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THE TOLSTOY “CONNECTION”: ALEKSANDR SOLZHENITSYN’S *IN THE FIRST CIRCLE* THROUGH THE PRISM OF PEASANT PROVERBS IN *WAR AND PEACE* AND *ANNA KARENINA*

Abstract: Like his nineteenth-century predecessor, Leo Tolstoy, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn displayed a keen fascination for the folk wisdom and simple speech of Russian peasants. And, like Tolstoy, Solzhenitsyn was fond of interspersing large numbers of proverbs into the speech of central characters and protagonists of his fiction. A case in point is his novel *In the First Circle*, which shares a number of features in common with Tolstoy’s masterpieces *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*: in particular, the predilection of his predecessor to resolve the ethical-moral crisis faced by his protagonist through the introduction of a Russian peasant into the narrative, whose folksy wisdom and speech succeed in shedding light on the existential search in the novel, undertaken by the protagonist.

Keywords: Russian proverb; peasant speech; Russian folk wisdom; Russian Literature; *War and Peace*; *Anna Karenina*; *In the First Circle*; Pierre Bezukhov; Platon Karataev; Konstantin Levin; Fyodor the peasant; Gleb Nerzhin; Spiridon Yegorov.

In discussing Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s fiction, scholars often point to the influence of Fyodor Dostoevsky—particularly with respect to the polyphonic structure of the latter’s novels. Numerous scholarly articles and several monographs attest to this influence.¹ The present study, however, will examine the influence of another writer—Leo Tolstoy—especially with regard to the moral-didactic voice that underlies much of the major thematic message expressed in his two major novels and the thematic connection they have with Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s novel, *In the First Circle*.² I will argue, furthermore, that much of the underlying force of this moralistic message in the major novels of both authors is driven by the didactic suasion of the Russian proverb, what Gary Saul Morson refers to as its “absolute language.”³

Tolstoy's attraction to Russian proverbs has received considerable scholarly attention.⁴ From at least the 1860s, he was particularly drawn to the simplicity and native folk wisdom of the Russian peasant as reflected in their fondness for proverbial speech. Similar to the later practice of his twentieth-century successor, Solzhenitsyn, Tolstoy developed a habit of copying large numbers of proverbs from Vladimir Dal's Dictionary, *Poslovitsy russkogo naroda/Proverbs of the Russian People*, as well as from other lexicographers. In addition, Tolstoy was often inclined to eavesdrop on the Russian peasant speech of countless passers-by at his elaborate country estate at Yasnaya Polyana.⁵ The fruit of this enterprise on Tolstoy's part has recently been calculated by prominent Russian paremiologists, Valery Mokienko and Olga Lomakina, to number more than 1,200 proverbs, proverbial expressions, and proverb variants.⁶ Strangely, however, relatively little scholarship has been devoted to analysis of the eminent 19th-century Russian author's use of proverbs in his literary works.⁷

As we know from his novels as well as his literary autobiography, *Бодался телёнок с дубом/The Oak and the Calf*,⁸ Solzhenitsyn shared a number of interests in ethical and moral issues with his 19th-century predecessor. Not the least of which was his fascination with the connection they bore with the moral certainty of the "absolute language" of the Russian proverb. Another scholar, Mary McCarthy has gone so far as to label this bond between art and morality "the Tolstoy connection."⁹ This ethical link between art and the proverb is not surprising since, in Tolstoy's as well as in Solzhenitsyn's own views, both are associated, like the proverb, with the prescriptive qualities of truth understood through experience and morality.¹⁰ In his speech before the Union of Soviet Writers in November 1967, for example, Solzhenitsyn declared:

The task of a writer is to select more universal and eternal questions, [such as] the secrets of the human heart and conscience, the confrontation between life and death, the triumph over spiritual sorrows, the laws in the history of mankind that were born in the depths of time immemorial and that will cease to exist only when the sun ceases to shine.¹¹

Similar to Tolstoy and other nineteenth-century Russian writers, Solzhenitsyn's fictional works bring to mind a spirit of moral exhortation reminiscent, one might suggest, of the didactic spirit of the proverb. Also like Tolstoy and, for that matter the Russian proverb itself, Solzhenitsyn sees himself as a teacher of life and, in fact, assumes an inseparability between art and life itself. Further reminiscent of the properties of the proverb, Solzhenitsyn states in his Nobel Prize Lecture of 1972 that the "great and blessed property" of true art relates to its mission, which is both educational as well as prophetic. He goes on to note that the origin of art is spiritual and mystical, stating that art alone has the capacity to reveal a "portion of its mysterious inner light" and to warm even a chilled and sunless soul to an exalted spiritual experience."¹² Similarly congruent with the nature of the proverb, Solzhenitsyn argues that the prophetic mission of art is to address universal values and to inspire ethical behavior in the world.¹³ "True art" in Solzhenitsyn's formulation clearly has an enormous mission: like the role of the proverb, its educational task is to teach individuals as well as whole nations. And, still, like the proverb, its prophetic mission is to alert humanity of its precarious path and to call it to acknowledge, if not return to, timeless universal and absolute values.

Another view shared by Tolstoy and Solzhenitsyn with respect to the proverb relates to a disinclination both authors feel for purely intellectual solutions to problems of human existence and ethics. This is certainly evident in the narrative development of both of Tolstoy's major novels, *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, where each of the main protagonists over the course of their respective novels sheds his preference for the intellect and philosophy as tools for understanding life's mysteries and, in time, instead adopts the age-old wisdom provided by a Russian proverb. The same is true for the various heroes of Solzhenitsyn's novels, especially Gleb Nerzhin in *In the First Circle*, who through the agency of a Russian peasant, clearly comes to prefer life experience drawn from Russian proverbs, whose wisdom represents the fruit of ethical actions taken from real life rather than from the speculative world of philosophy. Both authors understand that proverbs, unlike philosophy, yield understandings that have emerged over time from life lessons accumulated from human experience and real human acts. Because they represent

the existential evidence of lessons taken from actual life, proverbial wisdom and advice, especially of the Russian variety, assume a major role in the moral-ethical quests undertaken by Tolstoy's and Solzhenitsyn's heroes. Furthermore, the native, folk quality of living Russian proverbs in their respective fictional and publicistic works far exceeds the appearance and use of proverbs emanating from Western Europe. This is not surprising as both authors adhered far more to nineteenth-century Slavophile views than to the more logic-centered precepts of the West.¹⁴

Like Tolstoy, Solzhenitsyn's interest in Russian proverbs date back to his childhood when his mother's sister, Aunt Irina, had presented him a copy of Vladimir Dal's *Пословицы русского народа/Proverbs of the Russian People* (1862). Years later, when working as a Gulag camp librarian in Zagorsk, Solzhenitsyn would run across a copy of Dal's four-volume *Толковый словарь живаго русского народа/Explanatory Dictionary of the Living Russian People* (1880) that to his delight contained examples of numerous proverbs taken from the Russian past. As Solzhenitsyn would later comment to his wife and others, he was especially drawn to the terse precision characterized by these gems of Russian folk wisdom. From an interview he gave to one of his biographers, Michael Scammell, Solzhenitsyn engaged in a variety of "literary gymnastics," wherein he would read a few pages from Dal' each day, attempting to commit to memory unusual words and popular expressions from the Russian language. According to his first wife, Natalya, he would mark particular proverbs taken from Dal's *Dictionary* and then pass them on to her to be typed and filed with the goal of one day filling a large vase bearing his favorite proverbs.¹⁵

Turning now to the relationship between Solzhenitsyn's *In the First Circle* and Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* and *War and Peace*, we recall the quest that the three major protagonists in each novel experience in seeking profound answers to the eternal questions of life's meaning. Like his predecessor, Platon Karataev, in Tolstoy's *War and Peace* and, for that matter, like Konstantin Levin in *Anna Karenina*, Gleb Nerzhin in Solzhenitsyn's novel brings to mind the famous Russian *pravednik* ("righteous person"), bent on sacrificing himself to identifying an eternal "truth" that will provide answers to an ever-elusive quest to live

properly and in harmony with the life force. For Gleb this mystery defines itself as the disparity between a just and proper life and one in which man rains evil acts upon his fellow man. Pierre Bezukhov, on the other hand, over the course of nearly a thousand pages, seeks to understand why his life is so empty and artificial. Neither the mystical practice of freemasonry nor his fancifully conceived mission to assassinate Napoleon succeeds in ridding Pierre of his constant feeling of doubt and disillusionment.

Konstantin Levin encounters a similar dilemma in Tolstoy's next novel, *Anna Karenina*. Confronted with the realization of death's inescapable cruel joke at the end of a lifetime of suffering and struggle, Levin considers suicide as a possible alternative to life. Not even his otherwise blissful marriage to Kitty succeeds in alleviating his constant doubts and endless soul-searching over this issue. In fact, he has become even more focused on philosophical musing following his marriage to Kitty and his new responsibilities as a father. Neither his readings in the classic literature of philosophical idealism nor his search for non-materialist answers to his questions about life's meaning bring him the guidance and consolation for which he has searched over the course of the novel. Mirroring the experience of Pierre Bezukhov in *War and Peace* as well as Gleb Nerzhin in *In the First Circle*, Levin achieves a resolution to his spiritual odyssey through the agency of the proverbial wisdom of one of his farm laborers, a Russian peasant named Fyodor.¹⁶ Morose and perplexed at seeing his peasants on the estate and imagining them dead in just a few years as he, too, would be dead, Levin launches into a conversation with his grain feeder, Fyodor, about whether a mutual acquaintance, old Platon from a neighboring village, might rent a certain farm plot that Levin had previously leased. Learning that the plot of land is currently rented by the innkeeper, Kirillov, and that the wealthy and amiable Platon would never be able to make it profitable, Levin innocently inquires how it is that Kirillov is able to succeed where Platon could not. Fyodor explains with a proverbial expression that Mityukha (a diminutive form of Kirillov's first name) "*pushes till he gets his own/нажмёт да своё выберёт*" and never takes pity on a peasant (AK, 794/386; 578). By contrast, Fyodor explains with still another proverbial expression that Platon would never "*skin a man/драть шкуру с человека*" (AK, 794/II, 386; Mok.,

II, 754).¹⁷ To emphasize his point, Fyodor directly employs two final proverbial expressions in explaining that Platon “*lives for the soul/для души живёт*” (AK, *ibid.*; Mok. II, 214) and that he “*remembers God/Бога помнит*” (AK, *ibid.*; Mok. II, 48). Struck by the profound insight of this peasant wisdom, Levin almost shouts, “How’s that? Remembers God? Lives for the soul?”

A new, joyful feeling came over him. At the muzhik’s words about Fokanych *living for the soul, by the truth, by God’s way*, it was as if a host of vague but important thoughts burst from some locked-up place and, all rushing towards the same goal, whirled through his head, blinding him with their light (AK, *ibid.*).

Throughout the novel Levin repeatedly has focused on conducting himself consonant with his own needs and personal advantage. Following his conversation with Fyodor, however, he once again reflects on his childhood lessons of “living for the good” and remembering God. In doing so, as he is reminded by Fyodor, one lives righteously and for others. Now galvanized with a new understanding of “how one should live,”¹⁸ Levin realizes the sham value of life’s deceptions as well as one’s own self-deceptions. He understands Fyodor’s message to say that “one should not live for one’s own needs—that is, one should live not for what we understand, for what we’re drawn to, for what we want—but for something incomprehensible, for God, whom no one can either comprehend or define” (AK, 795/II, 387). The simplicity of Fyodor’s wisdom is reflected in Levin’s own simplistic resolve never to argue with others, only to be foiled when he unintentionally quarells with his driver on the way home after meeting his brother, Sergei, and his friend, Katavasov. He quickly catches himself, however, realizing that such small moral lapses are inevitable in life and that his new-found faith and understanding will certainly survive.¹⁹

While no less spiritual in nature, Gleb Nerzhin’s existential search in Solzhenitsyn’s novel is not grounded in the comfortable life of the landed gentry of nineteenth-century Russia but, rather, in the hellish world of *zek* (prison) labor camps in Joseph Stalin’s twentieth-century nightmare of an interconnected *gulag* system. Unlike the personal and existential quests of Levin and Pierre, Nerzhin’s journey more so takes on the character of a

moral test of conscience. As Rzhovsky observes in his study of Solzhenitsyn's *The First Circle*, Levin's ethical crisis of how to live reflects itself in Nerzhin's quest of how to conduct oneself under the conditions of all-penetrating violence in society.²⁰ His conscience does not permit him to work in the cushy environs of a *sharashka* (special camp for intellectuals), when doing so means that he must align his scientific skills to the construction of speech decoders designed to imprison innocent victims unaware that their conversations are being recorded for purposes of possible arrest and imprisonment. This moral challenge to his conscience ultimately will unfold in his decision to leave the *sharashka* for the cold and remote northern camps of the gulag that promise him a certain death.

As was the case in Tolstoy's two novels, Solzhenitsyn frames the resolution of Gleb's search for conscience in the form of age-old peasant wisdom borne by a Russian proverb. A comparison of the moments of spiritual discovery, respectively achieved by Levin, Pierre and Gleb, demonstrates the serious role assigned to proverbial speech by Tolstoy and Solzhenitsyn alike. In the case of Pierre in *War and Peace*, twelve books of the novel over the course of nearly one-thousand pages have brought Bezukhov to French imprisonment in a desolate camp outside of Moscow, where he has lapsed once again into a state of both physical and mental misery, confusion, and existential anguish. The meager and scraggly peasant Platon Karataev arrives almost as a beacon of hope for the forelorn Pierre.²¹ When Platon responds to Pierre's concern that his new-found friend must be saddened with his lot as a prisoner in the French camps, he unconsciously calls upon two Russian proverbs:

“How can one see all this and not feel sad? *But the maggot gnaws the cabbage, yet it dies first*/Червь капусту гложет, а сам перед нею умирает; that's the way the folks used to tell us...”

“What? What did you say?” asks Pierre.

“Who? I?” said Karataev. “I say things happen not as we plan but as god judges/Не нашим умом, а Божьим судом,” he replied, thinking that he was repeating what

he had said immediately before....” (AK, 858/II, 437; Mok., 987)²²

Significantly, Tolstoy selected the name Platon, the Russian version of the Greek philosopher Plato, who taught that one must look beyond the material world to a realm of greater spiritual harmony and certainty. Karataev, of course, would have no idea who Plato was or anything about the Greek philosopher's teachings. Nonetheless, both Tolstoy and Pierre immediately embrace the rustic peasant's aphoristic wisdom. It is not merely the two proverbs that Platon employs in this first scene, or even the successive nineteen that he eventually will insert into his speech over the course of a mere nine pages of the novel's action that capture Pierre's attention, but the overall personality and behavior of this strikingly unusual peasant. Throughout his conversations with Pierre, it is as if Platon speaks in a continuous stream of spontaneous proverbs and proverbial expressions, each of which manages to correspond to the given context or scene in which they are uttered. That is, what makes Karataev such a memorable and influential experience for Pierre is the lessons in life that he learns from his peasant mentor. As a result of his first encounter with Platon, for example, we read that Pierre considers that his «soul was once more stirring with a new beauty and on new and unshakable foundations» (W&P, 861/II, 441). Over the course of the four weeks that Pierre is confined to the prison shed with twenty-three other soldiers, only Platon remains “in his mind a most vivid and precious memory and the personification of everything Russian....” (W&P, 859/439). As Pierre later reflects on his peasant friend, he recalls the chief peculiarity of Platon's speech being its directness and appositeness (непосредственность и спорость). For example, when grieved at the news that Pierre's mother is no longer alive, Karataev immediately consoles with the Russian proverb, “*A wife for counsel, a mother-in-law for welcome, but there's none so dear as one's own mother/Жена для совета, тёща для привета, а нет милей родной матушки*» (W&P, 858/438; Mok, 335). And when he learns that Bezukhov does not regret not having children, the distressed Platon responds, «*Never decline a prison or a beggar's sack/От сумы да от тюрьмы не отказывайся*” (W&P, *ibid.*; Mok, 789), suggesting that one can-

not escape one's fate and fortune. Similarly, in preparing to retire every night, Platon would rapidly cross himself, repeating "Lord Jesus Christ, holy Saint Nicholas, Frola and Lavra!²³ Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on us and save us," concluding with the proverbial injunction, «*Lay me down like a stone, O God, and raise me up like a loaf*/Положи, Боже, камушком, подними калачиком" (W&P, 859/II, 440; Mok., 211). And when he awakens in the morning, Platon ritually pronounces, "*I lay down and curled up, I get up and shake myself*/ Лёг—свернулся, встал—встрянулся" (W&P, 860/*ibid.*; Mok., 484). In addition, as he begins to return to his former peasant habits during his French captivity, Karataev regrows his beard with a proverbial explanation, "*A soldier on leave—a shirt outside breeches*/ Солдат в отпуску—рубаша из порок" (W&P, *ibid.*; Mok., 850).

With regards to Platon's frequent habit of infusing Russian proverbs into his speech, Tolstoy informs his readers that they were not the coarse and indecent saws that soldiers often employed but, rather, "those folk sayings which taken without a context seem so insignificant, but when used appositely suddenly acquire a significance of profound wisdom" (W&P, *ibid.*). Pierre felt that his peasant friend adorned his speech with folk sayings often invented by Platon himself, but which always assumed a character of solemn fitness. This seemingly ordinary and insignificant Russian peasant acquires for Pierre an aura of saintliness as a representation of the shared native traditions of Russian rural life. Having traveled abroad in Western Europe, Pierre recognizes the truth and wisdom that eluded him there is rooted in the very heart of his native Russia in the person of Platon Karataev. It is what R. F. Christian refers to as the "popular gnostic element" of Platon's speech that so appeals to Pierre during their imprisonment.²⁴ While many of the liberal-minded elite in Tolstoy's time would have viewed Platon's frequent use of proverbial speech as a sign of his peasant class and low level of literacy, both Tolstoy and Pierre recognize, instead, the degree of wisdom reflected in his colloquial expressions. Clearly, Pierre has finally identified what he has searched so long to find—an honest person of true integrity, who lives justly and without pretense. It is as if Pierre discovers meaning in life simply by living everyday and interacting with Karataev. While the other prisoners looked upon Platon as an ordinary soldier, we read that to

Pierre “he always remained what he had seemed that first night: an unfathomable, rounded, eternal personification of the spirit of simplicity and truth” (*W&P*, 859/II, 439). As had been the case with Levin in the novel *Anna Karenina*, Pierre achieves a newly found peace of mind and tranquility through the agency of Russian proverbs relevantly pronounced by a peasant mentor:

He had sought in different ways...that inner harmony which had so impressed him in the soldiers at the Battle of Borodino. He had sought it in philosophy, in Freemasonry, in the dissipations of town life, in wine, in heroic feats of self-sacrifice, and in romantic love for Natasha; he had sought it by reasoning—and all these quests and experiments had failed him. And now without thinking about it he had found that peace and inner harmony only through...what he recognized in Karataev (*AK*, 895/II, 487).

Spiridon Yegorov, the wily janitor-*pravednik* of Solzhenitsyn’s *In the First Circle*, shares many of these same qualities represented by Platon Karataev. Similar to Tolstoy’s righteous hero, Spiridon comes from peasant roots, is in his fifties, and displays quite a fondness for interspersing Russian proverbs into his daily speech. The influence Spiridon renders Gleb is, perhaps, suggested by the diminutive form of his name (from the Latin *spiritus*, for soul or spirit). The name was borne by a fourth-century Cypriot saint, who was a hermit before becoming a bishop and playing a major role at the Nicene Council in 325. Of additional significance is the fact that St. Spyridon became the patron saint of the Tolstoy family early in the 15th century and remains so to this very day.²⁵

Like Platon Karataev in Tolstoy’s novel, Spiridon reflects similar degrees of a rich and checkered biography, stability and resolve of character, innate integrity, and a strong sense of fairness. Even their physical features, as described by both authors, bind the two proverb-laden peasants together: Spiridon, for example, appears “roundheaded, with reddish hair” (*IFC*, 497), while his forbearer shares a round-like quality that is referred to 5 times in just one sentence, giving a description of his physical traits: “When Pierre saw his neighbor next morning at dawn the first impression of him, as of something round, was fully con-

firmed. Platon's whole figure...was round. His head was quite round, his back, shoulders, and even his arms,...were rounded, his pleasant smile and his large, gentle brown eyes were also round" (*W&P*, 859/II, 439). This *kruglyi* quality to Platon and Spiridon arguably serves to endear both characters to the reader. Also, similar to Pierre's attraction to Karataev, Nerzhin finds himself very much drawn to the mysterious, philosophical folk wisdom of Spiridon. At one point in the novel, for example, Gleb reflects, "Didn't this [Spiridon's actions] somehow tally with the Tolstoyan doctrine that in this world no one is ever right and no one is ever to blame? Perhaps the more or less instinctive actions of this red-headed peasant exemplified the universal philosophical system known as skepticism" (*IFC*, 509/535)?²⁶

In his Tolstoyan quest for wisdom and understanding, Nerzhin embarks on a "khozhdenie v narod" or "going to the people," so reminiscent of Tolstoy's and many other nineteenth-century intellectuals' turning to Russian peasants and their traditional form of wisdom and system of values. Before his encounter with Spiridon towards the end of the novel, however, Gleb had already devoted considerable reflection on the nature of the Russian people. Earlier in the narrative, for example, he had entertained but soon rejected fellow *zek* Lev Rubin's view that it was futile to look for any degree of meaning in the peasant class since in his view only the collectivism and selflessness of the proletariat gave life a higher meaning. Similarly, Gleb comes to dismiss his friend Sologdin's opinion that the *narod* (people) was a term for the large mass of crude and simple people far too preoccupied in their unenlightened way with their daily existence (*IFC*, 493-494/519). It soon becomes obvious, however, that the janitor Spiridon's appeal for Gleb, like that of Pierre for Karataev, stems from his honesty and folk wisdom: "Far from wearying of Spiridon's stories [Gleb] felt refreshed by them; they were like the breath of a river at dawn, like the breeze that refreshes a field in the afternoon..." (*IFC*, 498/523). As Spiridon relates the various stages and difficulties of his life in the 1920s-1930s,²⁷ he sprinkles his stories with Russian proverbs much like Platon Karataev had done in his tales that had similarly captivated Pierre Bezukhov's attention. Returning to his home village following the Russian Civil War, for example, Spiridon recounts how he quickly put his land on a firm footing, concluding his

description with an apposite proverb, “*A good husbandman can walk down the yard and pick up a ruble/Кто хозяин хорош—по двору пройти, рубль найдёшь*” (IFC, 500/525; Mokienko, 961). A little later, in relating the close bond existing between himself and his wife, Spiridon called on the wisdom of another timeless Russian proverb, “*A good wife makes all the difference in life/Хорошо жениться—полжизни*” (IFC, *ibid.*; Mok., 342).

Bent on resolving the question of evil that has plagued him throughout the novel, Nerzhin waits breathlessly at every step of Spiridon’s description of his and his family’s adventures following the Civil War and leading up to the invasion of the Nazi army. Having secured his family’s safety, Spiridon describes the frantic chaos of the period in yet another metaphorical proverb, “*It isn’t my horse and it isn’t my whip, so off we go and I’ll never say ‘whoa’/Лощадь чужая, кнут не свой, погоняй не стой*” (IFC, 502/527; Mok., 494). Equally apposite in its wisdom is the proverb he employs upon hearing Gleb’s admission of his reluctant support of the new Soviet order, “*Well, it’s like that sometimes; we plant rye, and what comes up is goose-grass/Сеем рожь, а вырастает лебеда*” (IFC, 503/ 529; Mok., 763). Eager to learn from the lessons in life the janitor had accrued over the many trials and tribulations of his war-torn years, Gleb presses Spiridon for details about how he had fought for both the Soviets as well as the Germans during the war. Once again relying on a brief yet aptly selected proverb, Spiridon explains his decision to fight on the German side since the Soviet authorities would never believe his account of why he had not joined the Partisans during the war, “*He decided that he might as well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb.../Уж семь бед один ответ*” (IFC, 504/529; Mok., 38).

Difficulties continued to beset Spiridon even after the war when he and his family are posted to an American camp for displaced persons, where he has gone blind in one eye following a tragic drinking bout. Unlike his children, who succumb to the temptation of Soviet repatriation, Spiridon recognizes the danger as he explains to his wife in proverb fashion, “*They’ll promise us a lake, old girl, but who knows whether they’ll let us lap from a stinking puddle/Озеро в рот сулят, а из поганой лужи лакнуть ещё дадут ли?*” (IFC, 508/533; Mok., 496). When his daughter laments the prospect of being unable to marry a Russian boy in

her home country, Spiridon uncomfortably acknowledges the fitting wisdom of the proverb, "But no, *it's only the burned child that fears the fire*/Нет, видать, обо всё обжечься надо—самому" (*IFC*, 508/534; *Mok.*, 540).

As Pierre had marveled at Platon's strength and forbearance in the face of life's endless challenges, Gleb, too, reflects on Spiridon's will and determination especially since Gleb, himself, faces the decision of a lifetime—whether to remain in the *sharashka* or to maintain his resolve to be sent to the frozen camps of the north rather than participate in voice decoding experiments that will lead to the arrest of innocent men: "Through all the difficult years, through all the cruel vicissitudes, self-doubt had never unmanned Spiridon at the decisive moment. Spiridon Yegorov was horrifyingly ignorant, his mind was closed to the highest creations of the human spirit and human society, but his actions and decisions were marked by a steady and unwavering common sense" (*IFC*, 504/530). Like that of Platon Karataev, Gleb understands that Spiridon's moral code was uncomplicated, yet quietly confident. He did not speak ill of others and killed only in times of war. He never stole, and fought only in defense of his wife and family. Although nearly blind and sentenced to die in prison, Spiridon was not inclined toward despondency nor bent on repenting or reforming his ways: "He simply took his busy broom in his hands and swept the yard from dawn to dusk, day in and day out, in a life and death struggle against the commandant and the operations officers" (*IFC*, 505/531).

With this understanding of his trusted friend, Nerzhin feels compelled to address the one question that has filled his mind over the course of the novel. Throughout the time that he lived in the *gulag* camps and, now, even in the *sharashka*, Gleb has witnessed first hand the cruelty and savagery that man inflicts upon his fellow man. In his various attempts to understand the evil he has seen as well as experienced, Gleb has toyed with the merits of Taoism and skepticism as possible existential approaches to life—although not finding them within himself to embrace entirely. Laying his hands on Spiridon's shoulders, he wonders, "Perhaps...this is when I will learn the fundamentals of home-spun peasant skepticism, so that I can base myself on it in the future" (*IFC*, 510/536). Clearly, Gleb seeks a counterbalance to the learned and rational approaches to life represented by his *zek*

friends Rubin and Sologdin. He finally braces himself by referring to one of Spiridon's oft-quoted proverbs in addressing the question that has so plagued him throughout the novel:

That saying of yours about *sowing rye and goose-grass coming up*....At least it was rye they sowed, or so they thought. It may be that all human beings want to do good or think they're acting for the best, but nobody is infallible.... They can convince themselves that they're doing good, but the results are bad.... Can anybody on this earth possibly make out who's right and who's wrong? Who can tell us that? (*IFC*, 510-511/536).

After several pages of cautiously framing and patiently developing his question, Nerzhin is shocked by the appositeness and speed with which Spiridon proverbially responds to his probing and lengthy query: "I can tell you—*killing wolves is right; eating people is wrong!* Волкодав—прав, а людоед—нет!" (*IFC*, 511/537; *Mok.*, 143). The shock with which Gleb responds, "What? What's that you say?" reflects nearly verbatim Pierre's own reaction to Platon Karataev's proverb about the *maggot gnawing the cabbage, yet dying first*, that is, things happening in life *not as we plan, but as God judges*. Also, like Pierre, Nerzhin is elated with the new insight he has gained from his peasant mentor. While Tolstoy's hero had sought peasant wisdom in order to unravel the meaning of life when it ultimately leads only to death, Gleb looks to Spiridon to test his conscience and resolve to do the right thing in life, much as he feels Spiridon has done throughout his own life.

Throughout the novel Nerzhin has demonstrated an instinctive awareness of the importance of one's acts and actions as well as a corresponding distrust of the philosophical and purely intellectual solutions to problems of human existence and ethics. His own experiments in Taoist philosophy as well as the respective influence of Rubin's dogmatic Marxism and Sologdin's pragmatic egotism have left only questions and doubt in Nerzhin's mind. Over the course of the novel, Gleb's interests gravitate to an understanding of life based more so on actions than on ideas. Unlike both Pierre and Levin, who spend most of their respective novels lost in philosophical speculation, Nerzhin intuitively understands that such intellectual soul searching will

be of little use to him. Actions themselves, certainly reflected in the lessons that he gleans from Spiridon's life history, come to represent for Gleb the concrete reality of human existence.²⁸ In listening to Spiridon's stories about his life, Gleb is struck by the certainty with which this simple peasant has made decisions of great personal and ethical resolve: "Not one of those eternally-damned questions about the criteria for truth in our emotional perceptions or about the adequacy of our inner awareness bothered Spiridon. He was certain of what he saw, heard, and smelled; he understood everything unmistakably" (*IFC*, 505/530). It can be argued that the folk wisdom of the proverb, cited by Spiridon differentiating the acts of the wolfhound from those of the cannibal, constitutes both the final link in the existential journey Nerzhin has taken during the novel, as well as the climax of the novel itself. With Spiridon's answer to his questions about justice, Gleb now feels fortified to set off on the next stage of his journey—one that will undoubtedly result in his death of cold and starvation in a northern arctic camp. Grounded in his newly acquired understanding of a life bound to a commitment not to perform evil toward others, Gleb is able to reaffirm his earlier refusal to cooperate with evil by rejecting Sologdin's offer at the end of the novel of a position in the latter's special new project involving absolute voice decoding at the Mavrinno prison. By the final page of the novel, the reader feels that while a physical death certainly awaits him, Gleb's spiritual health and well-being remain intact and will sustain him through whatever trials he will face outside of this first circle of hell.

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Notes

¹ For the most thorough discussion of the relationship of the polyphonic novel in the works of Dostoevsky and Solzhenitsyn, see Vladislav Krasnov, *Solzhenitsyn and Dostoevsky: A Study in the Polyphonic Novel* (University of Georgia Press, 1980). One of the first commentators to note affinities of

Solzhenitsyn's fiction to that of both Dostoevsky and Tolstoy is Deming Brown in, "Cancer Ward and First Circle A Review Article," *Slavic Review*, vol. 39 (June, 1969), 304-313.

² There are many other affinities, of course, between Tolstoy's fiction and that of Solzhenitsyn beyond this moral-didactic voice. Stylistic devices (e.g. sparing use of figurative language; involved syntactic constructions; long, single-sentence paragraphs; word repetitions; parallel prepositional phrases and verb forms; authorial parenthetical interpolations into the text; etc.) are common in the works of both authors.

³ For an enlightening discussion of Tolstoy's "absolute language," see Morson's seminal article, "Tolstoy's Absolute Language," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 7.4 (1981), 667-687; also, his monograph, *Hidden in Plain View: Narrative and Creative Potentials in 'War and Peace'* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987). In this latter work, Morson argues that as a kind of absolute language, proverbs, "[L]ike biblical commands...can be attributed to no particular author.... Proverbs are never spoken, they are only cited; and to cite a proverb is to make its nonhistorical statement applicable to, but in no sense conditioned by, a particular historical situation. It is, rather, the historical situation that reveals its conformity to the timeless pattern described by the proverb" (14).

⁴ See, for example, Gary R. Jahn, "Tolstoy as a Writer of Popular Literature," in *The Cambridge Companion to Tolstoy*, ed. Donna Tussing Orwin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 113-126; Henri Troyat, *Tolstoy* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1967), trans. from the French by Nancy Amphoux, 463; О. В. Ломакина, "О функционировании фразеологизмов в текстологии Л. Н. Толстого," in *Язык. Человек. Дискурс* (Szczecin), 111-117; Ломакина, "Способы раскрытия смыслового содержания фразеологизма в тексте (на примере художественных произведений и писем Л. Н. Толстого), in *Грамматические категории и единицы: синтагматический аспект: К 100-летию профессора Анатолия Михайловича Иорданского: Материалы VII Международной конференции* (Владимир, 2007), 171-174.

⁵ Quoted in Troyat, 463.

⁶ V. M. Mokienko, "О словаре псковских пословиц и поговорок," in *Словарь псковских пословиц и поговорок*, compiled by V. M. Mokienko, T. G. Nikitkina (Sankt Peterburg: Olma, 2001), and Olga Lomakina, "фразеология Л. Н. Толстого : Типология трансформации, и паремии" in *Слово, Текст, Czas X: Jednostka frazeologiczna w tradycyjnych i nowych paradygmatach naukowych*, ed. Michał Aleksiejnki i Harrego Waltera (Greifswald: Szczecin, 2010), 251.

⁷ Some recent exceptions to this statement include, Rebecca Hogan, "Set Phrases of Consolation and Exhortation: Judging Proverbial and Biblical Wisdom in *Anna Karenina*," in *Proverbs in Russian Literature: From Catherine the Great to Alexander Solzhenitsyn*, ed. Kevin J. McKenna (Burlington, Vermont: Supplement Series of *Proverbium: Yearbook of International Proverb Scholarship*, 1997), 75-89; Kevin J. McKenna, "If a

Claw Gets Stuck, The [Whole] Bird is Lost": Proverb Function in Leo Tolstoy's Play *The Power of Darkness*," *Res Humanae Proverbiorum et Sententiarum: Ad Honorem Wolfgangi Mieder*. ed. Csaba Foldes. Unter Narr Verlag (Tubingen, 2004), 197-204; Olga Lomakina, "Национальное в индивидуальном: пословицы и поговорки в художественных произведениях Л. Н. Толстого," in *Cuadernos de Rusística Española*, 5 (2009), 11-20; Kevin J. McKenna, "The Role of the Proverb in Leo Tolstoy's Novel *Anna Karenina*," *Proverbium*, vol. 28 (2011), 121-146. The author wishes to express his gratitude to friend, colleague, and mentor, Wolfgang Mieder, for sharing information about the Lomakina article.

⁸ Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, *The Oak and the Calf: Sketches of Literary Life in the Soviet Union*, trans. Harry Willetts (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1979)/*Бодался телёнок с дубом* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1975); for an analysis of the role of the proverb in this work, see my article "Didactics and the Proverb: The Case of Alexander Solzhenitsyn's Literary Memoirs, *The Oak and the Calf*," *Proverbium*, vol. 25 (2008), pp. 289-317.

⁹ "The Tolstoy Connection," in *Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: Critical Essays and Documentary Materials* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1973), 332-350.

¹⁰ In his *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, for example, one of Solzhenitsyn's characters argues that "literature must raise the right feelings," a sentiment very reminiscent of Tolstoy's theory in his *What Is Art?*, trans. A. Maude (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 198f. In *In the First Circle* another one of Solzhenitsyn's characters observes that literature must be rooted in the "conscience" and that it should assume the role of the "teacher of the people," *In the First Circle*, trans. Harry T. Willetts (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), 462.

¹¹ Quoted from Leopold Labedz, ed., *Solzhenitsyn: A Documentary Record* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 121.

¹² *Nobel Lecture*, trans. F. D. Reeve (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc., 1972), 5-6.

¹³ Shulubin, one of the characters in Solzhenitsyn's *Cancer Ward*, persuasively argues this goal: "We have to show the world in which all relationships, fundamental principles and laws flow directly from ethics and from them *alone*. Ethical demands must determine all considerations: how to bring up children, what to train them for, to what end the work of grownups should be directed, and how their leisure should be occupied." *Cancer Ward*: (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1974), 446/Александр Солженицын, Собрание сочинений, том второй, *Раковый корпус* (Frankfurt/Main, Germany: Possev-Verlag, 1970), vol. 2, 489-490.

¹⁴ The Slavophile movement, originating in mid-nineteenth century Russia, opposed what it saw as the gradual Westernization of Russia. The Slavophiles held that Russia was culturally, morally, and politically superior to the West. While not formally members of this movement, both Dostoevsky and Tolstoy adhered to many of its views, as did Solzhenitsyn himself. For more

information on this movement, see Tomas G. Masaryk, *The Spirit of Russia: Studies in History, Literature and Philosophy*, 2 vols. (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1955).

¹⁵ Michael Scammell, *Solzhenitsyn: A Biography* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1984), 227.

¹⁶ While Fyodor's peasant speech is larded with significantly fewer proverbs than that of either Platon Karataev or Spiridon Yegorov, the peasant wisdom he conveys to Levin in the form of Russian proverbs has the same revelatory effect on him.

¹⁷ I have used the Richard Pevear/Larissa Volokhonsky English language translation of the novel (New York: Penguin Books, 2000); the citation from the Russian original is taken from Л. Н. Толстой, *Анна Каренина* (Ленинград: Художественная литература, 1967), в двух томах. Page numbers for citations from this English translation will appear in parentheses immediately following the citation in the text of this article. The second page number will refer to the Russian language text, preceded by a Roman numeral to indicate which of the two volumes is being used. Finally, the third page number following each proverb citation will refer to Valery Mokienko's (Mok.) source for the proverb in his recently published *Большой словарь русских пословиц/Great Dictionary of Russian Proverbs* (Moskva: OLMA media group, 2010). In some cases the source for a proverbial expression will appear as Mok., II to reflect Mokienko's earlier book, *Большой словарь русских поговорок/Great Dictionary of Russian Proverbial Expressions* (Moskva: OLMA media group, 2008).

¹⁸ It is interesting to note that the proverbial expression serves both as the title to one of Tolstoy's short stories as well as the title of one of Solzhenitsyn's chapters in *Cancer Ward*.

¹⁹ My reading of this scene concurs with that of Gary Saul Morson, who cautions against a misreading of this passage by many readers who interpret Tolstoy to be saying that Russian peasants are all wise. Fyodor's proverb-lesson here is, indeed, not the answer but the catalyst for Levin's eventually moving toward the answer he has been seeking throughout the novel. See Morson's "Anna Karenina" *In Our Time: Seeing More Wisely* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007) 209-210.

²⁰ *Solzhenitsyn: Creator & Heroic Deed*, trans. Sonja Miller (Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1978), 49-69. It should be noted that Rzevsky's book examines the earlier publication of Solzhenitsyn's novel, the one containing only 87 chapters from the Russian original that he had found necessary to censor in hopes of having it published in Russia in the early 1960s. In English translation this edition is titled *The First Circle*, trans. Thomas P. Whitney and was originally published by Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 1968 and later by Northwestern University Press, 1997. The complete version of the novel, written between 1955-1958, containing the original 95 chapters, was published much later and correctly appears in English translation as *In the First Circle: A Novel, The Restored Text*, trans. Harry T. Willets (New York: Harper

Perennial, 2009). Regardless of Rzhnevsky's study being based on the shorter and censored text of the novel, its argument and analysis continue to hold considerable insight and understanding.

²¹ In his analysis of the various drafts of Tolstoy's novel, R. F. Christian comments on the slow and gradual development of Karataev's character and, especially, the selection of proverbs finally assigned to him. According to Christian, in the earlier drafts of the novel Pierre does not undergo his regeneration and resolution of his moral search nearly as convincingly until Karataev's character is integrated into the action. *Tolstoy's "War and Peace": A Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), 44.

²² Hereafter, references to proverb citations from Tolstoy's *War and Peace* will be based on the Norton Critical Edition translation edited by George Gibian (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1996). Page numbers for citations from this English translation will appear in parentheses immediately following the citation in the text of this article. The second page number will refer to the two-volume Russian original (Leningrad: Khudozhestvennaya literatura, 1967). Finally, the third page number following each proverb citation will refer to Valery Mokienko's (Mok.) source for the proverb.

²³ Brothers who were martyred under the Roman Emperor Diocletian, Florus and Laurus are included by the Russian Orthodox Church as saints and have been accounted the patron saints of horses by the peasants, who mispronounce their names.

²⁴ *Tolstoy's "War and Peace": A Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), 162.

²⁵ For an interesting history of this name, see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Spyridon>.

²⁶ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *In the First Circle*. All citations from the English translation are based on this translation and will follow the system used earlier for Tolstoy's novels: reference to the English translation will appear first, separated by a parallel bar (/) and, then, followed by the page number from the original Russian text, *В кругу первом. Роман* (Москва: ПРОЗАИК, 2009).

²⁷ The author of a recent monograph on Solzhenitsyn's novel observes that he manages to capture nearly the entire history of Soviet people through the lengthy description of Spiridon's adventures. See, Pekka Forrstedt, *Человек перед лицом зла: Мир героев Александра Солженицына "В кругу первом"/Man in the Face of Evil: The World of Heroes in Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's Novel "In the First Circle"* (JYVÄSKYLÄ: University of JYVÄSKYLÄ, 2001), 122.

²⁸ For an engaging discussion of the experiential basis of Nerzhin's thoughts and actions, see Natalie Rea, "Nerzhin: A Sartrean Existential Man," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 13, Nos. 2-3 (1971), 209-216.

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