

MINUTES
of the Meeting of
The Novel Club of Cleveland
Date: February 3, 2015

Hosts: Jane Hammond and Catherine LaCroix

Novel: *Hadji Murad*, by Leo Tolstoy

Papers:

Biographical: Andrew Fabens

Critical: George Weimer

Members and friends of The Novel Club of Cleveland gathered at the home of Catherine LaCroix on the wintery evening of Tuesday, February 3, 2015. After the customary opening interval for refreshments and conversation, the meeting was called to order by President Anne Ogan at 8:15. Guests were welcomed. The club treasurer being absent, there was no treasurer's report. The Program Committee will report next month when their work is finalized. They have completed the list and are working on clearing up one remaining issue. A question was raised and brief discussion ensued about recent changes in membership application procedures. After a few exchanges, agreement was reached to table the discussion for the present, continuing for now with procedures as listed in this year's program booklet and on the website.

Andy Fabens presented the biographical paper on Leo Tolstoy.

The critical paper on *Hadji Murad* was presented by George Weimer, who also supplied the discussion questions. The questions, along with notes on the discussion they prompted, appear below.

1. What do you think of Harold Bloom's comment: "*Hadji Murat* is ... to me the best (short) story in the world"?

First responses to this comment were to the nature of the comment—that to declare anything "best...in the world" is likely excessive; that to refer to this short novel as a "story" is "astounding," and that Bloom, though a respected critic, is also highly opinionated and, in this case, wrong.

Then followed several comments in general reaction to the book—that it was difficult to get into, but ultimately engaging; that it had a disappointing effect of "trivializing" the character of Hadji Murad; that it contains breathtaking scenes presented by a great craftsman at his best; and that it masterfully juxtaposes gaiety with brutality in an artistic dance depicting the whole human story, in a way—including the possibility that "war is the natural state of man."

2. What is your interpretation of the beginning bouquet and the thistles?

These images suggest the Chechens' strong character and the unconquerability of the Chechen people (by the Russians), through the historical record. They also suggest that there was something left Tolstoy felt he needed to say in his literature about conflict between Russians and their victims—the thistle representing toughness of the subject people and the fight they put up,

even if they were eventually conquered. These ideas are conveyed by the fact that one can't destroy the thistle by cutting off its head, because it stays rooted in the ground—or at least that in trying to destroy it, the attacker will get stuck and injured.

Broader questions were raised here: 1) is thistle especially tough, or especially ephemeral? 2) does this vignette suggest that people murder nature? —or, that as we try to murder nature, it spreads its seeds? 3) is it particularly characteristic of the book, that every sentence can be examined/analyzed, so that for example the thistle image leads to discussion of humans attempting to exercise dominion over earth? or (again, from another angle) over each other—suggesting that although warriors can scorch the earth, there will still be “the thistles among us” who can't be eliminated?

3. Can a person of such nobility, humility and virtue ever exist in the real world? Can you name someone who fits the soul of Hadji Murad?

Response to this question began with wondering whether “nobility, humility, and virtue” would ever be attributed to recent middle-eastern leaders such as Karzai. Perhaps none of these characters (recent or historical/fictional) have strong claims on virtue/nobility. The character of Hadji Murad struck some readers as naïve and childlike, primitive though charming, a shrewd pragmatist, opportunist, charlatan—a cunning schemer, **not** a virtuous character. He may possibly be heroic/idealistic, but it seems also possible that if empowered, he might behave as badly as his opponents.

Contrastingly—as seen through the eyes of the narrator (and some of our readers), Hadji Murad has many virtues. Some readers think he is overwhelmingly honorable, and stands taller than other characters; others don't buy that interpretation, feeling he has the same failings as the other characters. Those viewing him as heroic wondered whether he is **too** good and noble to be believable? Was Gandhi such a character? (Not, someone pointed out, according to Winston Churchill...)

4. If Tolstoy were alive today, what would he say about what most people call Islamic terrorists?

Tolstoy tries to distinguish Shamil's Holy War from Hadji Murad's “war of independence”—raising the important point that people fight in different ways and for different reasons. Following this line of reasoning, likely Tolstoy would be against Islamic terrorists, because they fight for a wrong reason (religion) rather than the more valid reason of “independence.” Or, another reader asked, can we even identify what reason underlies present-day Islamic terrorism?—since they also fight amongst themselves, after all...

Is a biography of Hadji Murad in effect an exploration of the roots of present-day Islamic terrorism? Various analytical possibilities were explored in discussion, including the viewpoint that current Islamic terrorism is not appropriately compared to the conflicts of 18th century Chechen nationalists—that the two issues are not fundamentally parallel and would not have been recognized as such by Tolstoy.

5. Why is Hadji Murat so fascinated by the watch he receives from Princess Vorontsov? What is Tolstoy saying about this?

- This is presented as a cultural exchange, after Hadji Murad gives the sabre to the child; thus it presents a touching episode of cultural brotherhood.
- Additionally, this element has to do with awareness of time measurement, which is not part of Hadji Murad's mountain culture at that time—so this invocation of time causes Hadji Murad to realize his own mortality, and thus presents a carefully thought-out scene in the book. • Perhaps this is also an oblique reference to Islamic faith, in which time is partly defined by reference to five-times-daily prayers, whereas the clock offers another way of measuring time?
- Also, this scene may say something about the “adopted brother” relationship, in which if one adopted brother admires something he is supposed to be given it by its owner.

6. This seems a book, albeit short, about the eternal battle between good and evil—sometimes in the same person. The battle seems to depend upon what one can understand. True? False?

- Isn't that true in all of Tolstoy?
- Who has both characteristics? All characters and people, except possibly the idealized Hadji Murad? Neither the Russian nor the Chechen characters have a monopoly on good or evil.
- Arguably, Tolstoy was writing about himself, with his own mixture of good and evil. He thought in 7-year cycles of life, so he could periodically change from what he didn't want to be...? On that view, this book could be a last desperate attempt to find some redemption through fundamentalist Christianity.
- On the whole, “battle of good and evil” seems a simplistic focus; note that *Anna Karenina* and *War and Peace* end with more complexity—but of course they are much earlier and longer works.

A few other general questions (regarding Tolstoy's portrait of Tsar Nicholas, and any relevance of this novel to the recent Russian/Chechnyan conflict) were raised from the floor and discussed briefly for historical context.

President Ogan brought discussion to a close at 9:50 with thanks to the hosts. Members returned to the table for a last round of refreshments and individual conversation.