A Confession

LEO TOLSTOY

1828–1910

A Confession

Исповедь

Translated from the Russian with AI (Claude) and edited



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A Confession · Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910)

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INTRODUCTION

In the late 1870s Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910) had everything a writer could want. *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* were behind him; he was healthy, rich, happily married and famous across Europe. And he found that he could not see why he should go on living. *A Confession*, written between 1879 and 1882, is his account of that crisis. Russian censors would not allow it to be printed, and it first appeared in Geneva in 1884, then circulated in copies at home.

He tells the story plainly: the boy who lost his faith, the young officer and gambler, the writer who taught others without knowing what to teach, the head of a family who hid a rope from himself so as not to hang himself. He asks the sciences and the philosophers what his life means, and gets the answer of Solomon and Schopenhauer: it means nothing. He looks at the people of his own class and sees four ways of living with that answer, none of which he can accept.

What turns him is the faith of ordinary working people, who live as if life had a meaning. Faith, he concludes, is "the force of life." He tries the Orthodox Church, keeps its fasts and takes communion, and in the end breaks with it over its hatred of other faiths and its blessing of war and executions. The book closes with a dream of hanging over an abyss, held up by a single strap. It opened the last thirty years of Tolstoy's life, spent on his own version of Christianity.

Chapter I

Baptized in the Orthodox faith, he has lost it by eighteen; what remains is a faith in self-perfection that turns into ambition.

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[1] *(Introduction to an unpublished work)*[1]

[1.1] I was baptized and brought up in the Orthodox Christian faith. I was taught it in childhood and all through my boyhood and youth. But when, at eighteen, I left the university in my second year, I no longer believed in anything I had been taught.

[1.2] Judging by certain memories, I never really believed seriously. I only had trust in what I had been taught and in what the grown-ups around me professed; and that trust was very shaky.

[1.3] I remember that when I was about eleven, a boy named Vladimir M., a gymnasium pupil long since dead, came to see us one Sunday and announced to us, as the latest news, a discovery that had been made at the gymnasium. The discovery was that there is no God and that everything we are taught is nothing but made-up stories (this was in 1838). I remember how interested my older brothers were in this news, and how they called me too into their council. We all, I remember, grew very excited and took the news as something very entertaining and quite possible.[2]

[1.4] I remember too that when my older brother Dmitry, while at the university, suddenly gave himself up to faith with the passion that was in his nature, and began going to all the services,

1 Tolstoy meant *A Confession* as the preface to his critique of dogmatic theology, which could not then be published in Russia.

2 A gymnasium was a classical secondary school.

fasting, and leading a pure and moral life, all of us, even the grown-ups, never stopped laughing at him, and for some reason nicknamed him Noah. I remember that Musin-Pushkin, who was then the curator of Kazan University, invited us to dances at his house, and when my brother declined, he mockingly tried to persuade him by saying that even David danced before the Ark. At the time I sympathized with these jokes of my elders, and I drew from them the conclusion that one must learn the catechism and one must go to church, but one should not take any of it too seriously. I remember too that I read Voltaire when I was very young, and his mockery not only did not shock me, it amused me very much.[3]

1.5 My falling away from faith happened in me just as it happened then, and happens now, in people of our kind of education. In most cases, it seems to me, it happens like this. People live as everyone lives, and everyone lives by principles that not only have nothing in common with the doctrine of faith but are for the most part opposed to it. The doctrine plays no part in life; one never has to run up against it in dealings with other people, and one never has to consult it in one's own life. This doctrine is professed somewhere over there, far from life and independent of it. If one does run up against it, it is only as an external phenomenon, unconnected with life.

1.6 From a man's life, from his deeds, it was impossible then, as it is impossible now, to tell whether he is a believer or not. If there is any difference between those who openly profess Orthodoxy and those who reject it, it is not in favor of the former. Then as now, open acknowledgment and profession of Orthodoxy was found for the most part in people who were dull, cruel and immoral, and who thought themselves very important. Intelligence, honesty, straightforwardness, good nature and morality were for the most part found in people who considered themselves unbelievers.

3 Count Mikhail Musin-Pushkin (1795–1862) was curator (superintendent) of the Kazan educational district, where Tolstoy and his brothers studied. King David danced before the Ark of the Covenant (2 Samuel 6).

1.7 In the schools they teach the catechism and send the pupils to church; government officials are required to produce certificates that they have taken communion. But a man of our circle who is no longer studying and is not in government service could, and can even now—and in the old days even more so—live for decades without once remembering that he lives among Christians and is himself considered to profess the Orthodox Christian faith.

1.8 So, now as before, the doctrine of faith, accepted on trust and kept up by outside pressure, gradually melts away under the influence of knowledge and of the experience of life, which are opposed to it. And very often a man goes on living for a long time imagining that the doctrine imparted to him in childhood is still whole in him, when in fact not a trace of it has been left for a long time.

1.9 S., an intelligent and truthful man, told me how he stopped believing. When he was already about twenty-six, he was once spending the night somewhere on a hunting trip, and in the evening, out of an old habit he had kept since childhood, he knelt down to pray. His older brother, who was with him on the hunt, lay on the hay watching him. When S. had finished and was lying down, his brother said to him: "So you still do that?" And they said nothing more to each other. And from that day on S. stopped kneeling to pray and going to church. And now for thirty years he has not prayed, not taken communion, and not gone to church. And not because he knew his brother's convictions and had come over to them, and not because he had decided anything in his soul, but only because the words his brother spoke were like the push of a finger against a wall that was ready to fall from its own weight. Those words showed him that where he thought there was faith there had long been only an empty space, and that the words he said, and the signs of the cross and the bows he made as he stood at prayer, were therefore completely meaningless actions. Once he had recognized that they were meaningless, he could not go on with them.

1.10 So it has been, and so it is, I think, with the great majority of people. I am speaking of people of our education, of people who are truthful with themselves, not of those who make the very object of faith a means of reaching some temporal end or other. (These people are the most thoroughgoing unbelievers of all, because if faith is for them a means of reaching some worldly end, then it is certainly not faith.) These people of our education are in this position: the light of knowledge and of life has melted the artificial structure, and either they have already noticed it and cleared the space, or they have not noticed it yet.

1.11 The doctrine of faith imparted to me in childhood vanished in me just as it did in others, with only this difference: because I began very early to read a great deal and to think, my renunciation of the doctrine very early became conscious. From the age of sixteen I stopped kneeling to pray, and I stopped going to church and fasting before communion of my own accord. I stopped believing in what had been imparted to me in childhood, but I believed in something. What I believed in, I could not possibly have said. I believed in God too, or rather I did not deny God—but what kind of God, I could not have said. Nor did I deny Christ and his teaching, but what his teaching consisted in, I could not have said either.

1.12 Now, remembering that time, I see clearly that my faith—the thing that, apart from animal instincts, moved my life—my one true faith at that time was faith in perfection. But what perfection consisted in and what its aim was, I could not have said. I tried to perfect myself mentally—I studied everything I could, everything life pushed me toward. I tried to perfect my will—I drew up rules for myself and tried to follow them. I perfected myself physically, sharpening my strength and agility with all kinds of exercises and training myself in endurance and patience with all kinds of privations. And all this I considered perfection. The starting point of it all was, of course, moral perfection, but this was soon replaced by perfection in general, that is, by the desire to be better not in my own eyes or in God's, but by the desire to be better in the eyes of other people. And very

soon this striving to be better in the eyes of people was replaced by the desire to be stronger than other people, that is, more famous, more important, richer than others.

Chapter II

War, vice and literary fame: Tolstoy joins the writers who believe they are teaching humanity without knowing what to teach.

2.1 Someday I will tell the story of my life—both touching and instructive—in those ten years of my youth. I think that very many people have gone through the same thing. With all my soul I wanted to be good; but I was young, I had passions, and I was alone, completely alone, when I sought the good. Every time I tried to show what made up my most heartfelt desires—that I wanted to be morally good—I met with contempt and ridicule; and as soon as I gave myself up to vile passions, I was praised and encouraged. Ambition, love of power, greed, lust, pride, anger, revenge—all this was respected. Giving myself up to these passions, I became like a grown-up, and I felt that people were pleased with me. My kind aunt, the purest of beings, with whom I lived, always told me that there was nothing she would like so much for me as that I should have an affair with a married woman: "rien ne forme un jeune homme comme une liaison avec une femme comme il faut" [nothing forms a young man like an affair with a woman of good society]. She wished me another happiness too—that I should become an adjutant, and[1]

1 Tatyana Ergolskaya (1792–1874), a distant relative who helped raise the orphaned Tolstoy children.

2.2 best of all to the Emperor; and the greatest happiness of all —that I should marry a very rich girl and that, as a result of this marriage, I should have as many slaves as possible.[2]

2.3 I cannot recall those years without horror, loathing and heartache. I killed people in war, I challenged men to duels in order to kill them, I lost at cards, I squandered the labor of peasants, I punished them, I fornicated, I deceived. Lying, stealing, adultery of every kind, drunkenness, violence, murder... There was no crime I did not commit, and for all this I was praised, and my contemporaries considered, and still consider, me a comparatively moral man.[3]

2.4 So I lived for ten years.

2.5 During this time I began to write, out of vanity, greed and pride. In my writing I did the same thing as in my life. To have the fame and the money for which I wrote, I had to hide what was good and display what was bad. And that is what I did. How many times I contrived to hide in my writings, under a show of indifference and even of light mockery, those strivings of mine toward the good which made up the meaning of my life. And I succeeded: I was praised.

AMONG THE WRITERS

In Petersburg he joins the writers, whose faith is that poets teach humanity without knowing what.

2.6 At twenty-six I came to Petersburg after the war and got to know the writers. They received me as one of their own and flattered me. And before I knew it, the views on life held by the writers I had got to know, the views of their class, had become my own, and they had completely wiped out in me all my former attempts to become better. Under the dissoluteness of my life these views put a theory that justified it.

2 That is, serfs, whom Tolstoy pointedly calls slaves; serfdom was abolished in 1861.

3 Tolstoy served as an artillery officer in the Caucasus and in the Crimean War (1853–56), including the siege of Sevastopol.

2.7 The view of life held by these people, my fellow writers, was that life in general develops, and that in this development the chief part is played by us, the people of thought; and among the people of thought the chief influence is ours—the artists, the poets. Our calling is to teach people. And so that the natural question should not occur to us—what do I know, and what am I to teach?—it was made clear in this theory that there is no need to know this, that the artist and the poet teach unconsciously. I was considered a wonderful artist and poet, and so it was very natural for me to adopt this theory. I, an artist, a poet, wrote and taught, without myself knowing what. For this I was paid money; I had excellent food, lodgings, women, society; I had fame. It followed that what I taught was very good.

2.8 This faith in the significance of poetry and in the development of life was a faith, and I was one of its priests. To be one of its priests was very profitable and pleasant. And I lived in this faith for quite a long time without doubting its truth. But in the second and especially in the third year of such a life I began to doubt the infallibility of this faith and began to examine it. The first occasion for doubt was that I began to notice that the priests of this faith did not all agree with one another. Some said: we are the best and most useful teachers, we teach what is needed, and the others teach wrongly. And others said: no, we are the real ones, and you teach wrongly. And they argued, quarreled, swore at each other, deceived and cheated one another. Besides, there were many among us who did not care who was right and who was wrong, but simply pursued their own selfish ends by means of this activity of ours. All this made me doubt the truth of our faith.

2.9 Moreover, having come to doubt the truth of the writers' faith itself, I began to watch its priests more closely, and I became convinced that almost all the priests of this faith, the writers, were immoral people, and for the most part bad people, worthless in character—far below the people I had met in my former life of carousing and soldiering—but self-assured and pleased with themselves, as only people who are wholly holy

can be pleased with themselves, or people who do not even know what holiness is. People became repulsive to me, and I became repulsive to myself, and I understood that this faith was a fraud.

2.10 But the strange thing is that although I soon understood all this lie of a faith and renounced it, I did not renounce the rank these people had given me—the rank of artist, poet, teacher. I naively imagined that I was a poet, an artist, and could teach everyone without myself knowing what I was teaching. And that is what I did.

2.11 From my closeness to these people I carried away a new vice: a pride developed to the point of sickness, and a mad certainty that I was called to teach people without myself knowing what.

2.12 Now, remembering that time, my state of mind then and the state of mind of those people (there are thousands like them even now, for that matter), I feel pity, and terror, and amusement—there arises precisely the feeling one has in a madhouse.

2.13 We were all convinced then that we had to talk and talk, write, print—as fast as possible, as much as possible—and that all this was needed for the good of humanity. And thousands of us, denying and abusing one another, all printed and wrote, instructing others. And without noticing that we knew nothing, that to the very simplest question of life—what is good and what is bad—we did not know what to answer, we all talked at once without listening to one another, sometimes indulging one another and praising one another so that I too would be indulged and praised, and sometimes losing our tempers and shouting one another down, exactly as in a madhouse.

2.14 Thousands of workers labored day and night to the limit of their strength, setting type and printing millions of words, and the post carried them all over Russia, and we went on teaching more and more, teaching and teaching and teaching, and never managed to teach everything, and we were always angry that people listened to us so little.

2.15 It is terribly strange, but now I understand it. Our real, heartfelt reasoning was that we wanted to get as much money and praise as possible. To reach this goal we knew how to do nothing else but write books and newspapers. And that is what we did. But in order to do such useless work and to be sure that we were very important people, we needed a further argument that would justify our activity. And so we came up with the following: everything that exists is rational. And everything that exists develops. And everything develops by means of enlightenment. And enlightenment is measured by the spread of books and newspapers. And we are paid money and respected for writing books and newspapers, and therefore we are the most useful and the best of people.[4] This argument would have been very good if we had all agreed; but since every thought expressed by one of us was always met by a diametrically opposite thought expressed by another, this should have made us stop and think. But we did not notice it. We were paid money, and the people of our party praised us—so each of us considered himself right.

2.16 It is clear to me now that there was no difference at all between this and a madhouse; at the time I only vaguely suspected it, and even then, like all madmen, I called everyone mad except myself.

4 "Everything that exists is rational" is a popular version of Hegel's dictum "What is rational is actual, and what is actual is rational."

Chapter III

An execution in Paris, a brother's death, schools, marriage; then the questions begin: "Why? And what then?"

3.1 So I lived, giving myself up to this madness for another six years, until my marriage. During this time I went abroad. Life in Europe and my acquaintance with advanced and learned Europeans confirmed me still more in the faith in perfection in general by which I lived, because I found the very same faith in them. This faith took in me the usual form it takes in most educated people of our time. This faith was expressed by the word "progress." At the time it seemed to me that this word expressed something. I did not yet understand that, tormented like every living man by questions of how I could best live, I was answering: live in accordance with progress—and in saying this I was saying exactly what a man would say who is being carried along in a boat by the waves and the wind, if to the main and only question for him—"Which way should we steer?"—he were to answer, without answering the question: "We are being carried somewhere."

THE EXECUTION IN PARIS

A guillotining in Paris and his brother's death shake his faith in progress.

3.2 At the time I did not notice this. Only now and then did something in me—not my reason but my feeling—rebel against this superstition, so common in our time, with which people screen from themselves their failure to understand life. Thus, during

my stay in Paris, the sight of an execution exposed to me the shakiness of my superstition of progress.[1] When I saw how the head was severed from the body, and how each of them, separately, thudded into the box, I understood—not with my mind but with my whole being—that no theories of the rationality of what exists, or of progress, could justify this act; and that even if all the people in the world, by whatever theories, had found since the creation of the world that this was necessary—I know that it is not necessary, that it is wrong, and that therefore the judge of what is good and necessary is not what people say and do, and not progress, but I with my heart. Another occasion when I became aware that the superstition of progress is not enough to live by was the death of my brother.[2] An intelligent, kind, serious man, he fell ill while still young, suffered for more than a year and died in agony, not understanding why he had lived, and understanding still less why he was dying. No theories could answer these questions in any way, either for me or for him, during his slow and agonizing dying.

3.3 But these were only rare moments of doubt; in essence I went on living, professing only faith in progress. "Everything develops, and I develop; and why I am developing along with everyone else—that will become clear." That is how I would have had to formulate my faith then.

SCHOOLS, JOURNAL, MARRIAGE

He teaches peasant children, edits a journal, falls ill, marries, and gives fifteen years to his family.

3.4 On returning from abroad I settled in the country and took up work with peasant schools. This work was especially dear to my heart, because there was none of that lie in it which had become obvious to me and already stung my eyes in the work of teach-

1 In April 1857 Tolstoy watched a guillotining in Paris; he wrote to a friend that he would never again serve any government anywhere.

2 Nikolai Tolstoy (1823–60), Lev's eldest brother, died of tuberculosis at Hyères in the south of France.

ing through literature. Here too I acted in the name of progress, but by now I took a critical attitude toward progress itself. I told myself that progress had in some of its manifestations gone wrong, and that one ought to treat people in their original state, peasant children, with complete freedom, offering them the choice of whatever path of progress they wanted.[3]

3.5 In essence I was still circling around one and the same insoluble problem: how to teach without knowing what. In the higher spheres of literary activity it was clear to me that one cannot teach without knowing what to teach, because I saw that everyone taught different things and by their disputes only hid their ignorance from themselves. Here, though, with peasant children, I thought that this difficulty could be got around by letting the children learn whatever they wanted. It is funny to me now to remember how I twisted and turned to satisfy my lust to teach, though in the depths of my soul I knew very well that I could not teach anything that was needed, because I myself did not know what was needed. After a year spent working on the school, I went abroad a second time, to find out there how one might manage, while knowing nothing oneself, to be able to teach others.

3.6 And it seemed to me that I had learned this abroad, and, armed with all this wisdom, I returned to Russia in the year the peasants were emancipated, took up a post as an arbiter of the peace, and began to teach both the uneducated people in the schools and educated people in a journal that I began to publish. Things seemed to be going well, but I felt that I was not quite sound in mind and that this could not go on for long. And perhaps I would have come even then to the despair I came to at fifty, if I had not had one more side of life that I had not yet explored and that promised me salvation: this was family life.[4]

3.7 For a year I occupied myself with arbitration, with the schools and with the journal, and I wore myself out so—espe-

3 In 1859 Tolstoy opened a school for peasant children at Yasnaya Polyana, his estate south of Moscow.

cially because I had become entangled; so hard did my struggles as an arbiter become for me, so vague were the results of my work in the schools, so repugnant to me did my twisting and turning in the journal become, which consisted always in one and the same thing, the desire to teach everyone and to hide the fact that I did not know what to teach—that I fell ill, more spiritually than physically. I dropped everything and went off to the steppe, to the Bashkirs, to breathe the air, drink kumys and live an animal life.[5]

3.8 When I returned from there, I married. The new conditions of a happy family life now completely diverted me from any search for the general meaning of life. During this time my whole life was centered on my family, my wife, my children, and therefore on worries about increasing our means of living. The striving for perfection, already replaced earlier by the striving for perfection in general, for progress, was now replaced outright by the striving to make things as good as possible for me and my family.[6]

3.9 So another fifteen years went by.

3.10 Although during these fifteen years I considered writing a trifle, I nevertheless went on writing. I had already tasted the temptation of authorship, the temptation of enormous monetary rewards and applause for worthless work, and I gave myself up to it as a means of improving my material position and of stifling in my soul any questions about the meaning of my life and of life in general.

3.11 I wrote, teaching what was for me the one truth: that one must live so that things are as good as possible for oneself and one's family.

4 After the emancipation of the serfs in 1861, arbiters of the peace settled disputes between landowners and freed peasants. Tolstoy's journal was the pedagogical magazine *Yasnaya Polyana* (1862).

5 The Bashkirs are a Turkic people of the southern Urals and the Samara steppe; kumys is fermented mare's milk, then prescribed as a cure.

6 Tolstoy married Sofya Andreevna Behrs (1844–1919) in September 1862.

"WHY? AND THEN WHAT?"

Moments of bewilderment return more and more often as questions he cannot answer.

3.12 So I lived; but five years ago something very strange began to happen to me. At first I began to have moments of bewilderment, of the arrest of life, as though I did not know how I was to live or what I was to do, and I would lose my bearings and fall into dejection. But this passed, and I went on living as before. Then these moments of bewilderment began to recur more and more often, and always in the very same form. These arrests of life always expressed themselves in the same questions: Why? Well, and then what?

3.13 At first it seemed to me that these were just pointless, irrelevant questions. It seemed to me that all this was well known, and that if I ever wanted to take up the task of solving them, it would cost me no effort—that just now I had no time for it, but that whenever I chose to, I would find the answers. But the questions began to recur more and more often, the answers were demanded more and more insistently, and like dots that all fall on the same spot, these unanswered questions ran together into one black stain.

3.14 What happened was what happens to anyone who falls ill with a fatal internal disease. First insignificant signs of indisposition appear, to which the sick man pays no attention; then these signs recur more and more often and merge into one suffering that is unbroken in time. The suffering grows, and before the sick man can look around, he realizes that what he took for an indisposition is the thing that matters more to him than anything else in the world: that it is death.

3.15 The same thing happened to me. I understood that this was not a chance indisposition but something very important, and that if the same questions kept recurring, I had to answer them. And I tried to answer them. The questions seemed such stupid, simple, childish questions. But as soon as I touched them

and tried to resolve them, I was at once convinced, first, that they were not childish and stupid questions but the most important and profound questions in life, and second, that I could not, could not, however much I thought, resolve them. Before occupying myself with my Samara estate, with my son's education, with writing a book, I had to know why I would be doing it. As long as I do not know why, I cannot do anything.[7] In the midst of my thoughts about managing the estate, which occupied me a great deal at that time, the question would suddenly come into my head: "Very well, you will have 6,000 desyatinas in Samara province and 300 horses—and then what?..." And I was completely taken aback and did not know what to think next. Or, as I began to think about how I would bring up my children, I would say to myself: "Why?" Or, reasoning about how the people might attain prosperity, I would suddenly say to myself: "But what is that to me?" Or, thinking about the fame my works would bring me, I would say to myself: "Very well, you will be more famous than Gogol, Pushkin, Shakespeare, Molière, than all the writers in the world—and what of it?..."[8]

3.16 And I could find no answer, no answer at all.

7 Tolstoy bought land in Samara province, on the Volga steppe, in 1871 and 1878.
8 A desyatina is about 2.7 acres, so some 16,000 acres.

Chapter IV

At fifty, healthy, loved and famous, he hides a rope from himself; the Eastern fable of the traveler, the dragon and the two mice.

4.1 My life came to a stop. I could breathe, eat, drink, sleep, and I could not help breathing, eating, drinking, sleeping; but there was no life, because there were no desires whose satisfaction I would have found reasonable. If I desired anything, I knew in advance that whether I satisfied my desire or not, nothing would come of it.

4.2 If a fairy had come and offered to fulfill my wishes, I would not have known what to say. If in drunken moments I have, not desires, but the habits of former desires, in sober moments I know that this is a deception, that there is nothing to desire. I could not even desire to know the truth, because I guessed what it consisted in. The truth was that life is an absurdity.

4.3 It was as though I had lived and lived, walked and walked, and come to an abyss, and seen clearly that there was nothing ahead but destruction. And it is impossible to stop, and impossible to go back, and impossible to close my eyes so as not to see that there is nothing ahead but the deception of life and happiness, and real suffering and real death—complete annihilation.

4.4 Life became hateful to me—some irresistible force drew me to get rid of it somehow. I cannot say that I wanted to kill myself. The force that drew me away from life was stronger, fuller, more general than any wanting. It was a force like my former striving toward life, only in the opposite direction. With all my strength I

strove away from life. The thought of suicide came to me as naturally as thoughts of improving my life had come before. The thought was so tempting that I had to use cunning against myself so as not to carry it out too hastily. I did not want to be in a hurry only because I wanted to make every effort to untangle things! If I can't untangle them, there will always be time, I told myself. And so it was then that I, a happy man, took the cord out of my room, where I was alone every night as I undressed, so as not to hang myself from the crossbar between the cupboards, and I stopped going hunting with a gun, so as not to be tempted by too easy a way of ridding myself of life. I myself did not know what I wanted: I was afraid of life, I strove to get away from it, and yet I still hoped for something from it.

4.5 And this happened to me at a time when, on every side, I had what is considered complete happiness: it was when I was not yet fifty. I had a good, loving and beloved wife, good children, a large estate that grew and increased without any effort on my part. I was respected by my family and acquaintances more than ever before, I was praised by strangers, and I could consider that I had renown, without any particular self-deception. Moreover, I was not only not unwell in body or in spirit; on the contrary, I enjoyed a strength of both spirit and body such as I have rarely met in men of my age. Physically I could work at the haymaking without falling behind the peasants; mentally I could work for eight or ten hours at a stretch without feeling any ill effects from the strain. And in this state I came to the point where I could not live, and, being afraid of death, I had to use cunning against myself so as not to take my own life.

4.6 To me this state of mind took this form: my life is some stupid and spiteful joke that someone has played on me. Although I did not acknowledge any "someone" who might have created me, this way of picturing it, that someone had played a spiteful and stupid joke on me by bringing me into the world, was the way of picturing it that came most naturally to me.

4.7 I could not help imagining that somewhere out there is someone who is now amusing himself as he watches me. He

watches how for a whole thirty or forty years I lived, lived learning, developing, growing in body and spirit. And he watches how now, my mind fully matured, having reached that summit of life from which the whole of it lies open, I stand on that summit like a perfect fool, seeing clearly that there is nothing in life, and never was, and never will be. "And he finds it funny..."

4.8 But whether this someone who laughs at me exists or not, that does not make it any easier for me. I could not give any rational meaning to a single act, or to my whole life. I was only amazed that I could have failed to understand this at the very beginning. All this has been known to everyone for so long. Any day now sickness and death will come (and they had come already) to the people I love, to me, and nothing will remain but stench and worms. My works, whatever they may be, will all be forgotten, sooner or later, and I myself will be no more. So what is there to bustle about for? How can a man not see this and go on living—that is what is astonishing! One can live only so long as one is drunk with life; but once you sober up, you cannot help seeing that it is all just a deception, and a stupid deception! That is just it: there is nothing even funny or witty about it. It is simply cruel and stupid.

THE TRAVELER IN THE WELL

The Eastern fable of the traveler hanging between a beast and a dragon while two mice gnaw the bush.

4.9 There is an Eastern fable, told long ago, about a traveler caught in the steppe by a raging beast. Fleeing the beast, the traveler leaps into a dry well, but at the bottom of the well he sees a dragon with its jaws gaping wide to devour him. He dares not climb out, lest he perish from the raging beast, and he dares not jump down to the bottom of the well, lest he be devoured by the dragon. So the unhappy man seizes hold of the branches of a wild bush growing in the cracks of the well and clings to it. His hands grow weak, and he feels that he will soon have to give himself up to the destruction that awaits him on both sides. But

he still clings on, and while he clings he looks around and sees two mice, one black, the other white. They are going steadily round and round the stem of the bush he is hanging from, and they are gnawing through it.[1] Any moment now the bush will break off of itself and give way, and he will fall into the dragon's jaws. The traveler sees this and knows that he will inevitably perish. But while he hangs there, he looks about him and finds drops of honey on the leaves of the bush, reaches them with his tongue and licks them. So I too cling to the branches of life, knowing that the dragon of death inevitably awaits me, ready to tear me to pieces, and I cannot understand why I have been brought to this torment. And I try to suck the honey that used to comfort me; but the honey no longer gives me any pleasure, and the white mouse and the black mouse, day and night, are gnawing at the branch I am clinging to. I see the dragon clearly, and the honey is no longer sweet to me. I see one thing only—the inescapable dragon and the mice—and I cannot turn my eyes away from them. And this is not a fable. It is the real, indisputable truth, and anyone can understand it.

4.10 The old deception of life's joys, which drowned out the terror of the dragon, no longer deceives me. Tell me as often as you like: you cannot understand the meaning of life, so do not think, just live—I cannot do it, because I did it for too long before. Now I cannot help seeing the days and nights running on and leading me to death. I see this one thing, because this one thing is the truth. All the rest is a lie.

4.11 Those two drops of honey which had kept my eyes from the cruel truth longer than the others, love of my family and love of writing, which I called art, are no longer sweet to me.

4.12 "Family"... I said to myself. But family means a wife, children, and they are people too. They are in exactly the same conditions as I am: they must either live in a lie or see the terrible truth. Why should they live, then? Why should I love them, care for them, raise them and watch over them? For the same despair

1 The parable of the man in the well is told in the legend of Barlaam and Josaphat, which Russians knew from the lives of the saints; it goes back to Indian sources.

that is in me, or for dull stupidity! Because I love them, I cannot hide the truth from them, and every step they take in knowledge leads them to this truth. And the truth is death.

4.13 "Art, poetry?..." For a long time, under the influence of success and of people's praise, I assured myself that this was something one could do even though death would come and destroy everything—me, and my works, and the memory of them. But soon I saw that this too was a deception. It was clear to me that art is an adornment of life, a lure to life. But life had lost its allure for me, so how could I lure others? As long as I was not living my own life, while someone else's life carried me along on its waves, as long as I believed that life had a meaning, even though I could not express it, I took joy in reflections of life of every kind in poetry and the arts. I enjoyed looking at life in this little mirror of art. But when I began to search for the meaning of life, when I felt the need to live myself, this little mirror became either unnecessary to me, superfluous and ridiculous, or else painful. I could no longer take comfort in what I saw in the little mirror: that my situation was stupid and desperate. It was fine for me to rejoice in it when, in the depths of my soul, I believed that my life had a meaning. Then this play of lights and shadows, of the comic, the tragic, the touching, the beautiful and the terrible in life, amused me. But when I knew that life was meaningless and terrible, the play in the little mirror could no longer entertain me. No sweetness of honey could be sweet to me when I saw the dragon, and the mice gnawing away at my support.

LOST IN THE FOREST

It is the terror of being lost, not the bare knowledge of meaninglessness, that draws him to suicide.

4.14 But even that is not all. If I had simply understood that life has no meaning, I could have known it calmly; I could have known that this was my lot. But I could not rest content with that. If I had been like a man living in a forest from which he

knows there is no way out, I could have lived. But I was like a man lost in a forest, who is seized with terror because he is lost. He rushes about, wanting to get out onto the road. He knows that every step tangles him up still more, and he cannot help rushing about.

4.15 That was what was terrible. And to escape this terror I wanted to kill myself. I felt terror at what awaited me. I knew that this terror was more terrible than the situation itself, but I could not drive it away, and I could not wait patiently for the end. There was the argument that a blood vessel in my heart would burst all the same, or something would give way, and everything would be over. However convincing it was, I could not wait patiently for the end. The terror of the darkness was too great, and I wanted to be rid of it quickly, as quickly as possible, by a noose or a bullet. And it was this feeling, more than anything, that drew me toward suicide.

Chapter V

He looks for an answer in the experimental and the speculative sciences and finds that they answer every question but his.

5.1 "But perhaps I have overlooked something, failed to understand something?" I said to myself several times. "Surely this state of despair cannot be natural to human beings." And I sought an explanation for my questions in all the knowledge that people have acquired. And I searched long and painfully, and not out of idle curiosity, not listlessly. I searched painfully, stubbornly, day and night—I searched as a perishing man searches for salvation—and I found nothing.

5.2 I searched in all the branches of knowledge, and not only did I find nothing, I became convinced that all those who had searched in knowledge as I did had likewise found nothing. And not only had they found nothing, they had plainly acknowledged that the very thing that was driving me to despair, the absurdity of life, is the only indisputable knowledge accessible to man.

5.3 I searched everywhere. I had spent my life in study, and through my connections with the learned world I had access to the scholars themselves in all the various branches of knowledge. They did not refuse to reveal all their knowledge to me, not only in books but in conversation too. Thanks to all this, I learned everything that knowledge has to say in answer to the question of life.

5.4 For a long time I simply could not believe that knowledge had no other answer to the questions of life than the one it gives.

For a long time I studied the importance and seriousness of the tone in which science asserted its propositions, which have nothing in common with the questions of human life, and it seemed to me that there was something I was failing to understand. For a long time I was timid before knowledge. It seemed to me that its answers failed to fit my questions not through any fault of knowledge but through my own ignorance. But for me this was no joking matter and no amusement; it was the business of my whole life. Willy-nilly, I was led to the conviction that my questions were the only legitimate questions, the ones that serve as the foundation of all knowledge. The fault lay not with me and my questions but with science, if it presumes to answer these questions.

5.5 My question, the one that at the age of fifty brought me to suicide, was the simplest of questions. It lies in the soul of every human being, from a foolish child to the wisest of old men. It is the question without which life is impossible, as I found out in practice. The question is this: "What will come of what I am doing today or will do tomorrow—what will come of my whole life?"

5.6 Put differently, the question will be this: "Why should I live, why should I wish for anything, why should I do anything?" It can be put yet another way: "Is there any meaning in my life that would not be destroyed by the death that inevitably awaits me?"

TWO KINDS OF KNOWLEDGE

Experimental knowledge ignores his question; speculative knowledge recognizes it but cannot answer it.

5.7 It was for an answer to this one question, the same question put in different ways, that I searched in human knowledge. And I found that, in relation to this question, all human knowledge falls, as it were, into two opposite hemispheres, at whose two opposite ends stand two poles: one negative, the other positive. But at neither pole are there answers to the questions of life.

5.8 One kind of knowledge does not, as it were, even recognize the question, but in return it answers clearly and precisely the questions it has independently posed for itself. This is experimental knowledge, and at its extreme point stands mathematics. The other kind of knowledge recognizes the question but does not answer it. This is speculative knowledge, and at its extreme point stands metaphysics.

5.9 From early youth I was interested in speculative knowledge, but later mathematics and the natural sciences attracted me too. Until I had put my question to myself clearly, until this question had grown up within me of itself and was urgently demanding a solution, I was satisfied with the counterfeit answers to the question that knowledge offers.

5.10 At times, in the experimental sphere, I would say to myself: "Everything develops, differentiates, moves toward complexity and perfection, and there are laws that govern this course. You are part of the whole. Come to know the whole, so far as you can, and come to know the law of development, and you will come to know your own place in this whole, and yourself." Ashamed as I am to admit it, there was a time when I seemed to be satisfied with this. That was the very time when I myself was growing more complex and developing. My muscles were growing and getting stronger, my memory was being enriched, my capacity for thought and understanding was increasing. I was growing and developing, and since I felt this growth in myself, it was natural for me to think that this was precisely the law of the whole world, and that in it I would find the solution to the questions of my life as well. But there came a time when my growth stopped. I felt that I was not developing but drying up, my muscles were weakening, my teeth falling out. And I saw that this law not only explained nothing to me, but that there never had been and never could be any such law. I had taken for a law what I had found in myself at a certain period of life. I looked more strictly at the definition of this law, and it became clear to me that there can be no laws of infinite development. It became clear that to say that in infinite space

and time everything develops, perfects itself, grows more complex, differentiates, is to say nothing. These are all words without meaning, for in the infinite there is neither complex nor simple, neither front nor back, neither better nor worse.

5.11 The main thing, though, was that my personal question, what am I, with my desires?, was left altogether without an answer. And I understood that these branches of knowledge are very interesting, very attractive, but that their precision and clarity are in inverse proportion to their applicability to the questions of life. The less applicable they are to the questions of life, the more precise and clear they are; the more they try to offer solutions to the questions of life, the more unclear and unattractive they become. Turn to the branch of these sciences that tries to offer solutions to the questions of life, to physiology, psychology, biology, sociology, and you find there a staggering poverty of thought and the greatest obscurity. You find a wholly unjustified pretension to solve questions beyond their competence, and constant contradictions of one thinker by the others, and even by himself. Turn to the branch of knowledge that does not concern itself with solving the questions of life but answers its own scientific, specialist questions, and you are filled with admiration for the power of the human mind, but you know in advance that there are no answers to the questions of life. These sciences simply ignore the question of life. They say: "What you are and why you live—to that we have no answers, and that is not our business. But if you need to know the laws of light, of chemical compounds, the laws of the development of organisms, if you need to know the laws of bodies, their forms, and the relation of numbers and magnitudes, if you need to know the laws of your own mind, then to all this we have clear, precise and indisputable answers."

5.12 In general, the relation of the experimental sciences to the question of life may be expressed like this. Question: Why do I live?—Answer: In infinitely vast space, in infinitely long time, infinitely small particles undergo modifications of infinite com-

plexity, and when you understand the laws of these modifications, then you will understand why you live.

5.13 At other times, in the speculative sphere, I would say to myself: "All humanity lives and develops on the basis of spiritual principles, *ideals*, that guide it. These ideals are expressed in religions, in the sciences, the arts and the forms of the state. These ideals keep rising higher and higher, and humanity is moving toward the highest good. I am part of humanity, and so my calling is to help humanity become conscious of its ideals and realize them." And in my time of feeble-mindedness I was satisfied with this. But as soon as the question of life rose up clearly within me, this whole theory instantly collapsed. There is the dishonest imprecision with which knowledge of this kind passes off conclusions drawn from the study of a small part of humanity as general conclusions. There are the contradictions among the various adherents of this view as to what the ideals of humanity consist in. Leaving all that aside, the strangeness, not to say the stupidity, of this view lies in this. Every human being faces the question "what am I," or "why do I live," or "what should I do." To answer it, he must first solve the question: "what is the life of the whole of humanity, which he does not know, and of which he knows one tiny part over one tiny period of time." In order to understand what he is, a man must first understand what all this mysterious humanity is, made up of people just like himself, who do not understand themselves.

5.14 I must confess that there was a time when I believed this. That was the time when I had my own cherished ideals, which justified my whims, and I tried to invent a theory that would let me regard my whims as a law of humanity. But as soon as the question of life rose up in my soul in all its clarity, this answer instantly scattered into dust. And I understood that in the experimental sciences there are real sciences, and half-sciences that try to give answers to questions beyond their competence. I understood that in this sphere too there is a whole range of the most widespread branches of knowledge that try to answer questions beyond their competence. The half-sciences of this

sphere, the juridical, social and historical sciences, try to solve man's questions by appearing to solve, each in its own way, the question of the life of all humanity.

5.15 In the sphere of experimental knowledge, a man who sincerely asks how he is to live cannot be satisfied with the answer: study, in infinite space, the changes of infinite particles, infinite in time and complexity, and then you will understand your life. In just the same way, a sincere man cannot be satisfied with the answer: study the life of all humanity, whose beginning and end we cannot know and of which we do not know even a small part, and then you will understand your life. And just as with the experimental half-sciences, these half-sciences too are the more full of obscurities, imprecisions, stupidities and contradictions, the further they stray from their proper tasks. The task of experimental science is the causal sequence of material phenomena. Let experimental science bring in the question of a final cause, and the result is nonsense. The task of speculative science is the awareness of the causeless essence of life. Let it bring in the investigation of causal phenomena, such as social and historical phenomena, and the result is nonsense.

5.16 Experimental science gives positive knowledge and displays the greatness of the human mind only when it does not bring a final cause into its investigations. And conversely, speculative science is a science and displays the greatness of the human mind only when it sets aside entirely the questions of the sequence of causal phenomena and considers man solely in relation to the final cause. Such, in this sphere, is the science that forms the pole of this hemisphere: metaphysics, or speculative philosophy. This science poses the question clearly: what am I, and what is the whole world? And why am I, and why is the whole world? And for as long as it has existed, it has always answered in the same way. The philosopher may call the essence of life that is in me and in everything that exists ideas, or substance, or spirit, or will. Whatever he calls it, he says one thing: that this essence exists and that *I* am that same essence. But why it exists he does not know, and he does not answer, if he

is a precise thinker. I ask: Why should this essence exist? What will come of the fact that it is and will be?... And philosophy not only does not answer; it only asks this very thing itself. And if it is true philosophy, then all its work consists solely in posing this question clearly. And if it holds firmly to its task, it cannot answer the question "what am I and the whole world?" in any other way than "all and nothing." And to the question "why does the world exist and why do I exist?" it can only answer "I do not know."

5.17 So however I turn these speculative answers of philosophy this way and that, I can get nothing resembling an answer—and not because, as in the clear, experimental sphere, the answer does not bear on my question, but because here, although all the intellectual work is aimed precisely at my question, there is no answer, and instead of an answer one gets the same question, only in a more complicated form.

Chapter VI

Socrates, Schopenhauer, Solomon and the Buddha give one answer: life is vanity and evil.

6.1 In searching for answers to the question of life I experienced exactly the same feeling that a man lost in a forest experiences.

6.2 He came out into a clearing, climbed a tree and saw clearly boundless spaces, but saw that there was no house there and could be none. He went into the thicket, into the darkness, and saw darkness, and again there was no house, still no house.

6.3 So I wandered in this forest of human knowledge. On one side were the clearings of mathematical and experimental knowledge, which opened up clear horizons to me, but horizons in whose direction there could be no house. On the other was the darkness of speculative knowledge, into which I sank the deeper the further I went. And I became convinced at last that there was no way out and could be none.

6.4 When I gave myself up to the bright side of knowledge, I understood that I was only averting my eyes from the question. The horizons opening up before me were alluring and clear, and it was alluring to plunge into the infinity of this knowledge. However alluring they were, I already understood that this knowledge was the clearer the less I needed it, the less it answered the question.

6.5 All right, so I know, I would say to myself, everything that science so stubbornly wants to know, but along this path there is no answer to the question of the meaning of my life. In the speculative sphere, on the other hand, the aim of knowledge was directed straight at answering my question. And I understood that

despite this, or precisely because of it, there is no answer other than the one I had given myself. What is the meaning of my life? —None.—Or: What will come of my life?—Nothing.—Or: Why does everything that exists exist, and why do I exist?—Because it exists.

6.6 When I questioned one side of human knowledge, I received countless precise answers about things I had not asked. They told me about the chemical composition of the stars, the movement of the sun toward the constellation Hercules, the origin of species and of man. They told me about the forms of infinitely small atoms and the vibration of infinitely small, weightless particles of ether. But this field of knowledge had only one answer to my question, what is the meaning of my life? You, that which you call your life, are a temporary, chance cohesion of particles. The mutual action and change of these particles produce in you what you call your life. This cohesion will last for a certain time; then the interaction of these particles will cease, and what you call life will cease, and all your questions will cease too. You are a little lump of something that has stuck together by chance. The little lump ferments. The little lump calls this fermenting its life. The little lump will burst apart, and the fermenting will end, and so will all the questions. That is how the clear side of knowledge answers, and it can say nothing else, if only it strictly follows its own principles.

6.7 With such an answer it turns out that the answer does not answer the question. I need to know the meaning of my life, but the fact that it is a particle of the infinite not only gives it no meaning but destroys any possible meaning.

6.8 This side of experimental, precise knowledge makes vague compromises with speculation, in which it is said that the meaning of life consists in development and in contributing to this development. They are so imprecise and vague that they cannot count as answers.

6.9 The other side of knowledge, the speculative, answers the question directly when it holds strictly to its principles. And everywhere and in every age it answers, and has answered, one

and the same thing: the world is something infinite and incomprehensible. Human life is an unfathomable part of this unfathomable "all." Again I leave out all those compromises between speculative and experimental knowledge that make up the whole ballast of the half-sciences, the so-called juridical, political and historical sciences. Into these sciences, again, the concepts of development and perfection are just as wrongly introduced. The only difference is that there it is the development of everything, and here it is the development of human life. The error is one and the same: development and perfection in the infinite can have neither aim nor direction, and they give no answer at all to my question.

THE ANSWER OF THE WISE

Socrates, Schopenhauer and Solomon are quoted at length: death is better than life.

6.10 But there is a place where speculative knowledge is precise. That place is true philosophy, not what Schopenhauer called professorial philosophy, which serves only to sort all existing phenomena into new philosophical columns and give them new names. There, where the philosopher does not lose sight of the essential question, the answer is always one and the same: the answer given by Socrates, Schopenhauer, Solomon, the Buddha.[1]

6.11 "We shall come close to the truth only insofar as we move away from life," says Socrates as he prepares for death. "What do we, who love the truth, strive for in life?—To free ourselves from the body and from all the evil that flows from the life of the body. If that is so, how can we not rejoice when death comes to us?"[2]

1 Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), German philosopher of pessimism, whose *The World as Will and Representation* Tolstoy read with enthusiasm in 1869. He mocked the "professorial philosophy" of the universities.

2 Socrates (469–399 BC), the Athenian philosopher; Tolstoy paraphrases Plato's *Phaedo*, which tells of Socrates' last day before his execution.

6.12 "The wise man seeks death all his life, and therefore death is not terrible to him."

6.13 "Having come to know the inner essence of the world as will," says Schopenhauer, "we recognize in all phenomena only the objectification of this will, from the unconscious striving of the dark forces of nature to the fully conscious activity of man. Having recognized this, we can by no means escape the consequence: together with the free denial, the self-annihilation of the will, all those phenomena too will vanish. That constant striving and urge, without aim or rest, at all the levels of objectification, in which and through which the world consists, will vanish. The diversity of successive forms will vanish. Together with the form, all its phenomena will vanish, with their general forms, space and time, and finally its last fundamental form as well—subject and object. No will, no representation, no world. Before us, of course, there remains only nothing. But what resists this passage into nothingness, our nature, is after all only this very will to existence (Wille zum Leben [the will to live]), which constitutes ourselves as it constitutes our world. That we so dread nothingness, or, what is the same thing, so want to live, means only that we ourselves are nothing other than this willing of life, and know nothing but it. Therefore what remains after the complete annihilation of the will is, for us who are still full of will, of course nothing. But conversely, for those in whom the will has turned and renounced itself, this world of ours, so real, with all its suns and milky ways, *is nothing*."

6.14 "Vanity of vanities," says Solomon, "vanity of vanities—all is vanity! What profit has a man from all his labor at which he toils under the sun? One generation passes away and another generation comes, but the earth abides forever. What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun. There is something of which people say, 'Look, this is new'; but it already was, in the ages that were before us. There is no memory of former things; and of what is to come there will be no memory among those who come after. I, Ecclesiastes, was king over Israel in Jerus-

alem. And I gave my heart to seek out and to search by wisdom all that is done under heaven: this is the heavy task that God has given to the sons of men to be exercised in it.[3] I have seen all the works that are done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and weariness of spirit... I spoke in my heart, saying: behold, I have become great, and have gained more wisdom than all who were over Jerusalem before me, and my heart has seen much wisdom and knowledge. And I gave my heart to know wisdom, and to know madness and folly; I learned that this too is weariness of spirit. For in much wisdom is much grief, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.

6.15 "I said in my heart: come, I will test you with mirth, and I will enjoy what is good; but this too is vanity. Of laughter I said: it is folly; and of mirth: what does it accomplish? I resolved in my heart to gladden my body with wine, and, while my heart was still guided by wisdom, to keep hold of folly too, until I should see what is good for the sons of men, what they ought to do under heaven in the few days of their life. I undertook great works: I built myself houses, I planted myself vineyards. I made myself gardens and groves and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them; I made myself pools of water to water the groves where the trees grew. I acquired menservants and maidservants, and I had a household of my own; I also had more herds and flocks than all who were before me in Jerusalem. I gathered for myself silver and gold and treasures from kings and provinces; I got myself singers, men and women, and the delights of the sons of men, all kinds of musical instruments. And I became great and rich, more than all who were before me in Jerusalem; and my wisdom remained with me. Whatever my eyes desired I did not refuse them; I did not withhold any joy from my heart. And I looked back on all the works that my hands had done, and on the labor I had toiled at in doing them, and behold, all is vanity and weariness of spirit, and there is no profit in them under the sun. And I turned to look at wisdom, and madness, and folly. But

3 Ecclesiastes was traditionally ascribed to King Solomon of Israel (10th century BC); Tolstoy quotes passages from chapters 1, 2 and 9 in his own Russian wording.

I learned that one fate befalls them all. And I said in my heart: the same fate will befall me as befalls the fool—why then have I become so very wise? And I said in my heart that this too is vanity. For the wise man will not be remembered forever, any more than the fool; in the days to come everything will be forgotten, and alas, the wise man dies just like the fool! And I hated life, because the works that are done under the sun became loathsome to me, for all is vanity and weariness of spirit. And I hated all my labor at which I had toiled under the sun, because I must leave it to the man who will come after me. For what does a man have from all his labor and from the striving of his heart, with which he toils under the sun? For all his days are sorrows, and his labors are vexation; even at night his heart knows no rest. And this too is vanity. Not even this good is in man's power: to eat and drink and give his soul delight from his labor...

6.16 "To all and to everyone the same: one fate for the righteous and the wicked, for the good and the evil, for the clean and the unclean, for the one who offers sacrifice and the one who does not; for the virtuous as for the sinner; for the one who swears as for the one who fears an oath. This is just what is evil in all that is done under the sun, that there is one fate for all, and the heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in their heart, in their life; and after that they go to the dead. Whoever is among the living still has hope, for even a living dog is better than a dead lion. The living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing, and there is no more reward for them, for even the memory of them is given over to oblivion; and their love, and their hatred, and their jealousy have already vanished, and they have no more honor for ever in anything that is done under the sun."

6.17 So says Solomon, or whoever wrote these words.

6.18 And this is what the wisdom of India says:

THE LEGEND OF SHAKYAMUNI

The young prince sees old age, sickness and death, and resolves to free himself from life.

6.19 Shakyamuni, a young, happy prince from whom sickness, old age and death had been hidden, drives out for pleasure and sees a terrible old man, toothless and slobbering. The prince, from whom old age had until then been hidden, is astonished and questions his driver: what is this, and why has this man come to such a pitiful, repulsive, hideous state? And when he learns that this is the common lot of all people, that the same thing inevitably awaits him, the young prince, he can no longer go on with his drive and orders them to turn back, so that he can think it over. And he shuts himself up alone and thinks it over. And probably he devises some consolation for himself, because he again drives out for pleasure, cheerful and happy. But this time he meets a sick man. He sees an emaciated, livid, trembling man with clouded eyes.[4] The prince, from whom sickness had been hidden, stops and asks what this is. And when he learns that this is sickness, to which all people are subject, and that he himself, a healthy and happy prince, may fall ill in the same way tomorrow, again he has no heart for merriment, orders them to turn back and again seeks peace, and probably finds it, because a third time he drives out for pleasure; but the third time he sees yet another new sight: he sees that something is being carried. —"What is that?" A dead man.—"What does 'dead' mean?" asks the prince. He is told that to become dead means to become what this man has become.—The prince goes up to the dead man, uncovers him and looks at him.—"And what will happen to him next?" asks the prince. He is told that he will be buried in the ground. —"Why?"—Because he will surely never again be alive, and there will be nothing from him but stench and worms. —"And is this the lot of all people? And will the same happen to

4 Shakyamuni ("sage of the Shakyas") is a title of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha (5th century BC); Tolstoy retells the legend of his "four sights."

me? Will they bury me, and will there be a stench from me, and will the worms eat me?"—Yes.—"Back! I am not going out for pleasure, and I will never go again."

6.20 And Shakyamuni could find no consolation in life, and he decided that life is the greatest evil, and he devoted all the strength of his soul to freeing himself from it and freeing others. And freeing them in such a way that even after death life would not somehow be renewed—so as to destroy life altogether, at the root. This is what all the wisdom of India says.

6.21 So these are the direct answers that human wisdom gives when it answers the question of life.

6.22 "The life of the body is evil and a lie. And therefore the destruction of this life of the body is a good, and we must desire it," says Socrates.

6.23 "Life is what ought not to be—an evil, and the passage into nothingness is the only good of life," says Schopenhauer.

6.24 "Everything in the world—folly and wisdom, wealth and poverty, merriment and sorrow—all is vanity and trifles. A man will die, and nothing will remain. And this is stupid," says Solomon.

6.25 "It is impossible to live with the awareness that suffering, decrepitude, old age and death are inevitable—one must free oneself from life, from every possibility of life," says the Buddha.

6.26 And what these powerful minds said has been said, thought and felt by millions upon millions of people like them. And I too think it and feel it.

6.27 So my wandering among the branches of knowledge not only failed to lead me out of my despair but only deepened it. One kind of knowledge did not answer the questions of life; the other kind did answer, directly confirming my despair and showing that what I had arrived at was not the fruit of my own error, of a morbid state of mind—on the contrary, it confirmed to me that I had been thinking correctly and that I had come to agree with the conclusions of the most powerful minds of humanity.

6.28 There is no point deceiving myself. All is vanity. Happy is he who was never born; death is better than life; one must be rid of it.

Chapter VII

The four ways out for people of his circle: ignorance, pleasure, strength (suicide) and weakness.

7.1 Having found no explanation in knowledge, I began to seek this explanation in life, hoping to find it in the people around me, and I began to observe people—people like myself—how they live around me and how they relate to this question that had brought me to despair.

7.2 And this is what I found among people in the same position as myself in education and way of life.

FOUR WAYS OUT

People of his circle escape through ignorance, Epicureanism, strength or weakness; he lives in weakness.

7.3 I found that for people of my circle there are four ways out of the terrible position in which we all find ourselves.

7.4 The first way out is the way out of ignorance. It consists in not knowing, not understanding that life is an evil and an absurdity. People of this sort—mostly women, or the very young, or very dull people—have not yet understood the question of life that presented itself to Schopenhauer, Solomon and the Buddha. They see neither the dragon that awaits them nor the mice gnawing at the bushes they cling to, and they lick the drops of honey. But they lick these drops of honey only for a time: something will turn their attention to the dragon and the mice, and that will be the end of their licking. From them I have nothing to learn; one cannot stop knowing what one knows.

7.5 The second way out is the way out of Epicureanism. It consists in knowing the hopelessness of life and meanwhile making use of whatever good things there are, looking neither at the dragon nor at the mice, but licking the honey in the best possible way, especially if there happens to be a lot of it on the bush. Solomon expresses this way out thus:

7.6 "And I commended merriment, because there is nothing better for a man under the sun than to eat, to drink and to be merry: this stays with him in his labors through the days of his life which God has given him under the sun.

7.7 "So go, eat your bread with merriment and drink your wine with a joyful heart... Enjoy life with the *woman* you love all the days of your life of vanity, all your days of vanity, for this is your portion in life and in the labors you labor at under the sun... Whatever your hand finds the strength to do, do it, for in the grave, where you are going, there is neither work, nor thought, nor knowledge, nor wisdom."

7.8 The majority of people of our circle hold to this second conclusion. Their circumstances are such that they have more good things than bad, and their moral dullness allows them to forget that the advantage of their position is a matter of chance, that not everyone can have a thousand women and palaces like Solomon, that for every man with a thousand wives there are a thousand men without wives, and for every palace a thousand people building it in the sweat of their brow, and that the chance which today has made me a Solomon may tomorrow make me Solomon's slave. And the dullness of these people's imagination allows them to forget what gave the Buddha no peace—the inevitability of sickness, old age and death, which any day now will destroy all these pleasures. That some of these people claim that the dullness of their thought and imagination is a philosophy, which they call positive, does not, in my view, set them apart from the sort who lick the honey without seeing the question. And I could not imitate these people either: not having their dullness of imagination, I could not produce it in myself artifi-

cially. I could not, as no living man can, tear my eyes away from the mice and the dragon once I had seen them.

7.9 The third way out is the way out of strength and energy. It consists in destroying life once one has understood that life is an evil and an absurdity. That is what the rare strong and consistent people do. Having understood all the stupidity of the joke that has been played on them, and having understood that the good of the dead is greater than the good of the living and that it is best of all not to be, they act accordingly and end this stupid joke at once, since there are means: a noose round the neck, water, a knife to pierce the heart, the trains on the railways. And there are more and more people of our circle who do this. And people do it mostly in the very best period of life, when the powers of the soul are in full flower and few of the habits that degrade human reason have yet been acquired. I saw that this was the most worthy way out, and I wanted to take it.

7.10 The fourth way out is the way out of weakness. It consists in understanding the evil and meaninglessness of life and still going on dragging it out, knowing in advance that nothing can come of it. People of this sort know that death is better than life, but, lacking the strength to act rationally—to end the deception quickly and kill themselves—they seem to be waiting for something. This is the way out of weakness, for if I know what is better and it is in my power, why not give myself up to what is better?... I was in this category.

7.11 So people of my sort save themselves from the terrible contradiction in four ways. However hard I strained my mental attention, I saw no other way out besides these four. One way out: not to understand that life is an absurdity, vanity and evil and that it is better not to live. I could not help knowing this, and once I had come to know it, I could not shut my eyes to it. Another way out—to make use of life as it is, without thinking about the future. And this too I could not do. Like Shakyamuni, I could not go hunting when I knew that there is old age, suffering, death. My imagination was too vivid. Besides, I could not rejoice in the momentary chance that had tossed pleasure to my

lot for an instant. The third way out: having understood that life is an evil and a stupidity, to put an end to it, to kill myself. I understood this, but for some reason I still did not kill myself. The fourth way out—to live in the position of Solomon and Schopenhauer: to know that life is a stupid joke played on me, and still to live, wash, dress, dine, talk and even write books. This was repugnant and agonizing to me, but I remained in this position.

A DOUBT ABOUT REASON

Reason, the fruit of life, denies life, while the simple millions go on living as if life had meaning.

7.12 Now I see that if I did not kill myself, the cause was a dim awareness that my thoughts were wrong. However convincing and indubitable it seemed to me, the course of my own thought and of the thoughts of the wise that had brought us to admit the absurdity of life, there remained in me a vague doubt about the truth of the starting point of my reasoning.

7.13 It was this: I, my reason, have recognized that life is irrational. If there is no higher reason (and there is none, and nothing can prove there is), then reason is the creator of life for me. If there were no reason, there would be no life for me either. How then can this reason deny life, when it is itself the creator of life? Or, from the other side: if there were no life, there would be no reason of mine either—so reason is the son of life. Life is everything. Reason is the fruit of life, and this reason denies life itself. I felt that something here was wrong.

7.14 Life is a meaningless evil, there is no doubt of that, I told myself. But I have lived, I still live, and all humanity has lived and lives. How can that be? Why does it live, when it could choose not to live? What, am I alone, with Schopenhauer, so clever that I have understood the meaninglessness and evil of life?

7.15 The argument about the vanity of life is not so very subtle, and it has been made long since, by everyone, even the simplest

people, and yet they have lived and live. What, do they all live and never even think of doubting that life is rational?

7.16 My knowledge, confirmed by the wisdom of the sages, has revealed to me that everything in the world—organic and inorganic—everything is extraordinarily cleverly arranged, and only my own position is stupid. And these fools—the huge masses of simple people—know nothing about how everything organic and inorganic in the world is arranged, and yet they live, and it seems to them that their life is very rationally arranged!

7.17 And it occurred to me: but what if there is something I still do not know? That, after all, is exactly how ignorance behaves. Ignorance always says just this. When it does not know something, it says that what it does not know is stupid. In fact it turns out that there is a whole humanity that has lived and lives as if it understood the meaning of its life, for without understanding it, it could not live; and I say that all this life is an absurdity, and I cannot live.

7.18 No one stops Schopenhauer and me from denying life. But in that case kill yourself—and you won't be reasoning. You don't like life—kill yourself. But if you live and cannot understand the meaning of life, then end it, instead of twisting and turning in this life, telling everyone and writing at length about how you don't understand life. You have come into a cheerful company, everyone is having a fine time, everyone knows what they are doing, and you are bored and disgusted—so leave.

7.19 Really, what are we, who are convinced that suicide is necessary and cannot bring ourselves to commit it, if not the weakest, most inconsistent and, to put it plainly, stupid people, making a fuss of our stupidity like a fool with a painted sack?[1]

7.20 For our wisdom, however indubitably true it may be, has not given us knowledge of the meaning of our life. Yet all humanity, which makes life, the millions—do not doubt the meaning of life.

7.21 Indeed, from the distant, distant times since there has been life of which I know anything at all, people have lived

knowing that argument about the futility of life which showed me its absurdity, and still they lived, giving it some meaning. Ever since any human life began, they already had this meaning of life, and they led this life, which has come down to me. Everything that is in me and around me, all of it is the fruit of their knowledge of life. The very tools of thought with which I weigh this life and condemn it—all of that was made not by me but by them. I myself was born, brought up and grew up thanks to them. They dug out iron, taught us to cut timber, tamed cows and horses, taught us to sow, taught us to live together, ordered our life; they taught me to think and to speak. And I, their product, fed and nurtured by them, taught by them, thinking with their thoughts and their words, have proved to them that they are an absurdity! "Something is not right here," I told myself. "Somewhere I have made a mistake." But where the mistake lay, I could not find at all.

1 A Russian proverb: "to fuss like a fool with a painted sack" means to make much of something worthless.

Chapter VIII

Perhaps he has misunderstood: he turns from his own circle to the millions who live and find a meaning in life.

8.1 All these doubts, which I can now express more or less coherently, I could not have expressed then. Then I only felt that, however logically inevitable my conclusions about the futility of life, confirmed as they were by the greatest thinkers, there was something wrong with them. Whether in the reasoning itself or in the way the question was posed, I did not know; I felt only that the rational persuasiveness was complete, but that it was not enough. None of these arguments could convince me to the point of doing what followed from my reasoning, that is, killing myself. And I would be telling an untruth if I said that it was by reason that I arrived where I arrived and did not kill myself. Reason was at work, but something else was at work too, something I cannot call anything other than a consciousness of life. There was also at work that force which made me turn my attention to this and not to that, and it was this force that led me out of my desperate position and directed reason in an entirely different way. This force made me notice that I, with hundreds of people like me, am not all of humanity, that I do not yet know the life of humanity.

THE BILLIONS WHO LIVE

He turns from his narrow circle to the masses of working people, whose irrational knowledge is faith.

8.2 Looking round the narrow little circle of people of my own age, I saw only people who did not understand the question; people who understood it and drowned it in the intoxication of life; people who understood it and ended their lives; and people who understood it and, out of weakness, lived out a life of despair. And I saw no others. It seemed to me that the narrow circle of learned, rich and leisured people to which I belonged made up all of humanity, and that those billions who have lived and are living were *nothing*—some sort of cattle, not people.

8.3 However strange, however incredibly incomprehensible it seems to me now that, reasoning about life, I could overlook the life of humanity that surrounded me on all sides, that I could be so ridiculously mistaken as to think that my life, the life of the Solomons and Schopenhauers, is the real, normal life, while the life of billions is a circumstance not worth attention—however strange this is to me now, I see that it was so. In the delusion of my intellectual pride it seemed so indubitable to me that Solomon and Schopenhauer and I had posed the question so correctly and truly that nothing else was possible, it seemed so indubitable that all these billions belonged to those who had not yet grasped the full depth of the question, that I sought the meaning of my life and never once thought: "But what meaning do all the billions who have lived and are living in the world give to their life, and what meaning have they given it?"

8.4 For a long time I lived in this madness, which is peculiar—not in words but in deeds—to us, the most liberal and learned people. But whether thanks to some strange physical love of mine for the real working people, which made me understand them and see that they are not as stupid as we think, or thanks to the sincerity of my conviction that I can know nothing except that the very best thing I can do is to hang myself, I sensed that

if I wanted to live and understand the meaning of life, I must seek this meaning of life not among those who have lost the meaning of life and want to kill themselves, but among those billions of the dead and the living who make life and carry on their own shoulders their life and ours. And I looked round at the huge masses of simple people, dead and living, neither learned nor rich, and I saw something entirely different. I saw that all these billions of people who have lived and are living, all of them, with rare exceptions, do not fit into my classification; that I cannot regard them as not understanding the question, because they pose it themselves and answer it with extraordinary clarity. Nor can I regard them as Epicureans, because their life is made up more of privation and suffering than of pleasure; still less can I regard them as irrationally living out a meaningless life, since they can explain every act of their life, and death itself. And killing oneself they consider the greatest evil. It turned out that all humanity has some knowledge of the meaning of life which I did not recognize and despised. The upshot was that rational knowledge does not give meaning to life, it excludes life; whereas the meaning given to life by billions of people, by all humanity, rests on some despised, false knowledge.

8.5 Rational knowledge, in the persons of the learned and the wise, denies the meaning of life, while the huge masses of people, all humanity, recognize this meaning in irrational knowledge. And this irrational knowledge is faith, the very faith I could not help casting off. It is God who is 1 and 3, the creation in 6 days, devils and angels and everything I cannot accept as long as I have not lost my mind.[1]

8.6 My position was terrible. I knew that on the path of rational knowledge I would find nothing but the denial of life, and there, in faith, nothing but the denial of reason, which is still more impossible than the denial of life. According to rational knowledge it followed that life is an evil, and people know it, and it is up to people not to live, yet they have lived and live, and I myself

1 "God who is 1 and 3": the doctrine of the Trinity, one God in three persons.

lived, though I had long known that life is meaningless and is an evil. According to faith it followed that in order to understand the meaning of life I must renounce reason—the very thing for which meaning is needed.

Chapter IX

Rational knowledge leads to nothing; faith, irrational knowledge, is what gives the finite an infinite meaning. Faith is the force of life.

9.1 Here was a contradiction from which there were only two ways out: either what I called rational was not as rational as I thought, or what seemed to me irrational was not as irrational as I thought. And I began to check the course of reasoning of my rational knowledge.

9.2 Checking the course of reasoning of rational knowledge, I found it entirely correct. The conclusion that life is nothing was inevitable; but I saw the mistake. The mistake was that my thinking did not correspond to the question I had posed. The question was this: why should I live—that is, what real, imperishable thing will come of my illusory, perishable life, what meaning has my finite existence in this infinite world? And to answer this question, I studied life.

9.3 The solutions to all possible questions of life obviously could not satisfy me, because my question, however simple it seems at first, includes the demand that the finite be explained by the infinite and vice versa.

9.4 I asked: what timeless, causeless, spaceless significance has my life?—And the question I answered was: what significance in time, in cause and in space has my life? The result was that after long labor of thought I answered: none.

9.5 In my reasoning I constantly equated—and indeed could not have done otherwise—the finite with the finite and the infinite with the infinite, and so I got what I was bound to get: force is

force, matter is matter, will is will, infinity is infinity, nothing is nothing, and nothing further could come of it.

9.6 It was something like what happens in mathematics when, thinking you are solving an equation, you are solving an identity. The course of reasoning is correct, but the result is the answer: a = a, or x = x, or 0 = 0. The same thing happened with my reasoning about the question of the significance of my life. The answers that all of science gives to this question are only identities.

9.7 And indeed, strictly rational knowledge—the knowledge which, as Descartes did, begins with complete doubt about everything, casts off all knowledge accepted on faith and builds everything anew on the laws of reason and experience—cannot give any other answer to the question of life than the very one I received: an indeterminate answer. It only seemed to me at first that knowledge had given a positive answer—Schopenhauer's answer: life has no meaning, it is an evil. But on examining the matter I understood that the answer is not positive, that it was only my feeling that expressed it so. The answer strictly expressed, as it is expressed by the Brahmins, and by Solomon, and by Schopenhauer, is only an indeterminate answer, or an identity: 0 = 0; life, which appears to me as nothing, is nothing. So philosophical knowledge denies nothing; it only answers that this question cannot be solved by it, that for it the solution remains indeterminate.

9.8 Having understood this, I understood that it was no use seeking an answer to my question in rational knowledge, and that the answer given by rational knowledge is only an indication that an answer can be obtained only if the question is posed differently, only when the question of the relation of the finite to the infinite is brought into the reasoning. I understood too that, however irrational and monstrous the answers given by faith, they have the advantage of bringing into every answer the relation of the finite to the infinite, without which there can be no answer. However I put the question—how am I to live?—the answer is: by the law of God. What real thing will come of my

life?—Eternal torment or eternal bliss.—What meaning is there that is not destroyed by death?—Union with the infinite God, paradise.

9.9 So, besides rational knowledge, which had formerly seemed to me the only kind, I was inevitably led to recognize that all living humanity has another kind of knowledge as well, an irrational one—faith, which makes it possible to live. All the irrationality of faith remained the same for me as before, but I could not help recognizing that it alone gives humanity answers to the questions of life and, in consequence, the possibility of living.

9.10 Rational knowledge led me to recognize that life is meaningless; my life came to a stop, and I wanted to destroy myself. Looking round at people, at all humanity, I saw that people live and assert that they know the meaning of life. I looked back at myself: I had lived as long as I knew the meaning of life. For me, as for other people, it was faith that gave the meaning of life and the possibility of life.

9.11 Looking further, at people of other countries, at my contemporaries and at those long gone, I saw one and the same thing. Where there is life, there faith, ever since humanity has existed, has made it possible to live, and the main features of faith are everywhere and always one and the same.

FAITH IS THE FORCE OF LIFE

Every faith gives finite existence an infinite meaning; without faith it is impossible to live.

9.12 Whatever answers any faith may give, and to whomever it gives them, every answer of faith gives to man's finite existence the meaning of the infinite—a meaning not destroyed by suffering, privation and death. So it is in faith alone that the meaning and the possibility of life can be found. And I understood that faith, in its most essential significance, is not only "the evidence of things not seen" and so on; it is not revelation (that is only a description of one of the signs of faith); it is not only the relation

of man to God (one must first define faith and then God, not define faith through God); it is not only agreement with what a man has been told, as faith is most often understood—faith is the knowledge of the meaning of human life, by virtue of which man does not destroy himself but lives. Faith is the force of life.[1] If a man lives, then he believes in something. If he did not believe that there was something to live for, he would not live. If he does not see and understand the illusoriness of the finite, he believes in the finite; if he understands the illusoriness of the finite, he must believe in the infinite. Without faith it is impossible to live.

9.13 And I recalled the whole course of my inner work and was horrified. It was clear to me now that for a man to be able to live, he must either not see the infinite or have an explanation of the meaning of life in which the finite would be equated with the infinite. I had had such an explanation, but I did not need it as long as I believed in the finite, and I began to test it by reason. And before the light of reason the whole former explanation scattered into dust. But a time came when I stopped believing in the finite. And then I began to build, on rational foundations, out of what I knew, an explanation that would give meaning to life; but nothing would build. Together with the best minds of humanity I arrived at 0 = 0, and was very surprised to have obtained such a solution, when nothing else could have come of it.

9.14 What was I doing when I looked for an answer in experimental knowledge?—I wanted to find out why I live, and to that end I studied everything that is outside me. Clearly, I could learn a great deal, but nothing of what I needed.

9.15 What was I doing when I looked for an answer in philosophical knowledge? I was studying the thoughts of beings who were in exactly the same position as I was, who had no answer to the question: why do I live? Clearly, I could learn nothing other than what I knew myself: that nothing can be known.

1 "The evidence of things not seen": Hebrews 11:1, the New Testament's definition of faith.

9.16 What am I?—A part of the infinite. Surely the whole problem already lies in these two words. Can it be that humanity has only been asking itself this question since yesterday? And can it be that no one before me ever asked himself this question—a question so simple, one that rises to the lips of every intelligent child?

9.17 Surely this question has been asked for as long as there have been people; and for as long as there have been people it has been understood that, to resolve it, it is equally insufficient to equate the finite with the finite and the infinite with the infinite; and for as long as there have been people, the relations of the finite to the infinite have been sought out and expressed.

9.18 All these concepts in which the finite is equated with the infinite and a meaning of life is obtained—the concepts of God, of freedom, of the good—we subject to logical investigation. And these concepts do not stand up to the criticism of reason.

9.19 If it were not so terrible, it would be funny—the pride and self-satisfaction with which we, like children, take a watch apart, pull out the spring, make a toy of it, and are then surprised that the watch stops going.

9.20 What is needed, and precious, is a resolution of the contradiction between the finite and the infinite, and an answer to the question of life such that life becomes possible. And this one resolution, which we find everywhere, always and among all peoples—a resolution brought down from times in which the life of mankind is lost to our sight, a resolution so difficult that we could do nothing like it—this very resolution we frivolously destroy, in order to raise once again the question that is inherent in everyone and to which we have no answer.

9.21 The concepts of an infinite God, of the divinity of the soul, of the bond between human affairs and God, the concepts of moral good and evil—these are concepts worked out in the historical distance of humanity's life, hidden from our eyes; they are the concepts without which there would be no life, and no me either; and I, casting aside all this work of all humanity,

want to do everything over again by myself, alone, in a new way and in my own way.

9.22 I did not think this way then, but the seeds of these thoughts were already in me. I understood, (1) that the position I shared with Schopenhauer and Solomon was, for all our wisdom, stupid: we understand that life is evil, and yet we go on living. This is plainly stupid, because if life is stupid—and I am so fond of everything reasonable—then life must be destroyed, and there will be no one left to deny it. (2) I understood that all our reasoning goes round in a vicious circle, like a wheel that does not engage the gear. However much and however well we reason, we cannot get an answer to the question; it will always be 0 = 0; and therefore our path is probably wrong. (3) I was beginning to understand that the answers given by faith hold the deepest wisdom of humanity, that I had no right to deny them on the grounds of reason, and that, above all, these answers alone answer the question of life.

Chapter X

The faith of educated believers repels him; the faith of poor working people does not.

10.1 I understood this, but it did not make things any easier for me.

10.2 I was ready now to accept any faith at all, so long as it did not demand of me a direct denial of reason, which would have been a lie. And I studied Buddhism and Islam from books, and most of all Christianity, both from books and from the living people around me.

10.3 Naturally, I turned first of all to the believers of my own circle: to learned men, to Orthodox theologians, to monastic elders, to Orthodox theologians of the new school, and even to the so-called New Christians, who profess salvation through faith in the redemption. And I seized on these believers and pressed them with questions about how they believed and what they saw as the meaning of life.[1]

10.4 Although I made every possible concession and avoided all arguments, I could not accept the faith of these people. I saw that what they passed off as faith was not an explanation of the meaning of life but an obscuring of it, and that they themselves affirmed their faith not in order to answer the question of life that had brought me to faith, but for some other ends, alien to me.

10.5 I remember the agonizing feeling of horror at falling back into my old despair after hope—a feeling I experienced many,

many times in my dealings with these people. The more fully and in the more detail they set out their doctrines to me, the more clearly I saw their error, and the loss of my hope of finding in their faith an explanation of the meaning of life.

10.6 It was not that, in setting out their doctrine, they mixed a great many unnecessary and unreasonable things in with the Christian truths that had always been close to me—it was not this that repelled me. What repelled me was that the lives of these people were the same as mine, with only this difference: that their lives did not correspond to the very principles they set out in their doctrine. I clearly felt that they were deceiving themselves, and that they, just like me, had no other meaning of life than to live while life lasts and to take everything a hand can take. I saw this from the fact that, if they had had a meaning in which the fear of privation, suffering and death is destroyed, they would not have feared them. But they, these believers of our circle, lived exactly as I did, in plenty; they tried to increase it or keep it; they feared privation, suffering, death; and, just like me and all of us unbelievers, they lived to satisfy their lusts—lived just as badly as the unbelievers, if not worse.

10.7 No reasoning could convince me of the truth of their faith. Only actions showing that they had a meaning of life in which the poverty, illness and death that terrified me held no terror for them could have convinced me. And such actions I did not see among these various believers of our circle. On the contrary, I did see such actions among the most unbelieving people of our circle, but never among the so-called believers of our circle.

10.8 And I understood that the faith of these people was not the faith I was seeking, that their faith was not faith at all but only one of the Epicurean consolations of life. I understood that this faith might do—if not to console, then at least to distract a little—for a repentant Solomon on his deathbed, but that it could not do for the vast majority of humanity, which is called not to

1 The "New Christians" were followers of the evangelical preaching of Lord Radstock and V. A. Pashkov, which spread through St. Petersburg high society in the 1870s.

amuse itself on the labor of others but to create life. For all humanity to be able to live, for it to go on living while giving life a meaning, they—these billions—must have another, a true knowledge of faith. After all, it was not the fact that Solomon, Schopenhauer and I had not killed ourselves that convinced me of the existence of faith; it was that these billions had lived and are living, and have carried us and our Solomons along on the waves of their life.

THE FAITH OF WORKING PEOPLE

Among pilgrims, monks and peasants he finds a faith their whole life confirms, and comes to love them.

10.9 And I began to draw close to believers among the poor, simple, unlearned people: to pilgrims, monks, Old Believers, peasants. The doctrine held by these common people was also Christian, like the doctrine of the supposed believers of our circle. With them, too, a great deal of superstition was mixed in with the Christian truths; but the difference was that the superstitions of the believers of our circle were quite unnecessary to them, did not fit in with their lives, and were only a kind of Epicurean amusement, whereas the superstitions of the believers among the working people were so bound up with their lives that one could not imagine their lives without these superstitions—they were a necessary condition of that life. The whole life of the believers of our circle contradicted their faith, while the whole life of the believing, working people confirmed the meaning of life that the knowledge of faith gave.[2] And I began to look closely at the life and beliefs of these people, and the more closely I looked, the more convinced I became that they had a true faith, that their faith was necessary to them and alone gave them a meaning and the possibility of life. In contrast to what I saw in our circle, where life without faith is possible and where hardly one in a thousand acknowledges himself a believer,

2 Old Believers (raskolniki, "schismatics") broke with the Russian Orthodox Church over the liturgical reforms of the 1650s–60s.

among them there is hardly one unbeliever in thousands. In contrast to what I saw in our circle, where all of life passes in idleness, amusements and dissatisfaction with life, I saw that the whole life of these people passed in heavy labor, and that they were less dissatisfied with life than the rich. In contrast to the way the people of our circle resisted fate and railed against it for their privations and sufferings, these people accepted illness and sorrow without any bewilderment or resistance, with a calm and firm conviction that all this must be and cannot be otherwise, that all this is good. In contrast to the fact that the cleverer we are, the less we understand the meaning of life, and we see some cruel mockery in the fact that we suffer and die, these people live, suffer and approach death calmly, and most often with joy. In contrast to the fact that a peaceful death, a death without horror and despair, is the rarest exception in our circle, a death that is not peaceful, not submissive and not joyful is the rarest exception among the common people. And people like this—deprived of everything that for Solomon and me is the only good in life, and experiencing the greatest happiness all the same—are a multitude beyond counting. I looked more widely around me. I looked closely at the lives of the vast masses of people, past and present. And I saw such people, who had understood the meaning of life, who knew how to live and to die—not two, three, ten, but hundreds, thousands, millions. And all of them, infinitely diverse in temperament, intellect, education and position, all alike, and in complete contrast to my ignorance, knew the meaning of life and death, worked calmly, bore privation and suffering, lived and died, seeing in this not vanity but good.

10.10 And I came to love these people. The more I entered into the lives of these living people, and of others like them, now dead, whom I had read and heard about, the more I loved them, and the easier it became for me to live myself. I lived like this for about two years, and a revolution took place in me that had long been preparing in me, and the seeds of which had always been in me. What happened to me was that the life of our circle—the

rich, the learned—not only became repugnant to me but lost all meaning. All our actions, our reasonings, our science, our arts—all of it appeared to me as self-indulgence. I understood that it was impossible to look for meaning in this. The actions of the working people, who create life, appeared to me as the one real work. And I understood that the meaning given to this life is the truth, and I accepted it.

Chapter XI

The error lay not in his thinking but in his life: the life of a parasite cannot have a meaning.

11.1 And remembering how these same beliefs had repelled me and seemed meaningless when they were professed by people who lived contrary to them, and how these same beliefs had attracted me and seemed reasonable when I saw that people lived by them—I understood why I had then cast these beliefs aside and found them meaningless, and why I now accepted them and found them full of meaning. I understood that I had gone astray, and how I had gone astray. I had gone astray not so much because I thought wrongly as because I lived badly. I understood that what had hidden the truth from me was not so much the error of my thinking as my life itself, spent in the exceptional conditions of Epicureanism, of satisfying my lusts. I understood that my question—what is my life?—and the answer, "evil," had been entirely correct. The only thing that was incorrect was that I had applied an answer that concerned me alone to life in general: I asked myself what my life was, and got the answer: evil and absurdity. And indeed my life—a life of indulging lust—was meaningless and evil, and so the answer "life is evil and meaningless" applied only to my life, and not to human life in general. I understood the truth I later found in the Gospel: that people loved the darkness more than the light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the light and does not come to the light, so that his deeds will not be

exposed.[1] I understood that in order to understand the meaning of life, what is needed first of all is that life should not be meaningless and evil, and only then reason, to understand it. I understood why I had circled for so long around so obvious a truth, and that if one is to think and speak about the life of humanity, one must speak and think about the life of humanity, and not about the life of a few parasites of life. This truth had always been the truth, like 2 × 2 = 4, but I had not acknowledged it, because, having acknowledged 2 × 2 = 4, I would have had to acknowledge that I was not good. And to feel myself good was more important and more binding for me than 2 × 2 = 4. I came to love good people, I came to hate myself, and I acknowledged the truth. Now everything became clear to me.

11.2 What if an executioner who spends his life torturing and cutting off heads, or a hopeless drunk, or a madman who has shut himself up for life in a dark room, fouled that room of his, and imagines he will perish if he leaves it—what if they asked themselves: what is life? Obviously they could get no other answer to the question "what is life?" than that life is the greatest evil; and the madman's answer would be entirely correct, but for him alone. What if I am just such a madman? What if all of us, rich and learned people, are just such madmen?

11.3 And I understood that we really are such madmen. I, at any rate, certainly was such a madman. And indeed, a bird exists in such a way that it must fly, gather food, build nests, and when I see a bird doing this, I rejoice in its joy. A goat, a hare, a wolf exist in such a way that they must feed, multiply, feed their families, and when they do this, I have a firm awareness that they are happy and that their life is reasonable. What, then, must a man do? He must win life just as the animals do, with only this difference: that he will perish if he wins it alone—he must win it not for himself but for all. And when he does this, I have a firm awareness that he is happy and that his life is reasonable. And what was I doing throughout the thirty years of my conscious life?—Not only did I not win life for all, I did not win it

1 John 3:19–20.

even for myself. I lived as a parasite and, asking myself why I live, got the answer: for nothing. If the meaning of human life lies in winning it, then how could I, who had spent thirty years not winning life but destroying it in myself and in others, get any other answer than that my life was absurdity and evil? And it was absurdity and evil.

11.4 The life of the world goes on by someone's will—someone is doing some work of his own with the life of the whole world and with our lives. To have any hope of understanding the meaning of this will, one must first of all fulfill it—do what is wanted of us. And if I do not do what is wanted of me, I will never understand what is wanted of me either, and still less what is wanted of all of us and of the whole world.

THE BEGGAR AT THE PUMP

A parable: only the one who does the master's work comes to understand the establishment.

11.5 If a naked, hungry beggar were taken from the crossroads, brought into a covered place in a splendid establishment, given food and drink, and made to move some stick up and down, then obviously, before trying to work out why he had been taken, why he should move the stick, whether the whole establishment was reasonably arranged—the beggar must first of all move the stick. If he moves the stick, then he will understand that the stick drives a pump, that the pump draws up water, that the water runs along the garden beds; then he will be taken out of the covered well and put to other work, and he will gather fruit and enter into the joy of his lord, and, passing from lower work to higher, understanding the arrangement of the whole establishment further and further and taking part in it, he will never even think of asking why he is here, and will certainly never reproach the master.[2]

11.6 And so those who do his will do not reproach the master—the simple, working, unlearned people, whom we regard as

cattle; while we, the wise ones, eat everything of the master's, all right, but do not do what the master wants of us, and instead of doing it we have sat down in a circle and are arguing: "Why move this stick? It's stupid, after all." And so we have reasoned our way to something. We have reasoned our way to the conclusion that the master is stupid or does not exist, while we are clever—only we feel that we are good for nothing, and that we must somehow get rid of ourselves.

2 "Enter into the joy of his lord" echoes the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:21, 23).

Chapter XII

A year of searching for God ends in the woods in early spring: to know God and to live are one and the same.

12.1 The awareness of the error of rational knowledge helped me free myself from the temptation of idle theorizing. The conviction that knowledge of the truth can be found only by living led me to doubt whether my own life was right; but what saved me was only that I managed to break out of my exceptional position and to see the real life of the simple working people, and to understand that this alone is real life. I understood that if I want to understand life and its meaning, I must live not the life of a parasite but a real life, and, accepting the meaning that real humanity gives to it, merging with that life, test that meaning.

12.2 At this same time the following happened to me. Throughout that whole year, when almost every minute I was asking myself whether I should not end it with a noose or a bullet—all that time, alongside the trains of thought and observation I have spoken of, my heart was oppressed by an agonizing feeling. I can call this feeling nothing other than seeking God.

12.3 I say that this seeking God was not reasoning but a feeling, because this seeking did not flow from my train of thought—it was even directly opposed to my thoughts—but flowed from the heart. It was a feeling of fear, of being orphaned, of loneliness amid everything alien, and of hope for someone's help.

12.4 Although I was fully convinced that the existence of God cannot be proved (Kant had shown me, and I fully understood him, that it cannot be proved), I nevertheless sought God, hoped that I would find him, and out of old habit turned in prayer to

what I was seeking and could not find. Now I would go over in my mind the arguments of Kant and Schopenhauer about the impossibility of proving the existence of God, now I would begin to refute them. Cause, I told myself, is not a category of thought in the same way as space and time. If I am, then there is a cause of it, and a cause of causes. And this cause of everything is what is called God; and I would dwell on this thought and try with my whole being to become aware of the presence of this cause.[1] And as soon as I became aware that there is a power in whose hands I am, I immediately felt that life was possible. But I asked myself: "What, then, is this cause, this power? How am I to think of it, how am I to relate to what I call God?" And only the answers I already knew came into my head: "He is the Creator and Provider." These answers did not satisfy me, and I felt that what I needed in order to live was vanishing in me. I was horrified and began to pray to the one I was seeking, that he might help me. And the more I prayed, the more obvious it was to me that he did not hear me and that there was no one at all to whom one could turn. And with despair in my heart that there was no God, no God at all, I said: "Lord, have mercy, save me! Lord, teach me, my God!" But no one had mercy on me, and I felt that my life was coming to a stop.

12.5 But again and again, from various other directions, I came back to the same acknowledgment: that I surely could not have come into the world without any occasion, cause or meaning; that I cannot be the fledgling fallen from the nest that I felt myself to be. Let it be that I, a fallen fledgling, lie on my back cheeping in the tall grass; but I cheep because I know that a mother carried me inside her, hatched me, warmed me, fed me, loved me. Where is she, this mother? If I have been abandoned, then who abandoned me? I cannot hide from myself that someone gave birth to me out of love. Who, then, is this someone?—God again.

12.6 "He knows and sees my searching, my despair, my struggle. He exists," I told myself. And I had only to acknowledge

this for a moment, and at once life rose up in me, and I felt both the possibility and the joy of being. But again I passed from acknowledging the existence of God to seeking my relation to him, and again there appeared before me that God, our Creator, in three persons, who sent his Son, the Redeemer. And again this God, separate from the world, from me, melted like an ice floe, melted before my eyes, and again nothing remained, and again the spring of life dried up; I fell into despair and felt that there was nothing else for me to do but kill myself. And, worst of all, I felt that I could not do even that.

12.7 Not two, not three times, but tens, hundreds of times I came to these states—now of joy and revival, now again of despair and the awareness that life was impossible.

IN THE FOREST IN EARLY SPRING

Alone in the forest he sees that he lives only when he seeks God: God is life.

12.8 I remember it was early spring; I was alone in the forest, listening to the sounds of the forest. I listened and thought always about one thing, as I had constantly thought about one and the same thing these last three years. I was seeking God again.

12.9 "Very well, there is no God," I said to myself, "none who would be not my own imagining but a reality, as real as my whole life; there is no such one. And nothing, no miracles, can prove such a one, because miracles would be my own imagining—and an unreasonable one at that."

12.10 "But my concept of God, of the one I am seeking?" I asked myself. "Where did that concept come from?" And again at this thought joyful waves of life rose up in me. Everything around me came alive, took on meaning. But my joy did not last long. My mind went on with its work. "The concept of God is not God," I told myself. "A concept is something that happens within me;

1 Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) argued in the *Critique of Pure Reason* that the existence of God cannot be proved by theoretical reason.

the concept of God is something I can arouse in myself or not arouse. That is not what I am seeking. I am seeking that without which there could be no life." And again everything began to die around me and in me, and again I wanted to kill myself.

12.11 But then I looked at myself, at what was happening in me; and I remembered all those dyings and revivals that had taken place in me hundreds of times. I remembered that I had lived only when I believed in God. As it was before, so it is now, I told myself: I have only to know about God, and I live; I have only to forget, to not believe in him, and I die. What, then, are these revivals and dyings? Surely I do not live when I lose faith in the existence of God; surely I would long since have killed myself if I had not had a vague hope of finding him. Surely I live, truly live, only when I feel him and seek him. So what more am I seeking?—a voice cried out within me.—So here he is. He is that without which one cannot live. To know God and to live are one and the same. God is life.

12.12 "Live seeking God, and then there will be no life without God." And more strongly than ever before everything lit up within me and around me, and that light never left me again.

12.13 And I was saved from suicide. When and how this revolution took place in me I could not say. Just as imperceptibly and gradually as the force of life had been destroyed in me, and I had come to the impossibility of living, to the arrest of life, to the need for suicide—so, just as gradually and imperceptibly, this force of life returned to me. And it is strange that the force of life that returned to me was not new but the very oldest—the very same force that had drawn me on in the earliest days of my life. I returned in everything to what was earliest, to childhood and youth. I returned to faith in the will that produced me and wants something of me; I returned to the idea that the chief and only aim of my life is to be better, that is, to live more in accordance with this will; I returned to the idea that I can find the expression of this will in what all humanity, in a distance hidden from me, has worked out for its own guidance—that is, I returned to faith in God, in moral self-perfection, and in the tra-

dition that handed down the meaning of life. The only difference was that then all this had been accepted unconsciously, while now I knew that without it I cannot live.

THE BOAT AND THE CURRENT

A parable of rowing with the crowd downstream toward the rapids, then back toward the shore.

12.14 It was as though this had happened to me: I do not remember when I was put into a boat, pushed off from some shore unknown to me, shown the direction toward the other shore, given oars into my inexperienced hands, and left alone. I worked the oars as best I could and moved on; but the farther I rowed out toward the middle, the swifter the current became, carrying me away from my goal, and the more and more often I came upon other voyagers like me, being carried along by the current. There were solitary voyagers who kept on rowing; there were voyagers who had thrown down their oars; there were big boats, huge ships full of people; some struggled against the current, others gave themselves up to it. And the farther I went, the more—looking at the direction downstream in which all of them were moving—I forgot the direction I had been given. In the very middle of the stream, amid the crush of boats and ships rushing downstream, I lost my direction altogether and threw down my oars. On all sides around me, with merriment and rejoicing, voyagers under sail and oar were rushing downstream, assuring me and one another that there could be no other direction. And I believed them and went along with them. And I was carried far—so far that I heard the roar of the rapids where I was bound to be dashed to pieces, and saw boats that had been wrecked in them. And I came to my senses. For a long time I could not understand what had happened to me. Before me I saw only destruction, which I was rushing toward and which I feared; nowhere did I see salvation, and I did not know what to do. But, looking back, I saw countless boats that were ceaselessly, stubbornly breasting the current; I remembered the

shore, the oars and the direction, and began to row back, upstream and toward the shore.

12.15 The shore—that was God; the direction—that was tradition; the oars—that was the freedom given me to row my way to the shore, to unite with God. And so the force of life was renewed in me, and I began to live again.

Chapter XIII

He renounces the life of his class and joins the faith of the people, rites and all.

13.1 I renounced the life of our circle, having recognized that it was not life but only a semblance of life, that the conditions of excess in which we live deprive us of any possibility of understanding life, and that in order to understand life I must understand the life not of the exceptions, not of us, the parasites of life, but the life of the simple working people, the people who make life, and the meaning they give to it. The simple working people around me were the Russian people, and I turned to them and to the meaning they give to life. That meaning, if it can be put into words, was as follows. Every man has come into this world by the will of God. And God has so made man that every man can destroy his soul or save it. Man's task in life is to save his soul; to save his soul, one must live as God wills, and to live as God wills, one must renounce all the pleasures of life, work, humble oneself, endure and be merciful. The people draw this meaning from the whole of the doctrine handed down to them, and still being handed down, by their pastors and by the tradition that lives among the people and expresses itself in legends, proverbs and stories. This meaning was clear to me and close to my heart. But bound up inseparably with this meaning of the people's faith, among the common people around me, who were not Old Believers, there was much that repelled me and seemed inexplicable to me: the sacraments, the church services, the fasts, the veneration of relics and icons. The people cannot separate the one from the other, and neither could I.

However strange much of what made up the people's faith was to me, I accepted all of it: I went to the services, stood at prayer morning and evening, fasted, prepared myself for communion, and at first my reason resisted nothing. The very things that had once seemed impossible to me now aroused no resistance in me.

13.2 My relation to faith was now entirely different from what it had been then. Before, life itself had seemed to me full of meaning, and faith had seemed an arbitrary assertion of certain propositions that were utterly unnecessary to me, irrational and unconnected with life. I had asked myself then what meaning these propositions had, and, having satisfied myself that they had none, I had thrown them away. Now, on the contrary, I knew firmly that my life has no meaning and can have none, and the propositions of faith not only did not seem unnecessary to me—I had been led by undeniable experience to the conviction that only these propositions of faith give meaning to life. Before, I had looked on them as so much useless gibberish; now, if I did not understand them, I knew that there was meaning in them, and I told myself that I must learn to understand them.

13.3 I reasoned as follows. I said to myself: the knowledge of faith flows, like all humanity with its reason, from a mysterious origin. That origin is God, the origin both of the human body and of human reason. Just as my body has come down to me in succession *from* God, so have my reason and my comprehension of life, and therefore none of the stages in the development of this comprehension of life can be false. Everything that people truly believe must be truth; it may be expressed in different ways, but it cannot be a lie, and so if it seems to me a lie, that means only that I do not understand it. Besides, I said to myself: the essence of every faith lies in its giving life a meaning that death does not destroy. Naturally, for faith to be able to answer the question of a king dying amid luxury, of an old slave worn out by work, of an uncomprehending child, of a wise old man, of a half-witted old woman, of a happy young woman, of a young man tossed about by his passions, of all people in the most varied conditions of life and education—naturally, if there

is one answer that answers the one eternal question of life, "Why do I live, what will come of my life?", then that answer, though one in its essence, must be infinitely varied in its manifestations; and the more unified, the truer and deeper this answer is, the stranger and more grotesque, naturally, it must appear in its attempts at expression, according to the education and station of each person. But these arguments, which justified for me the strangeness of the ritual side of faith, were still not enough for me to allow myself, in what was for me the one business of life, in faith, to do things I had doubts about. I wished with all the strength of my soul to be able to merge with the people by carrying out the ritual side of their faith; but I could not do it. I felt that if I did, I would be lying to myself and mocking what was sacred to me. But here new works came to my aid—our own Russian works of theology.

THE INFALLIBLE CHURCH

Theologians teach that truth is given to the Church united in love, and he accepts all its rites.

13.4 As these theologians explain it, the fundamental dogma of faith is the infallible Church. From the acceptance of this dogma follows, as a necessary consequence, the truth of everything the Church professes. The Church, as the assembly of believers united by love and therefore possessing true knowledge, became the foundation of my faith. I told myself that divine truth cannot be accessible to one person alone; it reveals itself only to the whole body of people united by love. To attain the truth, one must not be divided; and in order not to be divided, one must love and make peace with what one disagrees with. Truth will reveal itself to love, and therefore, if you do not submit to the rites of the Church, you violate love; and in violating love, you deprive yourself of the possibility of knowing the truth. I did not see then the sophistry contained in this reasoning. I did not see then that unity in love may give the greatest love, but by no means theological truth expressed in definite

words in the Nicene Creed; nor did I see that love can by no means make a particular expression of truth obligatory for unity. I did not see then the error of this reasoning, and thanks to it I was able to accept and perform all the rites of the Orthodox Church without understanding most of them. I tried then with all the strength of my soul to avoid all reasoning and contradiction, and tried to explain, as rationally as I could, those tenets of the Church that I came up against.

13.5 In performing the rites of the Church, I humbled my reason and submitted to the tradition that all humanity had held. I united myself with my ancestors, with those I loved—my father, my mother, my grandfathers and grandmothers. They and all those before them had believed and lived, and had brought me into being. I united myself, too, with all the millions of the common people whom I respected. Besides, these acts in themselves had nothing bad in them (what I considered bad was the indulgence of lust). Getting up early for a church service, I knew that I was doing well, if only because, to humble the pride of my mind, to draw closer to my ancestors and contemporaries, for the sake of seeking the meaning of life, I was sacrificing my bodily comfort. It was the same when I prepared for communion, the same with the daily reading of prayers with prostrations, the same with keeping all the fasts. However trifling these sacrifices were, they were sacrifices in the name of the good. I prepared for communion, fasted, kept the prayers of the appointed hours at home and in church. Listening to the church services, I attended to every word and gave the words meaning when I could. In the liturgy the most important words for me were: "Let us love one another, that with one mind..." The words that followed, "we may confess the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit," I passed over, because I could not understand them.

Chapter XIV

Fasts, services and communion; what he can accept and what he cannot.

14.1 I needed so badly then to believe, in order to live, that I unconsciously hid from myself the contradictions and obscurities of the doctrine. But this making sense of the rites had its limit. If the litany became clearer and clearer to me in its chief words, if I explained to myself somehow the words "Remembering our most holy Lady, the Mother of God, and all the saints, let us commend ourselves and one another and all our life to Christ our God"; if I explained the frequent repetition of prayers for the tsar and his family by saying that they are more exposed to temptation than others and so stand more in need of prayer; then the prayers for subduing every foe and adversary beneath his feet, even if I explained them by saying that the foe is evil—these prayers and others, such as the Cherubic Hymn and the whole sacrament of the proskomedia, or "To thee, our champion leader," and so on—[1] almost two-thirds of all the services either had no explanation at all, or I felt that in fitting explanations to them I was lying and thereby destroying my relation to God altogether, losing utterly any possibility of faith.

14.2 I felt the same in celebrating the chief feasts. To remember the Sabbath day, that is, to devote one day to turning to God, made sense to me. But the chief feast was the commemoration of the resurrection, an event whose reality I could neither ima-

1 The Cherubic Hymn is sung at the liturgy, and the proskomedia is the preparation of the bread and wine before it. "To thee, our champion leader" opens the Akathist hymn to the Mother of God.

gine nor understand. And the day celebrated every week bore this same name of resurrection. And on these days the sacrament of the Eucharist was celebrated, which was completely incomprehensible to me. All the rest of the twelve feasts, except Christmas, commemorated miracles, things I tried not to think about so as not to deny them: the Ascension, Pentecost, the Epiphany, the Protection of the Virgin and so on. In celebrating these feasts, feeling that importance was being given to the very thing that for me had quite the reverse importance, I either invented explanations to soothe myself or shut my eyes so as not to see what offended me.[2]

14.3 This happened to me most strongly when I took part in the most ordinary sacraments, the ones considered the most important: baptism and communion. Here I came up against actions that were not incomprehensible but perfectly comprehensible: these actions seemed offensive to me, and I was put in a dilemma—either to lie or to reject them.

COMMUNION

At his first communion in years he must affirm the bread and wine are the true body and blood.

14.4 I shall never forget the painful feeling I experienced on the day I took communion for the first time after many years. The services, confession, the prescribed prayers—all this I could understand, and it gave me a joyful awareness that the meaning of life was being revealed to me. Communion itself I explained to myself as an act performed in remembrance of Christ and signifying cleansing from sin and the full acceptance of Christ's teaching. If this explanation was artificial, I did not notice its artificiality. It was such a joy to me, abasing and humbling myself before my confessor, a simple, timid priest, to turn out all the filth of my soul, repenting of my vices; such a joy to merge in thought with the aspirations of the Fathers who wrote the prescribed prayers; such a joy to be at one with all who had

2 In Russian, Sunday is voskresenie, "resurrection."

believed and who believe, that I did not even feel the artificiality of my explanation. But when I came up to the Royal Doors and the priest made me repeat that I believe that what I was about to swallow was the true body and blood, it cut me to the heart; this was not merely a false note, it was a cruel demand from someone who had evidently never even known what faith is.[3]

14.5 But it is only now that I allow myself to say it was a cruel demand; at the time I did not even think it, I only felt an inexpressible pain. I was no longer in the position I had been in as a young man, thinking that everything in life was clear; I had come to faith, after all, because apart from faith I had found nothing, absolutely nothing, but destruction, and so it was impossible to throw this faith away, and I submitted. And I found in my soul a feeling that helped me bear it. It was a feeling of self-abasement and humility. I humbled myself, swallowed this blood and body without any feeling of blasphemy, wishing to believe, but the blow had been struck. And knowing in advance what awaited me, I could not go a second time.

14.6 I went on performing the rites of the Church in exactly the same way and still believed that there was truth in the doctrine I was following, and something was happening to me that is clear to me now but seemed strange then.

14.7 I would listen to an illiterate peasant pilgrim talking about God, about faith, about life, about salvation, and the knowledge of faith would open up to me. I drew close to the people, listening to what they thought about life and faith, and I understood the truth more and more. The same happened to me when I read the Chetyi-Minei and the Prologues; these became my favorite reading. Leaving aside the miracles, regarding them as a plot that expresses an idea, this reading revealed to me the meaning of life. There were the lives of Macarius the Great and of the Tsarevich Josaphat (the story of the Buddha); there were the sermons of John Chrysostom, the tales of the traveler in the well, of the monk who found gold, of Peter the publican; there was the

3 The Royal Doors are the central doors of the iconostasis, before which communion is given.

history of the martyrs, all declaring one thing, that death does not exclude life; there were the stories of people who were saved though they were illiterate, foolish and knew nothing of the teachings of the Church.[4]

14.8 But I had only to come together with learned believers or pick up their books, and a kind of self-doubt, dissatisfaction, the bitterness of argument would rise in me, and I felt that the more I went into what they said, the further I moved from the truth and the nearer I came to the precipice.

4 The Chetyi-Minei and the Prologues are Russian Orthodox collections of saints' lives and edifying tales arranged by the days of the Church year. Macarius the Great (4th century AD) was an Egyptian desert father.

Chapter XV

The Church's hostility to other faiths and its blessing of war and executions drive him away from it.

15.1 How often I envied the peasants their illiteracy and lack of learning. From those tenets of faith that for me yielded obvious absurdities, nothing false followed for them; they could accept them and could believe in the truth, the same truth in which I too believed. Only for me, unhappy man, was it clear that truth was interwoven with falsehood by the finest threads and that I could not accept it in that form.

15.2 So I lived for about three years, and at first, when I, like a catechumen, was only little by little being admitted to the truth, when I was only following my instinct toward where it seemed lighter to me, these collisions struck me less. When I did not understand something, I said to myself: "It is my fault, I am bad." But the more I became imbued with the truths I was learning, the more they became the foundation of my life, the more painful and glaring these collisions became, and the sharper became the line that lies between what I do not understand because I am unable to understand it and what cannot be understood except by lying to myself.

15.3 Despite these doubts and sufferings, I still held to Orthodoxy. But questions of life arose that had to be resolved, and here the Church's resolution of these questions—contrary to the very foundations of the faith by which I lived—finally made me renounce the possibility of communion with Orthodoxy. These questions were, first, the relation of the Orthodox Church to other churches—to Catholicism and to the so-called schismatics.

At that time, because of my interest in faith, I was coming into contact with believers of various confessions: Catholics, Protestants, Old Believers, Molokans and others. And I met many people among them who were morally elevated and truly believing. I wished to be a brother to these people. And what came of it?[1] —The very teaching that had promised to unite everyone in one faith and love, this very teaching, in the persons of its best representatives, told me that all these people were living in falsehood, that what gave them the force of life was a temptation of the devil, and that we alone possessed the only possible truth. And I saw that the Orthodox consider all who do not profess the faith as they do to be heretics, exactly as Catholics and others consider Orthodoxy a heresy; I saw that toward all who do not profess their faith with the same outward symbols and words as Orthodoxy, Orthodoxy, though it tries to hide it, is hostile, as indeed it must be: first, because the assertion that you are in falsehood and I am in the truth is the cruelest thing one person can say to another, and second, because a man who loves his children and brothers cannot help being hostile to people who want to convert his children and brothers to a false faith. And this hostility grows the more one knows of doctrine. And to me, who placed truth in unity in love, it was inescapably striking that doctrine itself destroys what it ought to produce.

15.4 This stumbling block is so obvious—so obvious to us educated people, who have lived in countries where different faiths are professed and have seen the contemptuous, self-assured, unshakable rejection with which the Catholic treats the Orthodox and the Protestant, the Orthodox the Catholic and the Protestant, and the Protestant both, and the same attitude in the Old Believer, the Pashkovite, the Shaker and every faith—that at first the very obviousness of the stumbling block is baffling. You say to yourself: surely it cannot be so simple, and yet people have not seen that if two assertions negate each other, then neither one nor the other holds that single truth which faith must be.

1 The Molokans are a Russian sect of "spiritual Christians" who reject the sacraments, icons and the clergy.

There must be something to it.[2] There must be some explanation —and I did think there was, and I looked for this explanation, and read everything I could on the subject, and consulted everyone I could. And I received no explanation except the very same one by which the Sumy Hussars consider that the first regiment in the world is the Sumy Hussars, and the Yellow Uhlans consider that the first regiment in the world is the Yellow Uhlans. The clergy of all the different confessions, the best representatives among them, told me nothing except that they believed they were in the truth and the others in error, and that all they could do was pray for them. I went to archimandrites, bishops, elders, schema-monks, and asked, and no one made the slightest attempt to explain this stumbling block to me. Only one of them explained everything to me—but he explained it in such a way that I never asked anyone again.

15.5 I said that for every unbeliever who turns to faith (and our whole younger generation faces that turn) this question comes first: why is the truth not in Lutheranism, not in Catholicism, but in Orthodoxy? He has been taught at school, and he cannot help knowing, as the peasant does not know, that the Protestant and the Catholic assert in exactly the same way that their own faith alone is true. Historical proofs, bent by each confession in its own direction, are not enough. Could we not, I said, understand the teaching on a higher level, so that from the heights of the teaching the differences would vanish, as they vanish for the true believer? Could we not go further along the path we have taken with the Old Believers? They maintained that our sign of the cross, our alleluia and our procession around the altar were different. We said: you believe in the Nicene Creed and the seven sacraments, and so do we. Let us hold to that, and in the rest do as you please. We united with them by putting what is essential in faith above what is inessential. Now, could we not say to the Catholics: you believe in this and that, in the main thing, and as for the filioque and the pope, do as you please?

2 The Pashkovites are the "New Christians" of 10.3; the Shakers are an American Protestant sect.

Could we not say the same to the Protestants, uniting with them on the main thing? The man I was talking with agreed with my idea, but told me that such concessions would bring reproaches on the Church authorities for departing from the faith of their forefathers, and would produce a schism, whereas the calling of the Church authorities is to preserve in all its purity the Greco-Russian Orthodox faith handed down to them by their forefathers.[3]

15.6 And I understood everything. I am seeking faith, the force of life, and they are seeking the best means of fulfilling certain human obligations before people. And in doing these human things, they do them in a human way. However much they may speak of their sorrow over their erring brothers, of the prayers for them offered up before the throne of the Most High—doing human things requires violence, and violence has always been used, is being used and will be used. If two confessions each consider themselves in the truth and each other in falsehood, then, wishing to draw their brothers to the truth, they will preach their teaching. And if a false teaching is preached to the inexperienced sons of a church that is in the truth, that church cannot help burning the books and removing the man who leads its sons astray. What is to be done with the sectarian who burns with the fire of a faith that is, in the view of Orthodoxy, false, and who, in the most important business of life, in faith, leads the sons of the Church astray? What is to be done with him but to cut off his head or lock him up? Under Tsar Alexis they burned people at the stake, that is, they applied the highest punishment of the time; in our day too they apply the highest punishment—they lock people up in solitary confinement. And I turned my attention to what is done in the name of religious confession, and I was horrified, and by now I had almost entirely renounced Orthodoxy. The second relation of the

3 The filioque ("and from the Son") is the Western addition to the Nicene Creed on the procession of the Holy Spirit, a chief point of dispute between the Catholic and Orthodox Churches.

Church to the questions of life was its relation to war and to executions.[4]

WAR AND EXECUTIONS

The Church prays for victory in war and its clergy approve the killing of young revolutionaries.

15.7 At that time there was a war in Russia. And Russians began, in the name of Christian love, to kill their brothers. It was impossible not to think about this. It was impossible not to see that killing is an evil, contrary to the very first foundations of any faith. And at the same time in the churches they prayed for the success of our arms, and the teachers of faith accepted this killing as a deed that follows from faith. And not only these killings in war: during the troubles that followed the war I saw members of the Church, its teachers, monks, schema-monks, who approved the killing of helpless young people who had gone astray. And I turned my attention to all that is done by people who profess Christianity, and I was horrified.[5]

4 Tsar Alexis Mikhailovich (reigned 1645–76), under whom the Church reforms that produced the Old Believer schism were carried out and dissenters were persecuted.

5 The Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78; the troubles that followed were the revolutionary terrorism of 1878–81 and the executions of revolutionaries.

Chapter XVI

Truth and falsehood are mixed in the teaching; he resolves to study theology to separate them. Postscript (1882): a dream.

16.1 And I stopped doubting, and became fully convinced that not everything in the knowledge of faith that I had joined was truth. Before, I would have said that the whole doctrine was false; but now it was impossible to say that. The whole people had the knowledge of truth—this was beyond doubt, because otherwise they would not live. Besides, this knowledge of truth was already accessible to me; I was already living by it and felt the whole truth of it; but in this same knowledge there was falsehood too. And of this I could not doubt. And everything that had once repelled me now rose vividly before me. Although I saw that in the people as a whole there was less of the admixture of falsehood that had repelled me than in the representatives of the Church, I still saw that in the beliefs of the people, too, falsehood was mixed with truth.

16.2 But where had the falsehood come from, and where had the truth come from? Both the falsehood and the truth had been handed down by what is called the Church. Both the falsehood and the truth are contained in tradition, in what is called Holy Tradition and Scripture.

16.3 And, like it or not, I am brought to the study, the investigation, of this Scripture and tradition—the investigation I had been so afraid of until now.

16.4 And I turned to the study of that very theology I had once thrown aside with such contempt as unnecessary. Then it had seemed to me a series of unnecessary absurdities; then I had

been surrounded on all sides by the phenomena of life, which seemed to me clear and full of meaning; now I would gladly throw aside what will not go into a sound head, but there is no way around it. On this doctrine rests—or at least inseparably bound up with it is—the one knowledge of the meaning of life that has been revealed to me. However wild it seems to my old, firm mind, it is the one hope of salvation. I must examine it carefully and attentively in order to understand it—and not even to understand it in the way I understand a proposition of science. That I do not seek and cannot seek, knowing the particular nature of the knowledge of faith. I will not seek an explanation of everything. I know that the explanation of everything must lie hidden, like the origin of everything, in the infinite. But I want to understand in such a way as to be brought to what is inevitably inexplicable; I want everything that is inexplicable to be so not because the demands of my mind are wrong (they are right, and outside them I can understand nothing), but because I see the limits of my mind. I want to understand in such a way that every inexplicable proposition presents itself to me as a necessity of reason itself, and not as an obligation to believe.

16.5 That there is truth in the teaching is beyond doubt for me; but it is beyond doubt, too, that there is falsehood in it, and I must find the truth and the falsehood and separate the one from the other. And so I set about it. What I found false in this teaching, what I found true, and what conclusions I came to make up the following parts of the work, which, if it is worth it and anyone needs it, will probably be printed someday, somewhere.

POSTSCRIPT: THE DREAM

Three years later he dreams he hangs over an abyss and is held up by looking upward.

16.6 This was written by me three years ago.

16.7 Now, looking over this part that is being printed and returning to the train of thought and the feelings that were in me when I was living through it, I had a dream the other day.

This dream expressed for me, in a condensed image, everything I had lived through and described, and so I think that for those who have understood me, too, a description of this dream will refresh, clarify and gather into one all that has been told at such length in these pages. Here is the dream: I see that I am lying on a bed. And I feel neither comfortable nor uncomfortable; I am lying on my back. But I begin to wonder whether I am lying comfortably; and something, it seems to me, is awkward for my legs: whether it is too short or uneven, something is awkward; I move my legs a little and at the same time begin to consider how and on what I am lying, which until then had not entered my head. And examining my bed, I see that I am lying on woven rope straps fastened to the sides of the bedstead. My feet are lying on one such strap, my calves on another; my legs are uncomfortable. For some reason I know that these straps can be moved. And with a movement of my legs I push away the last strap under my feet. It seems to me it will be more comfortable that way. But I have pushed it too far; I want to catch it with my legs, but with this movement the other strap slips out from under my calves too, and my legs hang down. I make a movement with my whole body to set things right, fully confident that I will settle myself in a moment; but with this movement still other straps slip and shift beneath me, and I see that things are going completely wrong: the whole lower part of my body slides down and hangs, my feet do not reach the ground. I am holding on only by the upper part of my back, and I begin to feel not just uncomfortable but, for some reason, frightened.—Only now do I ask myself what had never even entered my head before. I ask myself: where am I, and what am I lying on? And I begin to look around, and first of all I look down, to where my body has slipped and where, I feel, I must fall at any moment. I look down and cannot believe my eyes. It is not that I am at a height like the height of the highest tower or mountain—I am at a height such as I could never have imagined.

16.8 I cannot even make out whether I see anything there, below, in that bottomless chasm over which I hang and into

which I am being drawn. My heart contracts, and I feel horror. To look down there is horrible. If I look down there, I feel I will slip off the last straps at once and perish. I do not look, but not looking is still worse, because I think about what will happen to me in a moment, when I fall from the last straps. And I feel that from horror I am losing my last hold and slowly sliding along my back, lower and lower. Another moment, and I will drop. And then the thought comes to me: this cannot be true. It is a dream. Wake up. I try to wake up and cannot. What am I to do, what am I to do? —I ask myself, and I glance upward. Above, too, is an abyss. I look into this abyss of the sky and try to forget the abyss below, and indeed I do forget. The infinity below repels and horrifies me; the infinity above draws me and steadies me. I am hanging just as before over the chasm, on the last straps that have not yet slipped out from under me; I know that I am hanging, but I look only upward, and my fear passes. As happens in dreams, a voice says: "Remember this—this is it!" and I look further and further into the infinity above and feel that I am growing calm; I remember everything that has happened, and I recall how it all came about: how I moved my legs, how I was left hanging, how I was horrified, and how I was saved from horror by beginning to look upward. And I ask myself: well, and now what—am I still hanging the same way? And I do not so much look around as test with my whole body the point of support that holds me. And I see that I am no longer hanging or falling, but holding firm. I ask myself how I am holding on, feel myself, look around, and see that under me, under the middle of my body, there is one strap, and that, looking upward, I am lying on it in the most stable balance, and that it alone had been holding me before as well. And here, as happens in dreams, the mechanism that holds me seems to me quite natural, understandable and beyond doubt, although in waking life this mechanism makes no sense at all. In the dream I am even surprised that I had not understood this before. It turns out that at my head stands a pillar, and the firmness of this pillar is beyond any doubt, although there is nothing for this slender pillar to stand

on. Then from the pillar a loop runs, somehow very cleverly and at the same time simply, and if you lie on this loop with the middle of your body and look upward, there cannot even be any question of falling. All this was clear to me, and I was glad and at peace. And it is as if someone is saying to me: look now, remember this. And I woke up.