology: A Contribution to the History of Sociological Thought and Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1915), 163–4.

55. McDonagh, *Child Murder*, 88–95, 137–44. For colonial attitudes toward infanticide, see also Patricia van der Spuy, "Infanticide, Slavery, and the Politics of Reproduction at Cape Colony, South Africa, in the 1820s," in *Infanticide: Historical Perspectives on Child Murder and Concealment, 1550–2000*, ed. Mark Jackson (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 128–48.

56. Stephen P. Frank, "Narratives within Numbers: Women, Crime and Judicial Statistics in Imperial Russia, 1834–1913," *Russian Review* 55.4 (1996): 541–66, at 561. Italics in the original.

57. I. Ia. Foinitskii, "Zhenshchina-prestupnitsa" (part II), *Severnyi vestnik* no. 3 (1893): 111–40, at 121.

58. A. Zhukovskii, "Detoubiistvo v poltavskoi gubernii i predotvrashchenie ego," *Arkhiv sudebnoi meditsiny i obshchestvennoi gigieny* 6.3 (1870): 1-13, at 2, 10–13.

59. O. P. Semenova-Tian'-Shanskaia, *Zhizn' "Ivana": Ocherki iz Byta Krest'ian odnoi iz chernozemnykh gubernii* (St. Petersburg: Tip. M. M. Stasiulevicha, [1900] 1914), 40.

60. Donskov, *Changing Image of the Peasant*, 120. Italics in the original.

61. Andrew Baruch Wachtel, *The Battle for Childhood: Creation of a Russian Myth* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 4.

62. Tolstoi, "Komu u kogo uchit'sia pisat', krest'ianskim rebiatam u nas ili nam u krest'ianskikh rebiat?", *PSS*, 8: 301-24, at 322.

63. Tolstoi, *Ispoved'*, in *PSS*, 23: 46.

64. Ibid., 23: 16–17.

65. Tolstoi, *Khristianskoe uchenie*, in *PSS*, 39: 117-91, at 183.

66. Dostoevskii, *Brat'ia Karamazovy*, in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 14: 220.

67. Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure* (New York: Signet Classic, 1961), 330.

68. Émile Zola, *L'Oeuvre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), 335.

69. Stanislavskii, 1: 334.

70. See Pruner, 31–3. See also Erich Auerbach, who relegates nineteenth-century Russian realism as a whole to "old-Christian [rather] than to modern occidental realism." Auerbach, *Mimesis:*

*The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 520–4.

71. A. M. Skabichevskii, "Vlast' t'my," *Sochineniia A. Skabichevskago: Kriticheskie etiudy, publitsisticheskie ocherki, literaturnye kharakteristiki*, 2 vols. (St. Petersburg: Izd. F. Pavlenkova, 1903), 2: 530-42, at 538.

72. The playwright Arkady Averchenko wrote a parody of the play for the Crooked Mirror, a turn-of-the-century theatre specializing in satire. Laurence Senelick, trans. and ed., *Russian Dramatic Theory from Pushkin to the Symbolists: An Anthology* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 302n.

73. Stakhovich, 45.

74. Sarcey in Pruner, 36.

75. "No, the way the little one plays it, it's still such a pity!" Quoted in S. A. Tolstaia, "Vospominaniia S. A. Tolstoi. 'Vlast' t'my,'" *Tolstovskii ezhegodnik* 1912: 17-23, at 22.

76. Ransel, 101–2.

77. A. P. Chekhov, "Spat' khochetsia," in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem v tridtsati tomakh*, ed. S. D. Balykhatyi, 30 vols. (Moscow: Nauka, 1974–83), 7 (1977): 7-12, at 7, 12.

78. Quoted in the notes to "Spat' khochetsia," 7: 626. It is worth noting that Tolstoy included a second work of infanticide literature, George Eliot's *Adam Bede*, in this exclusive category of "universal art" as well. Tolstoi, *Chto takoe iskusstvo?*, in *PSS*, 30: 27-203, at 160.

79. Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1966), 11.