

GÁBOR ITTZÉS

## HOW TO TAME DEATH WITHOUT SPIRITUALITY

Or, a Mentally Healthy Approach to the Inevitable End?

**AKUNIN, B. & G. TSCHCHARTISCHWILI (2009) *Schöner als der Tod: Friedhofsgeschichten*, trans. VEIT, B. (Munich: Goldman) 20.4 cm, 251 pp., ISBN: 978-3-442-46459-3, €7.95.**

### **Akunin: an Eastern European voice**

Georgian-born Russian scholar of Japanese culture, literary translator, and editor Grigory Shalvovich Chkhartishvili (b. 1956) rose to international fame in the late 1990s under the pen name Boris Akunin. He is best known for his historical whodunit novels featuring the fictional nineteenth-century detective Erast Fandorin. Akunin is both incredibly prolific and tremendously popular. His first novel was written in a mere six weeks, and in 1998 alone, the year that marked the first appearance of the Fandorin books on the market, he published four volumes in the series. Literally tens of millions of copies of his books have been sold in Russia, where the first editions of his new titles now routinely appear in 500,000 copies each. He quickly became an international publishing phenomenon comparable to J.K. Rowling of Harry Potter fame.

Akunin is not only a cultural entrepreneur carefully managing his considerable financial success and a creative writer constantly and consciously exploring literary, and cinematic, forms and genres, but he is also a responsible intellectual who has been acclaimed for offering a new role model for the emerging middle classes of post-Communist Russia. His many books, now translated into more than thirty languages and several also adapted to the big screen, are rooted in Russian culture, but they also took the West by storm. Akunin surely achieved more than creating a number of memorable heroes (of whom Fandorin is likely to take his place next to Sherlock Holmes, Miss Marple and Commissaire Maigret); he has made a genuinely Eastern European and, significantly, post-Soviet contribution to global culture.

### **Essays and novellas**

The ‘Cemetery Tales,’ as the *Kladbishchenskie istorii, 1999–2004* are usually referred to, although no English translation of the volume has been published yet,<sup>1</sup> are

<sup>1</sup> In addition to the Russian original (Moscow: KoLibri, 2004), the volume is also available, among other languages, in German (the hard cover edition came out in 2007), Hungarian (*Temetői történetek*,

both a typical and an atypical Akunin undertaking. So much is made clear by the title page that bears both the author's real name and his *nom de plume*. In this book that takes us through half a dozen major burial grounds of the northern hemisphere, Chkhartishvili goes beyond the limits of fiction and *essays* into the wider world of cultural history and philosophy. The six locations divide the work into six pairs of chapters, in which first a thoughtful essay by Chkhartishvili introduces the graveyard at hand, followed by a macabre novella, under Akunin's name, set in the same locale.

The tales are usually ghost or crime stories but always represent the register noir of the genre. In a biting satire of materialism, Karl Marx's ghost sucks the blood of visiting comrades in the Highgate Cemetery, London. In the Cimetière du Père-Lachaise, Paris, Oscar Wilde's corpse sponsors a, quite literally, grave homoerotic adventure of a philologist turned tomb raider. A Leningrad-born immigrant tries to win the graces of a mysterious clairvoyant by playing Russian roulette in New York's Green-Wood Cemetery. They are all well-written pieces of a skilful professional; their author is in full command of every trick and technique his trade has to offer. The novellas unfailingly deliver the twist in the tail that is the distinguishing mark of the genre. Each short story is perfectly constructed, clever, witty, and entertaining. They might even be unsettling on occasion, but they remain *études* and never aspire to be highbrow literature. The finger exercise quality is perhaps most tangible in 'Shigumo', set in nineteenth-century Japan, featuring Erast Fandorin, and later recycled in the 'Jade Rosary Beads'. It exhibits every requisite feature of a detective short story, but – perhaps because it conforms so obligingly to all generic clichés – it fails to achieve more than becoming a dime a dozen story.

It is noteworthy that the context the Akunin chapters uniformly place death in is sex and violence. These stories cater for a popular taste, and all they want is to entertain. If it were only for the tales, the book would certainly not deserve a review in this journal, but it was surely not the short fiction that took the author five years to compose. Indeed, the essays aim higher than the novellas. They acquaint the reader with the given cemetery's history and famous dead, providing a wealth of entertaining and educative, informative and surprising cultural historical details and anecdotes as they walk us through the burial grounds.

## East and West

Chkhartishvili, however, wants to present much more than a few acres of land in these pieces. He carefully selected graveyards that can function as cultural emblems of their respective countries, and he indeed sketches the portraits of the chosen nations. His preferences are instructive. Of the six locations, three (London,

trans. Ibolya Bagi and Csaba Sarnyai, Budapest: Európa, 2008), and Polish (*Historie cmentarne*, trans. Wiktor Dłuski, Warsaw: Noir sur Blanc, 2006).

Paris, and New York) represent the North Atlantic civilisation that is undoubtedly Chkhartishvili's main point of orientation. The other three, including his native Russia, largely serve to contrast, qualify, and interpret the West. Of course, Britain, France, and the US embody three different aspects of the West just as Russia, Japan, and Israel are 'eastern' in their different ways. The contrast between East and West, however, is not symmetrical. The western countries, in all their differences, are more alike than their counterparts from the East. In fact, the commonality of the latter lies mostly in that they contrast with the West. They have very little in common intrinsically. Significantly, it is in the three western cemeteries – and especially in the European ones – that Chkhartishvili focuses on famous individuals. In Moscow, Yokohama, and Jerusalem he is much more taken with the nameless dead, the ordinary, forgotten citizens.

Moscow's Old Don Cemetery is his point of departure. By its question of the passing time, it sends the essayist on an apparently global journey (apparently, for he does not venture into the southern hemisphere) in search of the meaning of death, which never brings him back to Russia. The heroes of the novellas are usually Russian, but that also means that they are outsiders, and it is typically forces greater than them that ultimately shape their fate. His Russian heroes move in an alien world, which they might believe to have mastered but in which events overtake them. Even Fandorin, who does solve the crime, is forced to stop short of successfully closing the case within the narrative.

Russian or, more generally, Eastern European culture in Akunin-Chkhartishvili's presentation is full of questions; it has no answers to offer. The conviction that was deep-seated in Dostoyevsky, that Russia had a genuine alternative to offer to the West and Orthodoxy was the true middle between the various aberrations of Latin Christendom, is lacking in Chkhartishvili. His is no prophetic voice. The service he does is to transmit, in ways that make heart-felt identification possible, western bourgeois values to Russia's new middle classes. In this context it might be ironic but it is both understandable and emblematic that the 'Cemetery Tales' have not been translated into English.

### **Fear of death**

Beyond the entertaining novellas and the essays that aim higher by both instructing and delighting, the volume as a whole embodies a third layer of meaning that can be recognised in the carefully drawn arc of the six essays. Their sequence is clearly not geographically organised but follows a different logic. The title of each has the structure of '... or, the [adjective] death' where the adjectives are *forgotten* (Moscow), *polite* (London), *beautiful* (Paris), *unexpected* (Yokohama), *optimistic* (New York) and *not in the least terrible* (Jerusalem). Clearly, western deaths get the positive descriptors while, with the exception of Jerusalem, the eastern ones are aug-

mented with adjectives that carry negative overtones. But there is more to this aspect of the book than a mere reiteration of the cultural clash between East and West.

Chkhartishvili wants to unpack the mystery of death or – recognising that it was impossible, for otherwise it would be no mystery at all – at least to find an antidote to the fear of death. Of the different kinds of death he studies along the way that takes him from Moscow to Jerusalem via Europe, Japan, and the US, the one that really frightens him is the unexpected death that overtakes humans at the height of their career, with their business still unfinished. It is a telling detail that this is the subject matter of his visit to the Foreigners' Burial Ground in Yokohama: it is farthest removed, both geographically and culturally, from the west, and it is in fact presented in the form of a cultural clash between naive or overcurious Europeans and native and overzealous rōnin. But the unexpected death lurks there at virtually every turn; several of the novellas' heroes also have to face it. It is against this threatening presence that Chkhartishvili so desperately tries to find a glimmer of hope.

Born of a Georgian father and Jewish mother, he discovers what he so fervently desires in the cemetery on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. Death is simply not feared here, he finds. The reason for such self-assurance is the confidence of work well done, mission accomplished, regulations observed, rules abided by, or – in theological language not used in the essay – the keeping of the law. Overcoming death in this way by no means implies an overcoming of death in general. What humanity must achieve, according to Chkhartishvili, to realise its greatest dream and liberate itself from the fear of death is to conquer premature death, which mows down humans before they are ripe and full of life. This he calls a happy ending, but it is no accident in my view that of the six novellas the one set in Jerusalem and designed to illustrate that thesis is the least convincing and least powerful.

### **Tame death**

The book, with its entire carefully wrought arc from the passing time through the fear of unexpected death to the calm of a well-deserved end after an active and creative life, presents more of an avoidance strategy than a genuine attempt to look death squarely in the face. Death can be civilised; death can be aestheticised, the essays suggest. It can be tamed. The fear of death the book seeks to overcome is not the all-encompassing horror that our ancestors found more terrible than death itself (*timor mortis morte peior*). It is a well-circumscribed, mild concern, the worry about a sudden, premature death, untouched by the dread of annihilation, the self's extinction or, religiously, the wrath of God. Chkhartishvili has a lot to say on the social history of death, but he conspicuously avoids treating it as a religious or spiritual issue although every condition would be given for that.

Both the question the book poses and the answer it provides are intellectual, barely scratching the surface of the mystery of death. They lack both an existential

and a spiritual dimension. This approach is surely marketable to the rising and hard-working middle classes of 'self-made men' in a post-Soviet Eastern Europe, but it is very far from an attitude that could effectively promote the mental health of individuals, communities, or societies when facing a crisis of existential depth, brought on by a brush with the inevitable end. One has to dig deeper in the traditions of Eastern Europe to find adequate answers in those difficult cases.

With all its limitations, Akunin and Chkhartishvili's work is highly readable. No-one who has a taste for the macabre will regret picking it up. It is both entertaining and informative, and it also provides food for thought. It may even contribute to the robustness of a burgeoning middle-class culture of self-reliance and hard work, but it fails to sound an Eastern European voice to which one should listen for orientation in the ultimate questions.