



Dr Andrew J Larner

is a Consultant Neurologist at the Walton Centre for Neurology and Neurosurgery in Liverpool, with a particular interest in dementia and cognitive disorders. He is also an Honorary Apothecaries' Lecturer in the History of Medicine at the University of Liverpool.

Correspondence to:

AJ Larner, Walton Centre for Neurology and Neurosurgery, Lower Lane, Fazakerley, Liverpool, L9 7LJ, UK.
E. a.larner@thewaltoncentre.nhs.uk

References

1. Bulgakov M. *The Master and Margarita*. London: Penguin, 2003 [1966-1967]: Pilate 19-24,310; Margarita 231; Woland 277; Master and Margarita 364.
2. Zayas V. *Sympathy for Pontius Pilate. Hemicrania in M.A. Bulgakov's "The Master and Margarita"*. Eur J Neurol 2005;12(suppl2):296 (abstract P2506).
3. Bulgakov M. *A Country Doctor's Notebook*. London: Harvill Press, 1975 [1925-1927]:47;119-20.
4. Parini J. *The Last Station. A novel of Tolstoy's final year*. New York: Anchor Books, 2009 [1990]:60; also 152,160,224 ("temples throbbled"); Bulgakov complains of a mild headache at 109, and Sasha, Tolstoy's daughter, reports at 139 that her "head no longer throbbled".
5. Porter C (trans.). *The diaries of Sofia Tolstoy*. London: Alma Books, 2009: xxiv,6,8,14,26(x2),55,125,146,155,163,210,263,277,312,357(x2),364,382,389,392,395,401,404; "neuralgia" 73,132,211,255,264,277; Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy's headaches 13,26,222,250,400,518,520; Tatyana (Tanya) Tolstaya 92; Alexandra (Sasha) Tolstaya 161; Maria (Masha) Tolstaya 242; Kozhevnikov 148, Koraskov 278,554.
6. Andermann F (ed.). *Chronic encephalitis and epilepsy. Rasmussen's syndrome*. Boston: Butterworth-Heinemann, 1991:245-61.
7. Larner AJ. "Neurological literature": headache. *Advances in Clinical Neuroscience & Rehabilitation* 2006;5(6):23-4.
8. Ford SF, Larner AJ. *Neurological disorders reported by Dr Anton Chekhov (1860-1904)*. Eur J Neurol 2010;17(suppl 3):545 (abstract P2530).
9. Larner AJ. "Neurological literature": headache (part 2). *Advances in Clinical Neuroscience & Rehabilitation* 2006;6(2):37-38.
10. Wolff T. *The Night in Question*. London: Bloomsbury, 1996: Migraine 120-130; Flyboys 57-73 [at 57,64].

Neurological Literature: Headache (Part 8)

The Master and Margarita, the posthumously published masterpiece of the Russian author Mikhail Bulgakov (1891-1940), depicts Pontius Pilate as suffering from "the invincible, terrible illness ... hemicrania, when half of the head aches ... there's no remedy for it, no escape ... I'll try not to move my head". Thus afflicted, Pilate interrogates the prisoner, Yeshua Ha-Nozri, who assures him "your suffering will soon be over, your headache will go away", but "a dull, slightly aching reminder of the morning's infernal pain" still lingers later in the day following the execution of the prisoner. Other characters in the novel are also affected, or nearly so, with headaches: Margarita has an ache like a needle in her temple all evening; Woland almost has a migraine from the roaring in the bar; and both the Master and Margarita have a slight ache in the left temple following Satan's ball.¹ Zayas has argued that Pilate's hemicrania reflects Bulgakov's personal experience of migraine, based on the evidence of his diaries.² Since Bulgakov was a qualified doctor, it might also be reasonably assumed that he encountered headache in practice, some corroboration for which may be found in his semi-fictional accounts published as *A Country Doctor's Notebook*. In *Black as Egypt's Night*, a miller from Dultsevo reports to young Dr Bulgakov that "Every day at twelve o'clock my head starts to ache, then I seem to get hot all over ... It makes me shiver for a couple of hours or so and then it goes", leading the doctor to diagnose malaria. In *Morphine*, an account of morphine addiction, an "absurd, hysterical letter" from the addict provokes a migraine in the recipient (Bulgakov).³

Another Bulgakov, Valentin Fedorovich (1886-1966), acted as secretary to Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) in the last year of the novelist's life, and subsequently published his diary for that year, which in turn became the starting point for Jay Parini's novel *The Last Station*, the motion picture of which was strangely neglected by mainstream cinemas in 2010. The story is told from several viewpoints, including that of Tolstoy's wife, Sofya Andreyevna, who at several points reports herself afflicted with headache, e.g.:

*I've been lying in bed with a headache, watching the snow fall, drinking tea. I cannot read. My head is tight as a drum, pounding. And I do not have the gramophone in my bedroom.*⁴

Parini's novel is based on the diaries kept by those in Tolstoy's inner circle. The edited diary of Sofia Tolstoy, covering the period 1862 to 1919,⁵ attests not only to her headaches, but also to those of Tolstoy himself, and other family members, including their youngest daughter, Sasha (born 1884):

21st June 1897. Sasha ... was looking very pale and said she felt sick and had a headache. ... Then she vomited and had to lie down. She often gets migraines, like her father.

Reading the diaries, I cannot escape the conclusion that Sofia's portrayal in the film of *The Last Station* is not entirely fair. Indeed, some might gauge that her character has been impudently traduced, or, at the

very least, that she was perhaps more sinned against than sinning. However, the tradition of cinematic misrepresentation of Tolstoy's last days is a long one, dating to 1912 (*The Flight of a Great Old Man*, described by Sofia as a lampoon of her), and at least *The Last Station* secured for Helen Mirren an (obligatory?) Oscar nomination for her portrayal of Sofia. Parenthetically, one may note that two figures in the history of neurology appear transiently, as offstage figures, in Sofia Tolstoy's diary: Kozhevnikov, later credited with the earliest description of what has come to be known as Rasmussen's encephalitis,⁶ was apparently consulted by Tolstoy's son Lyova in 1895; and on 24th November 1900 Tolstoy "went to a musical evening at the lunatic asylum", namely the psychiatric clinic of Professor SS Korsakov.

Chekhov was one of Leo Tolstoy's many occasional visitors, both at Yasnaya Polyana and in Yalta. Previous examples of headache in Chekhov's plays have been cited,⁷ and they may also be found in some of his short stories.⁸ For example, in *Peasants*, Kiryak has "a terrible hangover ... shaking his splitting head". In *The Bishop*, Bishop Peter "had the same headache as yesterday ...", and later "he had a splitting headache". This is one symptom of a febrile illness which is eventually diagnosed as typhoid.

Whilst headache is an incidental finding in all the aforementioned works, occasional pieces proclaim this to be their subject matter: one thinks of Robert Herrick's 1648 poem *The Head-ake*.⁹ Another example is the short story entitled *Migraine* by Tobias Wolff, from the collection *The Night in Question*. The story begins:

It began while she was at work.

(Although the nature of this work is not made explicit, the fact that she, Joyce, works at a keyboard, with lab reports, and with cubicles around her from which the "steady click of other keyboards" is heard, suggests the possibility of a medical secretary.) It transpires that this headache is occurring in the context of a relationship which is breaking up. At home Joyce tries herbal tea, which "helped. Not much, really ...", and kneading her temples, and she has apparently tried other remedies in the past including getting drunk and stoned, but it is head massages from her (soon to depart) partner which help most. Her symptoms include dizziness and:

... at the worst moment she went suddenly deaf, as if someone had pushed her head underwater ...

a symptom which recurs again later. Of note, headache also crops up in another of Wolff's stories, *Flyboys*:

... handsome families ... it was clear, did not ... come down with migraines.

*The sound grew larger and louder and emptier, the sound of emptiness itself, emptiness throbbing like a headache.*¹⁰ ♦