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When Hell freezes over and Tolstoy learns to skate

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John Collier's 1894 painting "The Devil skating when Hell freezes over" has such an impeccable ironic aura that it's hard to believe it was created more than a century ago, and rightfully so because it was not, neither in 1894 nor by John Collier, or mayhap was, chort knows—the gossip web is so wonderfully confusing at times!



"The Devil skating when Hell freezes over" by some John Collier, sometime Comrade A stumbled upon this painting by sheer accident, details of which he prefers not to disclose. One article told him it was

indeed made by John Collier and was indeed called “The Devil skating when Hell freezes over” but the problem is there’re two John Colliers and both of them are artists and both of them could, in theory at least, paint the skating Devil, and the gossip web (“So wonderfully confusing!”) attributes this picture to either John Collier, pre-Raphaelite English painter, who worked in a rather similar style, made this painting, oil on canvas, by the by, in 1894 and, allegedly, died in 1938, and our contemporary John Collier, a Usonian sculptor and artist, who also worked as an illustrator, painted it in either 1998 or 2012 and, hopefully, still alive and well.

Facing such a dubious predicament, Comrade A fancied himself a detective and began an investigation on how true is Truth in her once again confusion manifestation, because Comrade A needed to know if this painting (“An example of a niche meme, if one googles enough”) had that impeccable ironic aura ahead of its time, being in that case an almost proto post-modern artefact, or “just in time”, being in that case, well... normal.

As any sane person of his age, Comrade A decided to consult his personal thinking rock, which, however, did not help resolving this curious case and only hallucinated some bizarre theories that attributing the painting to John Collier was erroneous for the sole reason because it was. On top of that, people on various websites said it was made by another John Collier and was, in fact, a religious and | or political satire plus a homage to a work of Scottish painter Henry Raeburn, “The Reverend Robert Walker Skating on Duddingston Loch”, made,

notably, in 1790, a century earlier, or two, depending on which John Collier is *the* John Collier.

—If he painted it in 2012, Collier either couldn't die in 1938 or couldn't paint it at all, at least, it would be rather hard for him to do, wouldn't it?—said Comrade A while drinking what is called "Ivan-chai" ("a marvellous potion!").

—It would indeed. But wait! Isn't it so interesting? Isn't it a striking example of Victorian-era artistic satire?—replied the thinking rock.

—It is indeed,—said Comrade A.—But where's the original? Where is it? There's none. I cannot see any. There's no original. None of the museums or art catalogues have this painting in the same list as other Collier's paintings. Neither of the Colliers.

—Notably, Henry Raeburn's "The Reverend Robert Walker Skating on Duddingston Loch" (the painting satirised by Collier) resides in the Scottish National Gallery.

—We're not talking about the Skating Minister, though.

—I apologise for the confusion. The Skating Minister is most definitely out of the question...

—Then where's the Devil?

—However...

—What? What however about it? Where's the Devil?

—Oh, this is another mystery!—proclaimed the thinking rock, full of fervour.—Collier's devilish counterpart remains elusive in public records.

—Oh, I see. Which Collier, though?

—The mix-up highlights the importance of verifying historical context when encountering duplicate artist names. One online user described it as "whimsically blasphemous", by the by.



Henry Raeburn's "The Reverend Robert Walker Skating on Duddingston Loch", 1790 Oof, well, "daffuque," as French would say. Despite a slight miscommunication occurring between Comrade A and the thinking rock, Comrade A found the answer, at least what he would

consider “a hypothesis supported by empirical evidence”, the empirical evidence being results of visual, not exact, matches in image search. The screen revealed to Comrade A a book called “El Poder de Las Tinieblas” (The Power of Darkness), a Spanish edition of the second book in the Charlie Parker series by John Connolly. On both sides of the product image he saw the Devil himself, skating on the frozen lake: a large painting on the front, and a smaller painting on the back, cropped. The caption said, in Spanish, “Cover illustration: Devil Skates, pastel by John Collier. © Collier, 2004.” The book was priced 19 euros.

—Who’s that?—asked Comrade W, Comrade A’s wife.

—The Devil,—answered Comrade A with glee.

—Who? He’s the Devil?

—He is, my dear, he-he.

—No, he’s not, come on, my love. Look at the wings, and the tail. Is it a joke? This can’t be serious.

—Why not?

—Too short.

(Here, the author thought about inserting a dick joke in both Comrade A’s and Comrade W’s lines but abstained from it despite, nay “in spite”, having a perfect possibility, for the author was NOT and is NOT in a fifth grade.)

—He looks like an imp at most, a bulky imp. Hast thou ever seen the Devil?

—I have not, thankfully. The picture's enough for me,—Comrade A sounded irritated.—Hast thou? How? When? Under what circumstances? Pray tell.

—Oh, don't start an argument. He looks like... hmm...

—He is a perfect devil. He is the Devil.

—Cope harder. I'll make some tea.

—I need not any tea.

—I'll make it for myself.

Left alone in his study, Comrade A doubted himself for a second or a bit longer—a second at first, the whole infinity afterwards. It was unspeakable—he had never doubted himself till that moment, not ever, but his dear wife implanted a seed of qualm right inside his brain. If the figure on the painting was not the Devil, then who was it? Who? Who?! In Russian literature and folklore, devils and chorts and mean spirits and all those are never grand in their appearance, have no big wings, no long tail, no sharp shark teeth, and do no, under any circumstances, appear as gigantic kaiju monsters, on contrary—they appear human-sized, behave almost like humans, just with more cunning, unfathomable motivations, and have some supernatural abilities and extra limbs. They are not even evil per se! They are arbiters of human

deeds, at most chaotic good. Do bad, thou art a goner; do good, thou art kinda fine. They can visit thy city or a village, thou can drink with them, have a chat, they can even show thee the way out the forest if thou dost not piss them off. Almost as if a devil is a bro, and thou shouldn't let thy bro down. So, to Comrade A that painting was, in fact, very Russian, and the Devil was devilish enough.

That being thought, whether he is the Devil or not, the figure reminded Comrade A of several personae he knew by heart, though wholeheartedly wished he didn't: Lenin, because of the hat and the coat, Stalin, because of the hat and the coat, Fidel Castro, because of the hat and the coat, and, breaking a glorious streak of communist leaders, Tolstoy—thou wilt not believe why but also for other reason (one of them's going to be explained later in this treatise).

—It's Tolstoy! I reckon it's Tolstoy, my dear!—he arrived in the kitchen, his voice resembling a glossolalia.

—He what?

—Leo Tolstoy. The skater is Tolstoy.

—Did thy thinking rock tell thee that?

—No!

—Should've I made chamomile tea?

Truth, being a spoiled brat of a lady, was that Leo Tolstoy indeed had a

kink for skating. He learned it in his 60s and managed to master it so that even children were fascinated by the stunts he pulled off on those skates. Hannah Tarsey, a nanny in Tolstoy's house, brought the skates over from England and taught the family how to use them. "The skates at that time were wooden, and only the blade itself and the screw that wound into the boot heel were made of steel. Through the wooden frame of the skate, straps were threaded which secured the foot in two places," wrote Tolstoy's daughter Tatiana in her memoirs. Every winter they flooded ice rinks in both Big and Lower ponds of Tolstoys' estate in Yasnaya Polyana. According to Tolstoy's wife Sofia, he could spend hours on the rink and soon learned to execute every conceivable manoeuvre. He did tricks on one and both legs, backwards, in circles, and so on—he felt himself a schoolboy again, that chap. The Tsar thought of sending him over to the Olympics, although the first winter Olympic games were scheduled for 1924, thus poor Leo Tolstoy never became an Olympic champion in his favourite sport. Time is ruthless now and then, a merciless bitch.



She was indeed a merciless bitch but not so much for Tolstoy. He grew much older and much wiser and, although could no longer skate himself, he taught others or simply stood at the rink for hours, admiring the skating children ("Creep..."). In his diary entry, Tolstoy compared skating to spiritual enlightement and described that teaching peasant children to skate as being like "teaching angels to walk on earth". At least this is what the thinking rock said to Comrade A. Notably, some other unnamed sources even claimed that Anna Karenina was originally meant to meet her end not under a train but having plunged through the ice while skating. Tragic, that, vivider and more poetic but, as that unnamed source also said, Tolstoy could not and would not create such a powerful scene that could scare his readers away from his favourite activity, which makes us think he did not really like trains as much.

—Did Raskolnikov skate?

—It's Dostoevsky.

—Yes, I know, thank thou very much. I don't remember if he skated.

—Did he or didn't he?

—But he could, couldn't he? St. Petersburg, winter, frozen canals...

—Not in his psychological state.

—Why didn't he skate? Was Dostoevsky making a point about his character's separation from society? His inability to glide smoothly through life like others?

—Please stop.

Tolstoy often brought his daughters to the Patriarch Ponds with him to skate, as well as his characters, for example, Levin in his desperate search for Kitty. A peculiar coincidence, quite an amusing one, mind thee, that right there, in Moscow, at the Patriach Ponds, Woland first appeared and Annushka so inopportunely spilt the oil, thereby starting the events of "Master and Margatita" (sic!). The locals say that the evil spirits dwelling there were not exorcised properly and still continue to play tricks on the residents of the Patriarch settlement after Joachim, that very patriarch, ordered to dry swamps and dig three ponds in order to sustain his belly's need for fish.

—Could that be Woland? Did Woland skate?—asked Comrade A.—He must have. Thou read the book. The Patriarch's ponds and all.

Think about it: the Devil in Moscow, winter, frozen ponds.

—No, he didn't skate.

—Why didn't he skate?

—Well, there was no such thing in the book, that's why.

—Ah, but what about all those missing chapters that Bulgakov destroyed? Maybe that's why he destroyed them—he didn't like skating himself!

—I'm sure Woland didn't skate. It wasn't even winter.

—Nobody's ever seen Woland skate but nobody can prove he DIDN'T skate!

Comrade W contemplated, winced.

—Nah, doesn't look like Woland. Must be Tolstoy. He beat his wife. Hence the wings and all. Keep arguing with me—thou getest wings, too.

—Everyone skates in Russian literature! Aren't they? Like a national pastime of metaphors.

It was indeed a national pastime of metaphors. If it was not the Devil, despite, nay "in spite", the most reliable source said it was, who was it? Tolstoy? Woland? Tolstoy-Woland? Woland-Tolstoy? Tolstoland? Wolstoy? That's not to be ruled out, thought Comrade A. What on

Earth, setting aside the English idiom, which would've been too simple of an answer to such a complex, at times seemingly unsolvable conundrum, could inspire *the* John Collier to paint it in that exact way, using those exact elements in which the Devil indeed looked like a devilish, wife-beater version of Tolstoy? The hell in Dante's Inferno had a frozen lake in the ninth circle where those who committed treachery against God were sent. The lake itself was called Kokytos (from Greek "lamentation") and formed from the tears of Lucifer, the flapping of whose wings kept it frozen ("Those were, assumingly, much bigger. It is the size sometimes after all..."). It was there that Dante fought Lucifer, the last boss of the game. In Greek mythology, however, Kokytos was one of the underworld rivers and was never depicted as frozen. According to Homer's "Odyssey," it flowed into Archenon, another river, and started as a branch of the most known underworld river, Styx, the river of hatred. It circled Hades seven times, thus separating it from the land of the living. This, it must be said, rather far-fetched thought led Comrade A into some proper web wilderness, where he wandered, roamed, arsed about, until he found himself in complete emptiness, emptiness created by darkness, darkness created by the shadow of information overload, like in the shade of dense leaves that don't let through a single ray of light.

—Think Tolstoy ended up in Hell?—Comrade A whispered to the thinking rock (his wife was already abed).

—Tolstoy experienced a painful conflict between physical desire and spiritual ideals in his epic quest for ethic loot. After 18 years of marriage,

during which Sofia bore 13 children, 5 of which died as infants, he declared carnal relations “murder of women” and preached “brotherly-sisterly marriage”. Paradoxically, during her pregnancies, he engaged in sexual relations with peasant women in the village. “Cannot overcome lustfulness,” he wrote in his diary, “this passion has merged with habit in me. I must have a woman. Lust does not give me a moment’s peace.”

—So did he end up in Hell or not?

—Tolstoy was excommunicated from the Church in 1901 for denying basic dogmas, including the existence of hell as a place of eternal torment. In his story “The Destruction of Hell and Its Restoration” (1902), he depicts sinners leaving hell. The crowd could, theoretically, include himself, for there’s no evidence of neither. Tolstoy created a concept of a personal God and afterlife retribution, considering hell a metaphor for earthly suffering.

—Doesn’t sound too bad.

—Oh, and yes, he also was an anarchist.

—Oh, no, unbelievable!

Whether Tolstoy ended up in any Hell, be it Greek or Christian or none at all, Comrade A failed to find out, as the wild web contained no definitive answers to this curious in all senses question. However, ambiguous answers existed aplenty, if not on the online, then in

Russian literature. Thus, for example, in Victor Pelevin's novel "Chapaev and Void", the main character Pyotr Void contemplates:

—Russian souls are destined to cross the Styx when it freezes over, and the coin goes not to the ferryman, but to someone in grey who rents out a pair of skates.

Interesting, thought Comrade A, very interesting—no ferry. Capitalism is terrible! The spiritual crossing must be made alone? By thyself? Unspeakable! But whatever! There, in the same episode, he appears—the last boss of the game—Count Tolstoy in the flesh, skating on the frozen waters, pursued by three-headed dog.

—If this is Cerberus,—said Tolstoy,—then before me lies the Styx... Now, off the other shore... Cross to the other shore...

And off he glided, slowly and solemnly, in black tights, arms swinging wide, towards the distant horizon, tracing pirouettes, dodging the three-headed dog racing after him with silent barking—all against the red-yellow unearthly sunset.

Surprisingly, even great thinkers become prisoners of illusions if they do not realise śūnyatā. May he rest in peace and no war.

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