

Tolstoy and *Vekhi*

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This article examines the theme of Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy and *Vekhi* by analyzing textual references to Tolstoy in the *Vekhi* anthology and by weighing Tolstoy's critical reaction to the anthology. The heart of the analysis is an attempt to understand an apparent paradox—Tolstoy's repudiation of a book ostensibly dedicated to the "Tolstoyan" proposition that "inner" or "spiritual life" must take priority over the pursuit of "external" political and social change. As we shall see, a full explanation of this paradox requires careful reading not only of the anthology's explicit references to Tolstoy but also of ways that Tolstoy decoded the authors' intentions, explicit and hidden. In fact, what the authors laid between the lines may have been more important in triggering Tolstoy's disapproval than was the printed text itself.

In the introduction to *Vekhi*, dated March 1909, the editor Mikhail Osipovich Gershenzon declared the common platform of the volume's contributors to be

recognition of the theoretical and practical priority of spiritual life over external forms of community, in the sense that the inner life of the individual person is the only creative force of human life and that it, not the peculiar fundamentals of political order, is the only viable basis for any social structure.

In the name of his fellow contributors, Gershenzon called the ideology of the Russian intelligentsia, which allegedly rested on the primacy of politics over inner life, contradictory to human nature and counterproductive in practice. He also noted that *Vekhi's* critique of the intelligentsia was nothing new: "The same point has been made endlessly by

all our most profound thinkers from Chaadaev to Solov'ev and Tolstoy" (*Bexu* 4).

Gershenzon's remarks are important to us for two reasons. First, the primacy of inner life over politics was a signature theme of Tolstoy, found in all his great novels (*War and Peace*, *Anna Karenina*, *Resurrection*) and in his spiritual writings after 1880. In his philosophical treatise *On Life* (written 1886–1887, published 1888) he demanded that human beings subordinate their "animal nature" to reason—that is, to a "rational consciousness" or principle of personal economy ordering the passions and appetites. In *The Kingdom of God Is within You* (written 1890–1893, published 1893), he argued that Christ's teaching "will not govern men by external rules but by an inner recognition of divine perfection" (PSS 28: 78). The inner recognition of divine perfection amounted to "another, new and higher understanding of life" (PSS 28: 146), which Tolstoy held to be more radical than any doctrine espoused by modern socialists, since violent revolutionaries opposed existing regimes "from the outside, not from inside" (PSS 28: 182). Second, Gershenzon's introduction mentioned Tolstoy by name as one of the profound thinkers who had repeatedly condemned the intelligentsia's errors. Thus, the introduction to *Vekhi* deliberately created the initial impression that the seven contributors' "common platform" was compatible with Tolstoy's conviction of the primacy of inner life over politics and that the contributors were presenting themselves, at least in part, as defenders of the Tolstoyan critique of politics.

Taken superficially, the contents of *Vekhi* confirmed the impression fostered by Gershenzon's introduction—namely, of the authors' respect for Tolstoy as a champion of the inner life against the

intelligentsia ethos. The *Vekhovtsy* referred to Tolstoy by name on eleven pages of the relatively short anthology, to Dostoevsky on sixteen pages, to Vladimir Solov'ev on twelve pages, and to Petr Chaadaev on four pages. Although the contributors to *Vekhi* intended their book as a critique of the intelligentsia, they mentioned the leaders of the intelligentsia less frequently. Vissarion Belinsky was mentioned by name on eight pages, Mikhail Bakunin on five pages, Nikolai Chernyshevsky on six pages, Nikolai Mikhailovsky on ten pages, Gleb Uspensky on five pages, Georgii Plekhanov on four pages, Vladimir Lenin on one page. Among living thinkers—*intelligently* or not—Tolstoy's name was most frequently mentioned of all. And, for what it's worth, Tolstoy's name appeared in Gerzhenzon's introduction; in Nikolai Aleksandrovich Berdiaev's opening essay, "Philosophical Truth and Intelligentsia Justice"; in Sergei Nikolayevich Bulgakov's essay, "Heroism and Asceticism"; in Gershenzon's essay, "Creative Self-Consciousness"; and in Petr Berngardovich Struve's "Intelligentsia and Revolution." Semen Liudvigovich Frank's essay, "Ethics of Nihilism" did not mention Tolstoy by name, but referred to the Tolstoyan movement. Thus, in six of the eight pieces published in *Vekhi*, Tolstoy figured directly or indirectly.

Among Tolstoy's virtues, the *Vekhovtsy* underlined his "profound erudition, intelligence and genius" (*Bexu* 34), his "spiritual majesty and sharpness of vision... into the depths of Russian history" (*Bexu* 60), his resistance to the "falsities of our social-utilitarian morality" (*Bexu* 81) and to the "hypnosis of [the intelligentsia's] common faith [in revolutionary self-sacrifice] and [revolutionary] asceticism" (*Bexu* 89). Above all, they applauded his religiosity and thus his "ideological hostility to socialism and to irreligious anarchism." As Struve put it, "Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, each in his own way, tore off and vehemently discarded the uniform [of the intelligentsia]" (*Bexu* 153, 155).

There is no reason to doubt the sincerity of the *Vekhovtsy* who heaped praise on Tolstoy for his

intelligence and artistic acumen, especially since they knew painfully well and regretted that such praise had become a "common trope, mandatory reverence for a universally recognized genius" (Струве, "Лев Толстой" 303). Yet their celebration of Tolstoy had obvious political and rhetorical purposes. Politically, the friendly comments about Tolstoy were meant to appeal to public figures influenced by Tolstoy, and also to elicit sympathy from Tolstoy himself. Rhetorically, the reverence for Tolstoy fit the general pattern of the *Vekhi* collection, which was constructed on an elaborate series of binary oppositions. Thus, Tolstoy's "erudition," "intelligence," "genius," "spiritual majesty" and "sharpness of vision into the depths of Russian history" stood as binary opposites to the intelligentsia's intellectual superficiality, lack of profundity, lack of creativity, spiritual blindness, and lack of national consciousness. Tolstoy's religiosity stood in opposition to the intelligentsia's irreligion and atheism; his courageously held solitary vision of political peace opposed the intelligentsia's conformist commitment to revolutionary violence. These particular binaries sat among a host of others too numerous to mention. The *Vekhovtsy's* binary logic helps, of course, to account for the book's scandalous success. And truth to tell, the *Vekhovtsy's* manner of thinking only replicated the binary style of thinking one finds in Chaadaev's "First Philosophical Letter," with its contrast between Russia and the West; in Dostoevsky's famous formula, "If God does not exist, then all is permitted"; and in Vladimir Solov'ev's juxtaposition of the God-man [богочеловек] and the man-God [человекобог] constructed by Western egoists.

But binary logic cannot ultimately do justice to Tolstoy's worldview, as the conclusion of Isaiah Berlin's spirited essay on Tolstoy, *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, demonstrated. Tolstoy had in him too much of the fox, too much curiosity about the world, too much knowledge about the world's

variegated realities, and too many impulses pulling in multiple directions to be classifiable as a consistent opponent of the Russian intelligentsia. Think only of the social radicalism implicit in Tolstoy's critique of official hierarchies and class injustice in Russia, or of his hyperbolic rejection of the Russian state and Church: this radicalism and political extremism strongly resembled that of Chernyshevsky, of Bakunin, and of the radical populists.

These complexities of Tolstoy's political-religious outlook were too obvious and too well known for the *Vekhovtsy* to ignore, whatever their respect for Tolstoy's creative mastery. Therefore, their textual commentaries on him were sometimes awkwardly evasive or implicitly critical of him. Take for example, Berdiaev's remark that

the intelligentsia did not recognize Tolstoy as genuinely its own, but made its peace with him for his populism and at one time fell under Tolstoyan religious influence. In Tolstoyanism there was the same hostility to higher philosophy, and the same recognition of the sinfulness of wealth. (*Bexu* 21)

Not surprisingly, this passage and various poses struck by *Vekhovtsy* with relation to Tolstoy now look to us as ungainly, even disjointed, in view of Gershenzon's decision to present the anthology as generally consistent with Tolstoy's purportedly systematic hostility to the intelligentsia. More important, as we shall see below, their political and rhetorical posturing was immediately evident to Tolstoy himself, who was struck not only by the *Vekhovtsy*'s ungainliness and disjointedness, but by their *bad faith*, by their inconsistency, and, above all, by their secret attachment to the existing social and political order.

In a 1964 article, the historian Nikolai Poltoratzky argued that Tolstoy's attention was attracted to *Vekhi* by a newspaper story concerning a discussion at the Society for the Dissemination of Technical Knowledge, where a debate took place

on the anthology. Since the first newspaper stories on this debate surfaced on 15 April 1909, Poltoratzky reckoned that Tolstoy "obtained *Vekhi* and began to read them no earlier than April 15 [1909]" (Poltoratzky 334).

According to Poltoratzky and to the editors of the Jubilee Edition of Tolstoy's works, Tolstoy began almost immediately to draft an article in response to *Vekhi* spelling out his criticism of it (PSS 38: 285–290). In a diary entry on April 20, Tolstoy stated that "I started to write yesterday morning [April 19] on *Vekhi* and the peasant's [Ivan Vasil'evich Kolesnikov's] letter" (PSS 57: 52). Tolstoy seemed to confirm the diary entry in the first paragraphs of the draft article "On *Ve-khi*" itself:

Yesterday I read in the newspaper about a writers' gathering in which, during a discussion of questions about the old and new 'intelligentsia,' it was explained that the new intelligentsia recognizes the importance for improving the life of individuals, not of the transformation of external forms of life, as the old intelligentsia asserts, but of the moral work of individuals on themselves. Since I long ago firmly concluded that one of the greatest obstacles to progress toward a rational way of life is the widespread and constantly asserted superstition that external changes in the forms of public life can improve the lives of individuals, I rejoiced reading this news, and hastened to acquire the literary anthology *Vekhi*, in which, as the article declared, were expressed the views of the young intelligentsia. (PSS 38: 285–286)

Tolstoy continued to work on the draft article in late April/early May 1909. On April 23, his diary mentioned the anthology twice: "In the morning I did corrections on *Vekhi*"; and later:

I read *Vekhi*. Amazing language. Un-Russian, made-up words, implying new shades of thinking, unclear, artificial, conditional, and

unnecessary. These words are used and make sense only if the reader is willing to guess [the meaning from context] and they should always be accompanied by a [winking] proviso: “You understand, you and I understand this.”

Commenting on the article draft, Tolstoy wrote: “About *Vekhi*, it seems, pointless [to write]. Not good” (PSS 57: 52). Four days later, he again adverted to *Vekhi*: “About *Vekhi*, completely empty” (PSS 57: 54). On May 3, he reported “progress” on his articles, including apparently “On *Vekhi*” (PSS 57: 56). On May 6 he “corrected *Vekhi* and half the article [he did not specify which one (GMH)]—neither good nor bad—average” (PSS 57: 58). But the next day, he wrote: “I corrected the article and set it aside. The whole thing is not good. And *Vekhi* itself is also bad” (PSS 57: 59). He continued: “I worked on articles and on *Vekhi*. *Dans le doute abstiens-toi*. I’m throwing over *Vekhi*.” Finally, on May 9, he wrote: “I have finished correcting ‘On *Vekhi*,’ but I’m putting it aside [но бросаю]” (PSS 57: 61).

Tolstoy’s decision to abandon the article “On *Vekhi*” was announced to members of his household. His secretary Nikolai Nikolayevich Gusev recorded the decision in a diary entry on May 8:

Several days ago Lev Nikolayevich began an article on the recently published anthology of articles about the intelligentsia (*Vekhi*). Lev Nikolayevich does not want to publish [the article], partly because he does not want to offend the “young intelligentsia,” that is, the authors of the anthology whose articles he subjects to sharp criticism, and partly because this book has stirred up a major polemic in which he does not want to interfere, and partly because of other calculations. To me he said: “I wanted to show [in this article] that the best representatives of this intelligentsia have become hopelessly confused [безнадежно запугались].” (Гусев 253)

In spite of Tolstoy’s determination to put aside the article “On *Vekhi*,” he nevertheless arranged an interview with Sergei Petrovich Spiro, a correspondent with *Russian Word* [*Русское слово*], on May 20, 1909. At the interview, Tolstoy reports that he “spoke and dictated to [the correspondent] ‘On *Vekhi*.’ Nothing especially bad happened, but it was not possible to do better [under the circumstances]” (PSS 57: 71). Tolstoy told Gusev following the interview that he had given Spiro “excerpts” from the draft article, “On *Vekhi*,”

containing the basic idea of how the intelligentsia had lost its way in its speculations and how it had lost the capacity to state and resolve the main questions of life, and how the laboring people stand in this respect incomparably above this intelligentsia, which is so proud of its false enlightenment and which therefore thinks itself called to educate the people, who are in fact more enlightened than it is. (Гусев 256)

Tolstoy’s mood after seeing Spiro was relief. He told Gusev: “I am very glad I got this off my chest” (Гусев 256). Spiro immediately filed the story, “L. N. Tolstoy on *Vekhi*,” in his newspaper (*Спиро* 20–25).

In his working papers, Tolstoy’s draft of the article “On *Vekhi*” consisted of four parts: a pair of epigrams on the role of teaching and scholarship in society; pointed criticisms of *Vekhi*; a long excerpt from a letter written to Tolstoy by a purportedly “illiterate” peasant; and a final commentary on the role of educated Russians in contemporary life.

The first of the epigrams consisted of three paragraphs attributed by Tolstoy to Immanuel Kant. Inessa Medzhibovskaya has described them as a “free paraphrase from the *Metaphysics of Morals* and other works by Kant regarding catechistic and didactic knowledge” (Medzhibovskaya 27–28). The paragraphs from Kant contrasted the proper sequence of learning with the abnormal sequence often obtaining in the

academy. According to Tolstoy, in the proper sequence, a teacher attempts to help a student to think logically, then teaches him to be a rational person governed by these logical rules, and then finally teaches him to be a scholar. In the abnormal sequence, the student memorizes logical rules before learning to think logically. In Tolstoy's gloss, Kant believed this second way of learning "corrupts the imagination with erudition" and accounted for the large number of "incompetents [нелепые люди] issuing from the academy." The second epigram, written by Tolstoy himself, repeated his observation from *On Life* that "science answers thousands of very clever and intelligent questions, but not the question to which every rational person seeks an answer—the question of how and in what fashion I should live" (PSS 38: 285). The two epigrams, taken together, suggested the new and old intelligentsia's inability to teach the Russian *narod* how to live.

In the pointedly critical section of the article, Tolstoy sarcastically conceded that, in *Vekhi*, a reader could find a "wealth of learning" reflected in "very many citations of fashionable Russian and European compositions." As examples of the kind of commentary typical of *Vekhi*, Tolstoy quoted Sergei Bulgakov's phrases about "piety before the martyrology of the intelligentsia [пиетет перед мартирологом интеллигенции]," "heroic maximalism projecting itself somehow externally [героический максимализм проецируется как-то во вне]" and "the psychology of intellectual heroism impressing itself on social groups [психология интеллигентного героизма импонирует какой-то группе]" (PSS 38: 286; *Vekhi* 39, 44–45, 52). He noted Petr Struve's remarks that "religious radicalism appeals to the inner essence of the individual [религиозный радикализм апеллирует к внутреннему существу человека]," while "irreligious maximalism focuses on the problem of education [безрелигиозный максимализм отмечает проблему воспитания]" in politics and social life.

Tolstoy also registered Struve's comments about "intelligentsia ideology [интеллигентная идеология]," "political impressionism [политический импрессионизм]," and "staged provocation [инсценированная провокация]" (PSS 38: 286; *Vekhi* 158–161). Tolstoy repeated Semyon Frank's phrases about the "artificially isolating process of abstraction [искусственно изолирующим процессом абстракции]" and "an adequate intellectual witnessing of the world [адекватное интеллектуальное отображение мира]" (PSS 38: 286; *Vekhi* 168–170). These phrases removed from the contexts of their essays, pointed toward the obtuseness of the *Vekhi* authors, and therefore to their incompetence as teachers. Tolstoy quoted, with evident horror, Sergei Bulgakov's observation: "Whether it is bad or good, Petrine Russia's fate is in the intelligentsia's hands" (PSS 38: 286–287; *Vekhi* 28). Tolstoy's horror was a direct result of his conviction that the *Vekhi* authors had not included in the anthology the one necessary thing—"an indication...of what the inner work of individuals should consist, according to the prescription of those who call themselves the intelligentsia and in whose hands the fate of Russia rests" (PSS 38: 287).

Tolstoy conceded that two essays—Berdiaev's and Bulgakov's—made attempts to answer this question, but, in his opinion, neither succeeded. Berdiaev called simply for "recognition of the value of truth, humility before the truth, and for readiness to make sacrifices for its sake," a recognition that, in Berdiaev's view, would have facilitated development of a philosophical culture in Russia (PSS 38: 287; *Vekhi* 24–25). Bulgakov called upon the intelligentsia to return to religion and the Church, so as "to connect itself with... true Christianity, which would answer the current historical and national need" (PSS 38: 287–288; *Vekhi* 65–66). Tolstoy described Berdiaev's answer as "written in confused, unclear jargon," and Bulgakov's answer as "strange and unexpected": he seemed to dismiss both *Vekhovtsy* as unrealistic

(PSS 38: 287). Tolstoy's approach to *Vekhi* was to "make strange" its contents by deliberately ignoring the authors' central insights into the historical errors of the "old" intelligentsia, and by foregrounding their clumsy language and thus their unsuitability as religious guides.

Having ridiculed the *Vekhi* authors, Tolstoy then mentioned that he had just received a letter from Tashkent by a peasant discussing "the same questions that are talked about in the anthology." He quoted an excerpt from a letter declaring:

The foundation of human life is love, and to love everyone without exception. Love can connect us with anyone, even animals, and this love is God. Without love, nothing can save a man, and therefore it is pointless to pray into the empty space or [an icon] wall; each person needs only to remind himself to be not a monster but a man. And each person is responsible for trying to live a good life, and for not hiring judges or arbitrators. Each should act as judge and arbitrator over himself. All should understand that people ought to love one another, that there should be no sword amongst them, and they should fulfill Christ's words that the kingdom of God on earth is within you, within each person. (PSS 38: 288–289)

The clarity of this "illiterate" peasant's letter showed that neither the old nor the new intelligentsia had anything to teach the *narod*. Instead, the intelligentsia could only "corrupt" them, something that fortunately, "thanks to the Russian *narod*'s spiritual force, they [members of the intelligentsia] had not yet accomplished, as hard as they tried" (PSS 38: 289).

Tolstoy's verdict on *Vekhi* was simple. "These people have nothing to say about the content of the soul's inner life, and if they address the matter, they speak with most pitiful and empty nonsense." He took the *Vekhovtsy*'s "erudition, intellectual sophistication and endless theoretical

disagreements" as symptoms of the "growing confusion and perversion of emotions and ideas of the so-called educated world." He called on the educated classes to admit: "We are confused, lost, we have taken the wrong road, and must find our way to the right one" (PSS 38: 289–290).

Examined carefully, Tolstoy's critique of *Vekhi* endorsed the central conclusions of the anthology: The "inner life" should take precedence over the external transformation of society; and the Russian intelligentsia had taken the wrong path. But *Vekhi*'s "Tolstoyan" conclusions were not fully representative of the *spirit* of Tolstoy's actual worldview, with its peasant orientation, disdain of academic abstraction and intellectual ostentation, and, above all, with its *practical*, down-to-earth ethics. Put another way, the authors of the *Vekhi* anthology styled themselves as Tolstoyans, or at least as admirers of Tolstoy's opposition to the old intelligentsia, but they were not really consistent Tolstoyans at all.

At first, Tolstoy did not want to say this in print, because he "did not want to offend the "young intelligentsia," or "interfere" in a major polemic about the intelligentsia, but in the end he could not contain himself. He left to posterity his stinging attack—the article "On *Vekhi*"—and delivered the main points of his critique of *Vekhi* in the Spiro newspaper interview. He was glad to "get this off my chest" (Гусев 256), as only an angry sage could be glad.

II.

This account of the genesis of Tolstoy's reaction to *Vekhi*, having behind it the authority of Tolstoy's diaries, of his draft article "On *Vekhi*," and of Gusev's diaries, was presented to Russian readers by the editors of the Jubilee Edition of Tolstoy's works and to English readers by Poltoratzky. As recently as 2004, Inessa Medzhibovskaya accepted Poltoratzky's treatment as providing "an exhaustive background of Tolstoy's acquaintance with the *Landmarks* project and the circumstances

around the writing of his note on the collection” (Medzhibovskaya 30).

However, as the introductory words to Arabic-language fairy tales declare, *kan ma kan*: “It was so, but not so.” In fact, Tolstoy had acquired *Vekhi* not in mid April 1909, following the newspaper reports in St. Petersburg about the discussion of it at a meeting of the Society for the Dissemination of Technical Knowledge, but on 18 March 1909, a month earlier. The source of the book may have been Mikhail Gershenzon, *Vekhi*’s editor.

Already on March 19, Tolstoy was familiar enough with the approach of the *Vekhi* authors to speak about the anthology to his physician Dushan Petrovich Makovitsky:

L[ev] N[ikolaevich] on the new book *Vekhi*, which he received yesterday, on the intelligentsia; there are articles by several writers, Struve and others. The conclusion is that the intelligentsia has come to realize its inadequacy. (Маковицкий 3: 362)

At this stage, Tolstoy had not read beyond the table of contents (from which he knew the authors: “Struve and others”), Gershenzon’s introduction, and Berdiaev’s essay, “Philosophical Truth and Intelligentsia Justice.” We know this from Makovitsky, who, a month later, noticed that “only the first printer’s sheet [of *Vekhi*] was cut” (Маковицкий 3: 388). However, the brief encounter with *Vekhi* on March 18 was sufficient for Tolstoy to grasp the anthology’s basic approach to the problem of the intelligentsia. He already knew, from individual encounters with several of the authors and from reading the press, the authors’ divided attitude toward his own spiritual vision, and he knew in some detail the political views of Struve, Bulgakov and Gershenzon. At this stage, Tolstoy had also likely noticed the *Vekhovtsy*’s lack of clarity about the nature of the “inner” or “spiritual” work that individuals were supposed to perform. This lack of clarity would have been apparent to him at once from his perusal

of the table of contents and of Gershenzon’s introduction. Indeed, it was perfectly obvious that, religiously and politically, Gershenzon, Berdiaev, Bulgakov and Struve had little in common beyond a commitment to belief in God and their general liberalism. Besides, Gershenzon’s introduction signaled that the contributors “in part disagree widely with one another both on the basic questions of ‘faith’ and in their practical prescriptions” (*Bexu* 3–4).

The lack of practical clarity in *Vekhi* apparently triggered in Tolstoy a gnawing concern that his own spiritual prescriptions lacked clarity. He began, or rather continued with renewed intensity, his own inner struggle over the problem “how to live.” On March 21, he confided to his diary:

There is no freedom of will. One wants to say: there is the freedom to do evil, but no freedom to do good. Evil is my work, the good which I do is not my work but His [God’s] work. What can I do? I can act by avoiding evil, I can act by not destroying the good inside me. (This is unclear, but there is something there.) (PSS 57: 40)

Later the same day, after a game of solitaire, Tolstoy suddenly grasped how one ought to behave in the world:

It became clear to me that not only should one not blame anyone else for the existing evil, but these accusations are themselves the very evil... Here people murder [officials], but these murderers desire power no less [than those they murder], without even having the pretext of a right [to that authority]. In a word, one must, one should enter into the situation of others and not judge them by their offices... but rather by their goodness... And we should judge ourselves, not others.

He concluded the rumination by declaring: “To correct [our evil ways] there is only one recourse: goodness toward all and strict judgment of

oneself—a religion of goodness, love, love, love. *E pur si muove!*” (PSS 57:41).

Here Tolstoy tried to state his ethical code in a fashion that would provide common *narod* and the intelligentsia alike with a way of (not) acting in the world to improve Russia’s terrible condition (Denner 8–22). His ethics insisted on nonaction in the world, on passive resistance toward the state (that is, refraining from doing evil, from murdering officials, even from judging them) and on active resistance to one’s own vices (that is, enforcing self-discipline based on “strict judgment of oneself”). For him, this formulation of the “religion of goodness” was a discovery comparable to Galileo’s.

On March 23, Tolstoy promised himself to develop the following notion:

No sins—theft, prostitution, murder, etc—do 1/100,000th as much harm as do even the weakest rationalizations [for sin]. All the horrors done by governments and all the insanities spread by Churches are based on such rationalizations, religious, patriotic and socialistic. (PSS 57: 42)

That same day Tolstoy began to draft a “manifesto” [*воззвание*] on the problem of inner work and action in the world (PSS 57: 43). This “manifesto,” drafted between March 23 and June 5, was eventually published under the title, “The Inevitable Revolution” [*Неизбежный переворот*] (PSS 57: 43–44).

There are excellent reasons for thinking that “The Inevitable Revolution,” not “On *Vekhi*,” was Tolstoy’s main response to the *Vekhi* anthology. As we noted above, the article was conceived in the immediate aftermath of Tolstoy’s first encounter with *Vekhi*, in March, not April 1909. Its central problem was to spell out how to act in the world, the very problem raised but not resolved in *Vekhi*. Tolstoy devoted to “The Inevitable Revolution” far more attention than he paid to his briefer discussion of *Vekhi*, a sure sign of the weight he

attached to it. During the writing of “On *Vekhi*,” his diaries sometimes referred to both articles together. That is why, in the diary entry of May 3, Tolstoy reported progress on his “articles,” and why on May 6, he mentioned correcting *Vekhi* and half of another unspecified article. It also probably explains his comment on May 7: “I worked on articles and on *Vekhi*.” Tolstoy finished the draft article “On *Vekhi*” first, probably on May 8. After the Spiro interview on May 20, he continued to work on “The Inevitable Revolution” until May 25, when he sent it to Chertkov for comment. He apparently thought of the two articles as complementary: “On *Vekhi*” was the narrower response to *Vekhi*; “The Inevitable Revolution” was the more general response.

III.

Let us attempt to follow Tolstoy’s steps in composing “The Inevitable Revolution.” The first step was his statement on March 21 concerning the religion of love and his decision on March 23 to write a manifesto disseminating the idea. Tolstoy was thinking in terms of announcing an ethical approach that might change millions of individual lives, and might therefore constitute a “revolution” in human consciousness. On March 25 he turned his attention to Kant. According to Makovitsky, Tolstoy re-read Kant’s *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* and *The Critique of Practical Reason*. Tolstoy praised the former book (Маковицкий 3: 370), declaring in his diary that it was “very close to my heart,” and that reading it made him “happy and grateful” (PSS 57: 43). As we have noted above, Kant was the source of the first epigram in “On *Vekhi*”; he was also the source of the epigram beginning section four of “The Inevitable Revolution” (PSS 38: 79). On March 27, after mentioning that he had “corrected” the first pages of his article, Tolstoy noted: “I have chosen excellent epigrams” (PSS 57: 43). The same day, March 27, Tolstoy speculated about the reasons revolutionaries kill. He listed the reasons in this

order: “Perhaps the main one is youth, then vanity, then the self-deception of love for the *narod*” (PSS 57: 44). In section four of “The Inevitable Revolution,” following the epigram from Kant, Tolstoy wrote: “And so in our time revolutionaries, communists, anarchists, in the name of love, for the welfare of the *narod*, commit their destructive deeds, their murders.” He said that this “grand evil of violence, unnoticed by people, is done in the name of a deliberately manufactured facsimile of the good” (PSS 38: 80). This point about revolutionary self-deception and the pursuit of a false good had been made by Tolstoy over a decade earlier in *The Kingdom of God is Within You* and by Vladimir Solov’ev in *Three Conversations*; it was also, of course, one of the main ideas of the *Vekhovtsy*.

On March 29 and 30 Tolstoy continued to write “The Inevitable Revolution.” According to his diary, he was thinking about the problem of inner work, about how an individual can correct his own errant ideas.

Up to now, I didn’t understand the importance of work on my own thoughts. This work occurs almost exclusively in the present: [earlier] today I thought badly, but now I have corrected myself... I can see that by such work I can make more progress than by any other means. (PSS 57: 44)

The next day, March 31, Tolstoy was still brooding about self-correction. He reminded Makovitsky of a passage from the Talmud quoted in *Circle of Reading* [Круг чтения]: “A good man is he who remembers his own sins and forgets the good he has done, the evil man does the opposite” (Маковицкий 3: 374). The direction of Tolstoy’s thinking was clear: an individual should judge himself or herself strictly, correcting or discarding false ideas and avoiding vanity. This was the hard part of the “inner work” of the religion of love, a task not spelled out in *Vekhi*.

However, Tolstoy recognized that self-correction is difficult because established patterns of thinking, old mistakes and self-deceptions, stand in the way. He noted that common laborers often hated “good” factory owners more than “bad” ones. Indeed, the consciousness had spread among the oppressed that the powers that be “have no right to rule—hence the hatred for them” (Маковицкий 3: 376–377). In “The Inevitable Revolution” he noted: “Today workers seek slavery and even suffer because they cannot find a slave owner for a boss.” He blamed this paradoxical situation “on non-recognition of the cause of the evil of violence and on papering-over this evil with good intentions.” He posited that the means of doing violence had grown terrifyingly while blindness to it had not diminished at all (PSS 38: 80)—a point that he had made nearly twenty-five years earlier in *What Then Must We Do?* (PSS 25: 254 *et seq.*). To Makovitsky, Tolstoy said that the number of people living a proper spiritual life was very small, because “we are inclined to deceive ourselves.” The “spiritual life” of revolutionaries consisted simply of “doing what others approve” (Маковицкий 3: 377). This point about the power of public opinion and of revolutionary self-deception was, of course, made powerfully in *Vekhi*, but Tolstoy’s insight was perhaps based not on *Vekhi* but on the argument of Rousseau’s first discourse, a book close to his heart, suggesting that in civilization everyone lives for the opinion of others.

Throughout the last week of March 1909, Tolstoy fretted that his life’s work—teaching the gospel of nonresistance to violence—had been a failure. On March 29 and again the next day Tolstoy told Makovitsky that his new article would “not convince anybody”: “They will all say that they know it already: [It is just] the ‘old nonresistance.’” (Маковицкий 3: 372). He meant for “The Inevitable Revolution” to be a convincing restatement of his thinking, an article that would make the “old nonresistance” into something new

for his readers. On March 31 he quoted “the great Kant” to the effect that education should prepare children not for the existing order of things, but for the future order. Tolstoy insisted: “humanity’s religious consciousness should also progress. [And] if you do not move as religious consciousness moves, you will remain a savage” (Маковицкий 3: 375). Tolstoy’s anxiety over his failure to persuade people of the wisdom of nonviolence and his desire to develop a new religious consciousness were so profound that, ultimately, he decided to raise both points in the first two paragraphs of “The Inevitable Revolution” (PSS 38: 72–73). His insistence on a “new” religious consciousness for humanity set him apart from the *Vekhovtsy*.

During the first week of April 1909 Tolstoy wrote only “a little” of his article (PSS 57: 45), partly because he was ill (PSS 57: 46). However, he read Meng Zi (Mencius), one of the main Chinese interpreters of Confucius. He was struck by the Confucian emphasis on truthfulness as a quality of human nature (Маковицкий 3: 382). Tolstoy also read other masters of Chinese philosophy (Маковицкий 3: 382), who suggested to him that Chinese religious texts had been sources for Chinese law, including the law permitting capital punishment (Маковицкий 3: 384). The realization that the ancient Chinese and also Indian religions had made violence “a necessary element in properly organized society,” led him to think anew about Christianity. On the one hand, Christianity “in its true meaning” forbade violence and proclaimed the “law of love” as the “supreme law of human life.” On the other hand, Christianity, as traditionally practiced, permitted violence and even subordinated itself to the law of violence. This split between theory and practice led Christians into a divided consciousness not present among other religious communities. As Tolstoy put it in his diary on April 8: “We Christians (in opposition to the religion we profess) have only the sin and temptation to sin of violence, power” (PSS 38: 76–77). This divided consciousness helped explain

people’s inability to accept Tolstoy’s “religion of love,” but it also constituted an opportunity for those, like himself, who sought to recover the “true meaning” of Christianity, so as to promote a new religious consciousness. Tolstoy made these arguments in section two of “The Inevitable Revolution” (PSS 38: 75–77).

In early April Tolstoy continued to think hard about the nature of the “inner work” each person should conduct. On April 8 he recorded an internal dialogue between himself [Tolstoy] and an “I” that he underlined:

It is good, necessary and proper to ask yourself: whose is this desire, Tolstoy’s or *mine*. Tolstoy wants to judge, to think ill of some person, but *I* do not want to. And if I remember this, that Tolstoy is not *I*, then the question is decided. Tolstoy suffers disease, criticism and countless other trivial things, which one way or another affect him. But one needs only ask: what is this to *me*? And that’s the end of the matter, Tolstoy will keep quiet. You, Tolstoy, want or don’t want this or that—that is your affair. But *my* affair is to carry out your desire [or not], to judge its rectitude, its legitimacy... I don’t know how it will seem to others, but this distinction between Tolstoy and *I* is liberating and fruitful.

Tolstoy equated this “I” with “the one law native to all people, the law in whose satisfaction all people find their welfare” (PSS 57: 46–47). However, as the diary entry for April 14 showed, Tolstoy was acutely aware of the isolation of one individual from another, and therefore of the specificity of individual identity (PSS 57: 48). He thought this isolation from others made “inner work” a necessary agony but also a joy. As Tolstoy wrote on April 15: “Egoism is the worst feeling but also the best, when the egoist needs and asks nothing from others, and when he is alone with himself (and God)” (PSS 57: 49).

On the night of April 18–19, the night before Tolstoy took up the reading of *Vekhi* in response to the newspaper article about the Society for the Dissemination of Technical Knowledge, Tolstoy dreamed that “someone handed me a letter or prayer from an Optina [Pustyna] elder.”

Although there was much “wise and loving” in the dream, Tolstoy forgot it all except the elder’s declaration that he could not teach anyone because “he did not consider himself above others and because everything a person needs to know has already been said both in revelation and in the heart of each person.” The elder declared that everything being done in the external world “is a matter of indifference to us,” that we must only do God’s will, “consisting in self–perfection and love” (PSS 57: 50).

Thus, by April 19, when he picked up *Vekhi* again to re–read its introduction and its first essay and to study its other six essays, Tolstoy had attempted to reformulate his concept of “inner work.” That concept coupled “strict judgment” of the self with an ethically–grounded aversion to judging others. According to Tolstoy, strict judgment of the self depends on alertness to the “rationalizations” that lead to doing evil, on resolving not to share in these rationalizations, and on categorically condemning oneself for doing so. Tolstoy contended that an individual might avoid pernicious rationalizations and might refuse to act upon them by wholly identifying himself or herself with God and by regarding all virtuous acts not as personal acts, but as God’s deeds. Tolstoy gravitated toward a theory of self–transformation similar to that which the Eastern Church fathers had called *theosis*, with the difference that Tolstoy saw God not as an external entity but as a presence *within* each believer. According to Tolstoy, learning to identify with the inner divine presence meant conforming to the divine law of love—that is, espousing “a religion of goodness, love, love.” Since Tolstoy understood this divine law of love as a set of rational precepts or “natural” imperatives

known to all human beings, his Christian self–conception was consistent with Kant’s universalistic ethic.

If Tolstoy’s advocacy of complete self–identification with God implied the divinization of the self and therefore the hypertrophy of the individual’s ego, it simultaneously entailed a thorough self–emptying to be accomplished by obliteration of personal desires. For Tolstoy, self–emptying meant learning indifference to physical and psychological suffering. It meant the annihilation of vanity—that is, forgetting the good one has done to others and remembering one’s own faults, so that one can overcome those faults. Most importantly, it meant surrendering the hope of altering the world through imposing one’s will on others, for, to assume that one has the right to change others requires one, first, to imagine one’s self as more virtuous than they, and, second, to assume the right of compelling the less virtuous to conform to one’s standards of behavior. In Tolstoy’s opinion, such willfulness leads directly to the “law of violence” in action. That is why Tolstoy’s dream of April 18–19 was of capital importance: in it, the Optina elder preached that we have nothing to teach others, that everything done in the external world is “a matter of indifference” to us.

Tolstoy’s speculations of March–April 1909 concerning inner work did not sharply depart from the core teachings of his social thought. As before, his ethical system demanded nonresistance to evil—that is, the absolute refusal to meet violence by violence. Thus, he continued to repudiate the path of murderous revolutionaries, communists and anarchists, as well as state policies of coercion. As before, he condemned religions to the degree that they promoted violence instead of love. As before, he called for an end of social inequality and to the system of private property that sustained it. As before, he anticipated a qualitative change in human consciousness in the direction of love. Yet his soul searching in spring 1909, to the degree that

it embraced self-emptying and emphasized indifference to the external world, bespoke a deepening of Tolstoy's aversion to *any* coercion of others, including intellectual coercion. He dogmatically insisted that the world would not and could not change unless millions of people experienced simultaneous *theosis* and self-emptying. Although Tolstoy continued to think of himself as a genuine Christian who opposed the established Church, his new single-minded focus on concentrated inner labor signaled the importance of the contemplative spirit that one finds in the Desert Fathers, in certain strains of Buddhism, and in the Sufi mystics. His brand of cultivated indifference to the world strikingly replicated much of the Sufic logic in turning away from the "small jihad" (the holy war against unbelief) to focus on the "big jihad" (self-transformation through self-emptying and conforming to God's presence within). It may also be, as Michael Denner has argued in a stimulating essay, that Tolstoy was to the end of his life a self-conscious follower of Taoism, an admirer of the Taoist way of avoiding ill-considered self-assertion. Denner's claim deserves careful consideration in view of Tolstoy's (re-)reading of Chinese philosophers in early April 1909.

At any rate, it is no wonder that after his month of philosophical and spiritual struggle, Tolstoy found *Vekhi* still unsatisfactory. He told Makovitsky: "They [the Vekhovtsy] have missed the point [они увлечены], they [think they] now everything. What all isn't there [in the book]? This and that, yet, in the end, you have no idea what they want." Tolstoy then picked up the recently arrived letter from the peasant Kolesnikov, read it aloud, and said: "In the letter are expressed the universal Christian truths" (Маковицкий 3: 388).

This verdict on the anthology is, in the main, precisely the verdict Tolstoy would render in the draft article, "On *Vekhi*" and in the newspaper interview with Spiro a month later. He needed only to add the epigrams and certain details from the

text, such as the specific passages quoted from Berdiaev, Struve and Frank. But Tolstoy's reaction to the anthology on April 19 was so resolutely negative and self-assured because he had already spent a month thinking anew about the problem of "inner work" that the anthology's authors had approached so superficially.

As we have already noted, between April 19 and May 8, 1909 Tolstoy worked simultaneously on "The Inevitable Revolution" and his draft article "On *Vekhi*." During this three-week period, therefore, it is difficult to associate his process of thinking unambiguously with one project or the other. However, the diary entry of April 27 showed that, between the two articles, Tolstoy assigned priority to "The Inevitable Revolution." In the diary entry, he reported the imminence of his "passage" [переход] from life to another state or condition: he refused to call this state or condition "death," because he regarded that word as an "insidious, corrupt word which connotes something terrible, but there is nothing terrible here." In the face of this imminent passage, Tolstoy reported: "So you see clearly what is essential to do and what is not essential. On *Vekhi* is completely empty... but on revolution ["The Inevitable Revolution"] is most essential" (PSS 57: 53-54). For Tolstoy, the "manifesto" he had conceived in March 1909 had taken on the status of a spiritual testament.

On 28 April, Tolstoy felt physically weak but "spiritually very good." In his diary, he reminded himself

to do nothing to change your external condition and to direct all your energies, to concentrate them on the improvement of your soul. The majority of people do the opposite... this is important for your own good, since satisfaction with the external world and dissatisfaction with the internal... is within your control. (PSS 57: 54)

This note pertaining to inner work was relevant both to the draft article “On *Vekhi*” and to “The Inevitable Revolution.”

In early May, as he neared the end of “On *Vekhi*,” Tolstoy began to think about the intelligentsia as a social group. On May 3 he complained: “They live in three-story houses, use electricity, read all sorts of things and stuff their heads full of it, but leave no room for the simple order of life of those living naturally by agricultural labor” (Маковицкий 3: 400). The next day he described the intelligentsia as “a special caste”: “In Russia there is, beside the government and officialdom, a peculiar group called ‘intelligentsia’ that considers itself above the *narod* and looks down on it” (Маковицкий 3: 403). His train of thought contrasted inner work demanding humility with external work of the kind done by the regime and arrogant *intelligenty*. Here again his observations pertained both to “On *Vekhi*” and “The Inevitable Revolution.”

On May 7 Tolstoy corrected the article “On *Vekhi*” and read it aloud to a group of friends. However, his thoughts were turning back to “The Inevitable Revolution.” He observed that, since “God lives in every person,” this means that “in every meeting with another person, one encounters a manifestation of God, so that in each encounter with another person, one must be in a solemnly prayerful mood” (PSS 57: 59, 321). Tolstoy was trying to concretize his religion of the good. In the diary entry for May 10–11 he simplified his formula in two principles: “Treat every person the same, like a brother” and “refrain from doing harm to others, since that is inconsistent with love” (PSS 57: 63). He stressed that “complete perfection [in observing these rules] is impossible,” but held that an “approximation of perfection” could be achieved. He defined the main task of Russian society as “negative action”: “Do not do what you have been doing and as people around you are doing” (PSS 57: 65). This was a transparently clear reformulation of the ethic he had originally derived

from the Sermon on the Mount (“Resist not evil.”) and from repeated study of Lao Tzu’s *Tao Te Ching* (Denner 13–16).

Between May 14 and 17 Tolstoy corrected “The Inevitable Revolution,” putting last touches on his prose. At this juncture, writing was a physical struggle and a moral ordeal. He felt “very weak” in body on May 15 (PSS 57: 68), and the next day reported a “painful struggle with vanity” “sapping his religious feeling or consciousness.” Nevertheless, he took for granted that “faith alone liberates a man from slavery to the opinion of others.” He reminded himself that loving reverence for God has nothing to do with the external trappings of religion, but is instead a matter of inner spiritual effort: “Remember that before you is a manifestation of God, so elicit from inside yourself the sublime spiritual status of which you are capable” (PSS 57: 68–69). In this condition, summoning the better angels of his nature, Tolstoy finished “The Inevitable Revolution” on May 17, 1909.

As he often did, Tolstoy circulated the manuscript for reactions. On May 25 he offered to send it to Vladimir Grigor’evich Chertkov (PSS 89: 117). The same day he gave a copy to his son-in-law Mikahil Sergeevich Sukhotin, who made “sound criticisms” (PSS 57: 73). On June 1, perhaps in response to reactions by Chertkov and Sukhotin, Tolstoy reviewed the manuscript. According to his diary, “Everything [in “The Inevitable Revolution”] up to the eighth chapter is good. The end [chapters 8–12] needs work” (PSS 57: 78). On the evening of June 2 Tolstoy allowed his musician friend Aleksandr Borisovich Gol’denveizer to read the manuscript. On this occasion, Tolstoy described it as “a good book, even though I wrote it”—an indication of his satisfaction with the basic argument but also of his false modesty (Гольденвейзер 272–274; Гусев 263). We do not know whether Tolstoy made revisions of the manuscript in June, following the meeting with Gol’denveizer. However, on July 4, 1909 he did

change “one place” in response to advice from Dmitrii Sergeevich Nikolaev, who had come to Yasnaia Polyana to edit the article (Маковицкий 4:5 10; PSS 57: 93). The manuscript’s final version, dated “July 5, 1909,” was the basis for the publication of a short version of the article in the *Russian Gazette* (*Русские ведомости*) on September 10, 1909 (PSS 38: 509).

IV.

“The Inevitable Revolution” summoned Tolstoy’s readers to follow the “law of love” instead of accepting the illusory necessity of violence. If they did so, he predicted a “universal, sweeping revolution,” a “new joyous life” for humanity. He saw this goal not as a distant objective, but rather as an imminent possibility: in his opinion, humanity is poised “on the threshold” of a new era” (PSS 38: 98–99).

The article’s first paragraphs made clear the obstacles standing in the way of the new era. Governments and revolutionaries were engaged in “absurd” actions and in the pursuit of mistaken objectives for which they had made so many bloody sacrifices. But Tolstoy also pointed to the erroneous views of two categories of intellectuals as constituting obstacles to the new order. First, there were “so-called scholars... whose disciplines do not coincide with what I am saying.” These people, whose lives were devoted to “science,” conducted inquiries having no relevance to the ethical problem of how a human being should live. These pseudo-scholars had long been the targets of Tolstoy’s criticism. Second, there were the “so-called educated people,” who in addressing the most important questions of life were accustomed, without bothering to think, to adopt opinions professed by the surrounding majority, and to justify their position in those terms (PSS 38: 72). These conformist types were the most pernicious supporters of the “superstition” of violence. And amongst them, the most destructive of all were those who demanded that people live “according to

religious and scientific teachings lagging behind the ever-developing consciousness of humanity” (PSS 38: 85). Tolstoy had in mind supporters of Russian Orthodoxy and of national patriotism. He also included in this category “revolutionaries, communists and anarchists,” whose love for the *narod* was predicated on the outmoded “superstition” of violence.

In chapter 8 of “The Inevitable Revolution,” Tolstoy pressed his critique of intellectuals further. He pointed out that the question “What is to be done?” was nearly always translated by intellectuals as “How should the lives of others be arranged?” and not as “What should I do to change myself?” Here he reached the theme of the *Vekhi* anthology, the need for “inner work.” He argued that the “superstition of the unchangeability of religion, which had given rise to the legitimation of one group of people ruling over another, had generated another superstition, a superstition that more than all others hinders people from moving from a violent life to a peaceful, loving way of life: the superstition that certain people can and should organize the lives of others” (PSS 38: 89).

By thus formulating the chief intellectual obstacle to the new life, Tolstoy classified the *Vekh-ovtsy* as defenders of the old order. The *Vekhi* authors might have called for “inner work,” but in practice their ideas upheld the old superstition. Bulgakov wanted the intelligentsia to return to the Church—advice that Tolstoy regarded as “strange and unexpected” because the Church legitimated the Russian state. Struve called for liberals to govern Russia in a patriotic spirit, but for Tolstoy this was nothing but a summons to violence. All the *Vekhovtsy* believed in the intelligentsia’s mission as enlighteners of the people, in the notion that “Russia’s fate is in the intelligentsia’s hands.” For Tolstoy, this was just the old arrogance of power in new guise.

Tolstoy drew a sharp distinction between the religion of love and the superstitions upholding violence:

Love is incompatible with doing unto others that which you would not wish done unto you; it is therefore incompatible with injuries, deprivation of freedom, killings of others, which are unavoidably a part of the concept of violent coercion. Therefore, one can live by violence, not upholding the religious law of love; one can also live by the law of love, not recognizing the necessity of violence; but one cannot logically uphold the law of power as divinely ordained and simultaneously uphold the law of love as divinely ordained.

He believed that the Christian world, intellectuals included, now lived “amidst this crying contradiction” (PSS 38: 92).

In practice, Tolstoy asserted, liberation from this contradiction entailed following a simple set of prescriptions: 1. “Do no violence”; 2. “Take no part in the violence done by others”; 3. “Do not approve of violence in any form” (PSS 38: 93). Following these prescriptions did not require any individual to attempt to organize the lives of others. Quite the contrary, these prescriptions involved self-restraint, and, therefore, they could be implemented by each “Ivan, Pyotr and Maria, by every person if he recognizes the justice [of the new life]” (PSS 38: 93). “Liberation from the superstition of violence requires liberating the self from concentrating on the pseudo-important problems of public life; it requires transferring our energies from the external, the public realm, to heeding the imperatives of our spiritual life” (PSS 38: 97).

“The Inevitable Revolution” was Tolstoy’s general answer to *Vekhi*, an answer that, without mentioning any of the *Vekhovtsy* by name, exposed their superficial call for “inner work” as predicated not on the law of love but on the superstition of violence. As a Christian anarchist, Tolstoy upheld self-mastery and the self-determining life over slavery and heteronomy in any form. The *Vekhovtsy* thought of themselves as critics of the “old” intelligentsia, as “new” *intelligenty* acting in the *narod*’s best interest. Tolstoy saw “old” and

“new” *intelligenty* as wed by unseen bands to the existing order of power and coercion. For this reason, the *Vekhovtsy* failed to recognize the law of love “which has long inhabited people’s awareness and which inevitably must supplant the outmoded, anachronistic and destructive law of violence” (PSS 38: 99).

Thus, Tolstoy’s reaction to *Vekhi* consisted in the writing of two articles, which together unmasked the *Vekhovtsy* as false champions of inner work, as imposters who had pretended to advocate a view of the world consistent with Tolstoy’s but who, like so many other intellectuals, had fallen short of the master’s exacting standards. The *Vekhovtsy* had publicly challenged the political radicalism and irreligion of the old intelligentsia, thereby generating a bitter polemic, but what struck Tolstoy’s matchlessly acute eye was the “hopeless confusion” of the *Vekhovtsy* over the main questions of life—the very questions that troubled him with renewed urgency as he prepared for his final “passage” from life.

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