

Authoring Jesus: Novelistic Echoes in Tolstoy's *Harmonization and Translation of the Four Gospels*

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During his religious awakening and subsequent “withdrawal” from literature, Leo Tolstoy looked back at Christian primary texts in an effort to grasp the original teachings of Christ, an authentic core of Christianity that was unpolluted by ecclesiastical authority and dogmas. At the heart of this investigation was a two-year-long (1880-81) effort to retranslate and harmonize the four New Testament gospels—from the original Greek into Russian—known as *Harmonization and Translation of the Four Gospels* (*Соединение и перевод четырех Евангелий*) (henceforth *Harmonization*).

Judging by the presentation of the piece, Tolstoy appears to have intended it as a work of philological scholarship. The highly argumentative *Harmonization* presents Tolstoy's own translations side by side with the original Greek verses and the recently published Synodal translation.¹ Since Tolstoy's translations almost always differed from official translations, the verses were often followed by lengthy commentaries in which Tolstoy defended his frequent divergences. In these commentaries he relied on his patented “common sense,” which was informed and amplified by scholarly facts and a scholarly stance. Time and again he cited lexicon definitions of Greek words (such as the numerous definitions for the Greek “logos,” which he famously translated as “awareness”² [разумение]), vigorously interpreted the grammatical structure of the original Greek, and polemicized with passages from orthodox liturgy as well as with previous

New Testament translations such as Edouard G. E. Reuss's *La Bible, nouvelle traduction avec commentaire* (published in increments 1874-79).

Despite this scholarly façade, the *Harmonization* turned out to be a deeply subjective work that was intimately tied to Tolstoy's *Weltanschauung*. Scholars have viewed it as an exemplar of “Tolstoyan textology” (Morson 25) or even, somewhat more lightheartedly, as “the gospel according to Saint Leo” (McLean 142). Given its philological apparatus and Tolstoy's own descriptions, perhaps it is natural that the *Harmonization* should inspire such characterizations.

In the end, regardless of the philological and translation standards that he set for himself, Tolstoy translated according to his own very subjective criteria. Tolstoy took scissors to the gospels, eliminated passages at will, and combined verses from different gospels under the banner of harmonization.³ At the expense of philological standards, he ended up editing and translating the New Testament in such a way that its final message corresponded to his own search for meaning.⁴ Indeed, it is fitting to recall here Richard Gustafson's provocative suggestion that the insights Tolstoy claimed to have discovered in the New Testament were by no means new. Rather, Tolstoy found in the New Testament something he had known all along, something that had already been “forged in the smoldering furnace of his own life” and articulated in his art (190).

Tolstoy himself would also acknowledge the subjective nature of his work in the *Harmonization* and declare it—in an 1884 letter to Chertkov—“the best manifestation of my thought, it is that one book, that a person (as they say) writes his whole life” (PSS 24: 981). Though elusive, this declaration serves as an important clue about the kind of personal authorship Tolstoy assumed over the project. It moreover suggests that the *Harmonization* was not only a part of Tolstoy's search for meaning, but also an exceptional chapter in this search. As a life's work, it was a bold attempt at producing answers to questions that Tolstoy claimed to have struggled with his whole life: questions about the meaning of life and God's role in it.

Subjective editorship cannot be automatically equated with creative authorship. Yet the question of their relatedness becomes viable when we remember that Tolstoy's *Harmonization* was not a mere collection of abstract theological ideas. Tolstoy did not, as Hugh McLean observes, strictly outline the theological conclusions he arrived at. He could have limited himself to the Sermon on the Mount, but chose instead to embody these abstract theological ideas in the life of Jesus (129). Since Tolstoy had already generated similar syntheses of abstract ideas and life narratives in his novels, it seems reasonable to ask whether he might have been relying on some of those same artistic skills in the *Harmonization*.

On the whole, most scholars have not seen much artistic value in the *Harmonization*. Gustafson, for instance, while recognizing the deep ideological connection between this theological project and Tolstoy's art, does not go so far as to suggest that the author was using his artistic instincts in his editorial work. Rather, in the progression of Tolstoy's train of thought that Gustafson outlines—from experience to image (art) to idea (theological writings)—the *Harmonization* can be more comfortably categorized as a rarified expression of theology rather than as a

form of artistic expression (190-202). In his monograph on the *Harmonization*, David Matual focuses on how this work fits within the larger Biblical tradition and on Tolstoy's (rather poor) performance as a translator. Matual proposes a theological thesis, and argues that Tolstoy's Christ was a “gnostic Christ” who wore his divinity in spirit rather than body.

Hugh McLean, on the other hand, recognizes in the *Harmonization* Tolstoy's need for a theology grounded in narrative, and pursues ties between the gospel project and Tolstoy's artistic practices. Ultimately, however, he comes to the conclusion that the *Harmonization* does not have enough of an artistic bent. The literariness of Jesus becomes an important meter in McLean's investigation as he considers the degree to which Tolstoy enfolded and aestheticized the “hero” of the gospels. He suggests that when it came to his art Tolstoy was faced with a predicament like Mikhailov's in *Anna Karenina*: He could only paint a Christ that was in his heart. As McLean argues, since Tolstoy's appreciation for Christ was “forced” and primarily cerebral, his artistry—as characterized by psychological probing and elaborate “dialectics of the soul”—was stifled and did not come through (141).

And indeed, the *Harmonization* is so frequently burdened by fragmentations and Tolstoy's argumentative editorial comments that any rapport between Tolstoy the artist and Tolstoy the theologian might appear tenuous at best. But if we look beyond this lapse in aesthetics we can discern Tolstoy's more subtle creative interventions in this piece. In recent studies, Inessa Medzhibovskaya has detected artistic principles within the inner structure of the *Harmonization*. Medzhibovskaya argues that Tolstoy's retelling of the bible is a “supremely artistic task” and “the quest of an author for a perfect hero.” According to Medzhibovskaya, the New Testament functioned as an allegorical plot about the search for the meaning of life, and Jesus was the seeker who

overcame everything to get to that meaning (213). It must be noted that Jesus had to specifically *seek* this meaning and that he was not born with it. And since the meaning of life was tied to an “awareness” of God, Jesus had to “earn” precisely this “awareness.” Medzhibovskaya highlights Jesus the seeker in her study and elaborates on the artistically driven paths along which Tolstoy maps out this search in Jesus’ life.⁵

In this essay I aim to further this reading of the gospel as an artistic text, expanding on previous scholarship regarding the artistic development that Tolstoy conceives for Jesus. Of all the modifications that Tolstoy made to the gospels, the most radical one was a change in genre. Even when knee-deep in theology, Tolstoy could not discard the impulses of the novel: the significance that it assigns to the lowly world we all live in, and its insistence that the interactions and events within that lowly world matter more than anything. When confronted with a gospel, a genre concerned with the miraculous and the extraordinary, Tolstoy subverts its basic premises and transforms it into a novelistic hybrid, part novel and part gospel.

A discussion of the novel in the context of Tolstoy’s most theological of texts seems all the more fitting when we remember that, like the novel, the author’s religious philosophy was deeply bound to the lowly, everyday world. George Gutsche highlighted the value of the temporal world in Tolstoy’s religious philosophy, remarking that for Tolstoy, the Kingdom of God is “something this side of death” and a “state accessible to the living” (84). It was through his very human experiences on “this side of death” that Tolstoy’s Jesus entered the Kingdom of God while still alive and became a venerated teacher. Just like the lives of many novelistic characters, his path towards God was not guided by prophecy and punctuated by miracles; it was shaped instead by the quotidian world. In Tolstoy’s retelling of the Gospels, Christ the Son of God

emerged as Jesus the man, susceptible to the effects of everyday needs and occurrences. As many novelistic characters before him, he *became* who he was, developing through his interactions with the world and its processes.

The “Son of an Unknown Father”

One way Tolstoy altered the original gospel portrayal of Jesus was through omissions. As he asserted, all four gospels resembled a beautiful painting that “for worldly goals (временных целей) [was] covered up in dark color paint” (PSS 24: 797). (The “worldly” here refers to historical concerns, and specifically to the agendas of the historical Christian community.) The miracles associated with every stage of Jesus’ life made up the most important element of this obfuscating layer. For Tolstoy, the miracles were nothing but fabricated legends designed to increase the prominence of early Christianity and facilitate conversions (PSS 24: 796). Jesus’ divine conception, the miracles he performed, and the “legends” about his Resurrection had been included in the gospels as “advertisement” for the “importance and godliness of Jesus’ teaching” (PSS 24: 797).

As someone already “sold” on the goodness of this message, Tolstoy was only interested in the teaching of Jesus and worked to recover those long-lost and time-battered words. To do so, he felt he had to first decisively “scrape off” all traces of the miraculous from the gospels. He insisted that miracles distracted from the goodness of the teaching and that a rational man and a modern reader could not take seriously a text that required him to believe in supernatural phenomena like Resurrection in the flesh (PSS 24: 791).

Ultimately, this purgation of the miraculous also led to another, less conscious change in the narrative. By removing the miracles from the Gospels, Tolstoy extracted Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus the man, from Christ the Son of God and all the fantastic tales about a man believed to be

divine. “The story of Christ’s real life,” declares Tolstoy in the *Harmonization*, “had for its foundation actual life, full of depth and holiness” (PSS 24: 792). Tolstoy brought this more human Christ to the surface through his editorial work, using literary montage to shift the reader’s focus away from the miraculous rhetoric and back to this ordinary life of Christ.

Of all the legends that he believed had distorted Jesus’ original life, Tolstoy viewed the Immaculate Conception as the most blatantly spurious. As McLean notes, Tolstoy had from childhood doubted that Christ was the Son of God in a manner more intimate than the rest of humanity (120). As the *Harmonization* shows, Tolstoy viewed all humans as children of God; one of the first points that Tolstoy emphasizes at the start of the *Harmonization* is that “the appellation ‘son of Man’ [...] refers equally to all men” (PSS 24: 90).

This initial revision of the meaning of divine sonhood was also coupled with a thorough transformation of the essence of this “appellation.” Tolstoy had a tendency to appropriate canonical Christian ideas, exploit their “religious suggestiveness” to enhance the weight of his ideas, and then yield them a whole other meaning altogether (Gutsche 95). Divine sonhood undergoes this same transformation. Tolstoy reads it metaphorically and separates divine birth from the physical co-substantiality that the evangelists had insisted upon. As Tolstoy would argue, “Besides the cause of life which one can see in the conception of the child in the mother’s womb from a carnal father, there is also another cause of life, a non-carnal one” (PSS 24: 37). This “non-carnal” lineage came in the form of *logos*, or “awareness” in Tolstoyan terms, which was the only form of God that humans could know. And though not mixed into his or her blood, this higher parental lineage in the form of “awareness” nevertheless shaped an individual’s inner spiritual makeup. As Tolstoy put it: “God is always with man [...].

Man knows God from within himself (из себя)” (PSS 24: 90).

Interestingly, by trading physical divinity for a spiritual awareness of God, Tolstoy redefines divine sonhood as a psychological phenomenon; communion with God is a state of mind rather than literal co-substantiality. In the case of Jesus, this theological shift means that he is not the Messiah and therefore cannot be born a Son of God. Instead, as Medzhibovskaya points out, Jesus has to make himself aware of God.

This “conversion” unfolds on a thoroughly human plane and is driven by pedestrian human circumstances. Beginning with Jesus’ birth and continuing into his adulthood and maturation as a preacher, Tolstoy recasts his story in more realistic terms. Jesus’ divine birth, Tolstoy explains, was invented in an effort to disguise his illegitimate origin. In lieu of prophecy we encounter a much more novelistic reading of Jesus’ birth as the all too common plot of disgrace and illegitimate conception: “There was a young girl by the name of Mary. This young girl was bearing the child of an unknown person. The man betrothed to her felt pity for her and hiding her disgrace, he accepted her. Through her and the unknown father was born a boy” (PSS 24: 48). Infused with shame, the story of Jesus’ birth is thus quickly “novelized,” and, as Hugh McLean has suggested, it looks like “the germ of what might have become another adultery novel” (130). Though McLean does not develop this suggestion, it is a very important one, especially when seen alongside all the other editorial changes that Tolstoy brings about in Jesus’ story.

This initial profanation of Jesus’ life and of the miracle that consecrated it immediately wrenches him from the realm of the sacred and allow for his story to be understood from the lowly sphere of the novel. This change is crucial not only because it humanizes Jesus, and, as we will see, renders him susceptible to the temporal plane, but also in the realm of representation. In

Tolstoy's religious philosophy, "awareness" is the only element of God that humans can know, whereas God in all of his fullness exists at an unbridgeable distance. "No one has ever seen God," Tolstoy would declare, and "no one has comprehended and will comprehend God" (PSS 24: 44). (Here, of course, Tolstoy speaks of God himself and not of the "awareness" of God.) Following in this logic, it makes sense that God in his fullness should elude the humble artist's direct gaze. In Tolstoy's opinion, the classic attempts to capture God in the artistic medium, like the Old Testament representation of the burning bush, were mere Christian fables (PSS 24: 44).

God's likeness in man, however, was quite another matter. Unlike divine beings, man was open to be known and authored. Once deprived of his divine "otherness," the "man Jesus" therefore comfortably falls within the bounds of the human and artistic imagination. Since his experience is just as human as theirs, Jesus is someone who can be known and represented by the author and understood by readers.

Having corrected Jesus' origins, Tolstoy immediately begins to investigate the effects of illegitimacy on young Jesus. As it turns out, it is his lowly birth that propels Jesus to seek out God and view him as his father. In one of his most characteristic observations about Christ, Tolstoy depicts his childhood as burdened by psychological alienation. In spite of his kindness, Joseph appears to have had his limitations as a surrogate father. Under his roof, the boy Jesus remains deprived of a father figure and is not allowed to forget his illegitimacy: He feels like an outsider among other children whose biological fathers are present. The result is a psychological estrangement reminiscent of what the orphan Nikolai Bolkonsky experiences in *War and Peace*. Tolstoy's young Christ, just like Bolkonsky, is given to escapist daydreaming. The estranged child therapeutically thinks up for

himself a divine birth from a divine father. "I have no man father, therefore, my Father is God," says Jesus in Tolstoy's commentaries after straying behind in the Jerusalem temple. "The temple is God's house," he tells a worried Mary, "if you had looked for me in the house of my father, in the temple, you would have found me" (PSS 24: 51). In his comments on this episode, Tolstoy indicates his own understanding of the moment: "This story [...] very clearly brings out the train of thought, by which the clever, neglected child, seeing about him children who all had carnal fathers, and with no father in the flesh of his own, recognized as his father the beginning of all, God" (PSS 24: 52). Fully human, Tolstoy's Jesus has no closer or more prominent connection to God than the rest of us, but the immediate longing for a father leads him to seek out God.

This causal link between the need for a father and Jesus' awareness of God connects back to the novel in a number of ways. In his essay "Epic and Novel," Bakhtin considers one of the fundamental characteristics of the novel to be the great proximity it fosters between the object of representation and the reality its readers inhabit. Bakhtin uses the epic as a counterexample to illustrate his point and differentiates between the absolute removed epic past and the timeline of the novel. "The novel took shape precisely at the point when epic distance was disintegrating," writes Bakhtin, "when both the world and man were assuming a degree of familiarity, when the object of artistic representation was being degraded to the level of a contemporary reality and was inconclusive and fluid" (39). The gospel genre resembles the epic in its similar distance between its audience and the events and personages represented. There could be no "zone of familiar contact" between our (or Tolstoy's) present and the reality driven by the supernatural that Jesus inhabited. In his rendering, however, Tolstoy undertakes the "radical revolution" that

Bakhtin associated with the novel (14) and removes Jesus from the “distanced plane” (20) of a genre like the gospel. Jesus enters a novelistic “zone of familiar contact,” and, for better or worse, his emotional longing and his shameful birth fall within the spectrum of average human experience. The inaccessible and divine Jesus of the original gospels becomes accessible and secular in Tolstoy’s *Harmonization*, someone emotionally susceptible to the world he inhabits and in need of a father’s affection.

In fact, Jesus’ longings are so common that they could be interpreted as the elementary human fantasy for higher parentage that Freud would refer to as the “family romance.” The phenomenon, of course, had long predated Freud and was a frequent motif of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel where it could fittingly describe the experiences of many bastard offspring. As profiled by Marthe Robert in her study *Origins of the Novel*, the novelistic bastards lionized in the European novel were exceptionally prone to “add[ing] flattering touches to irreversible fate” (168). They embellished their identities and dreamed of discovering fatherhood within the highest of circles. In light of how common this motif was in the European novel, one might see Jesus’ story as a possible incarnation of it. His story, of course, is no garden-variety fantasy about a rich or powerful parent. In lieu of settling for a wealthy father and social position, Jesus gets to have as his father “the beginning of all,” God. His life story brings novelistic bastardy to uncharted heights.

The similarity between Jesus’ story in the *Harmonization* and the bastard motif of the European novel seems especially relevant considering that Tolstoy also treated similar themes in most of his own novels. The bastard motif of the European novel merely laid bare the profound alienation of an outsider to the conventional family. Anne Hruska covers the theme of the family outsider in her doctoral dissertation and

traces a long list of “archetypal outsiders” in Tolstoy’s novels. She argues that for Tolstoy the family simultaneously signified belonging and exclusion, and she shows the frequent manifestations of this anxiety throughout his fiction. According to Hruska, Tolstoy would embody this theme by portraying orphans, prostitutes, spinsters, and other similar figures who were family outsiders by virtue of their position in the world. Though masked in some of the early fiction, the unhappiness of the lonely outsider would emerge as more and more prominent in Tolstoy’s later fiction. As Hruska suggests, the universal brotherhood that Tolstoy eventually preached was partly aimed at a solution for the problem of the outsider (1-33). Jesus would issue a similar call for universal brotherhood in the *Harmonization*, but the fact that this message sprung from a history of personal alienation attests to the deep connection between Tolstoy’s novels and his theology.

Bildung and Becoming

From these novelistic flashes in Jesus’ childhood, Tolstoy’s *Harmonization* moves to an equally novelistic reading of his maturation as a preacher. Once again, and perhaps not fully consciously, Tolstoy humanizes Christ and inevitably crosses paths with the novel. At the center of the novel stood human beings who had not reached their full development, but were open to evolutions and personal transformations. Tolstoy’s Jesus has an equally undetermined sense of self. As it turns out, his initial recognition of and longing for divine fatherhood does not immediately grant him full “awareness.” If his childhood alienation was evidence of human needs, Jesus’ further development would prove an enduring humanity in Tolstoy’s protagonist. However vigorous his longing for God, the young Jesus still lacks the knowledge to realize that bond. As Medzhibovskaya has argued, to attain full awareness of God, Jesus must possess a

“will to change” (“*metanoia*”) and willingly renounce all other loyalties (210). Yet before he can embrace “*metanoia*,” this Tolstoyan and all too human Jesus is in need of much learning and thinking, and must build upon his initial moments of “awareness.” Jesus does not perform miracles that reflect a predetermined and effortless bond to God, but must engage in the process of becoming a Son of God. The Cana miracle is deleted, and Tolstoy’s narrative rushes ahead to Jesus’ encounter with John the Baptist, which is rich in educational overtones. Like every other human being, Jesus too must learn, and that learning, that moral education, is very much a novelistic process. In this respect, Tolstoy’s Jesus is ideologically closer to novelistic protagonists than to gospel heroes; more specifically, Tolstoy appears to rely on elements of the *Bildungsroman* to tell Jesus’ story.

In his discussion of the *Bildungsroman*, Mikhail Bakhtin isolates the theme of “becoming” as the defining trait of this genre. As Bakhtin puts it, the *Bildungsroman* “brings forth the phenomenon of a man’s becoming, a certain duality, a lack of wholeness characteristic of living human beings, a mixture within man of good and evil, strength and weakness” (393). According to Bakhtin, unlike classical epics which presented mature and ultimately static heroes who were tested by life only to reveal their pre-formed spiritual foundation, the modern novel relies on the concept of *Bildung* and carefully portrays the role of the world in the psychological formation of a character. The life and events of the *Bildung* universe are no longer static presences, but emerge, as Bakhtin argues, “bathed in the light of becoming” and “form and formulate the hero’s character and world view” (393).

Though in his later writings Bakhtin would describe Tolstoy’s characters as closed and monologic—not open to change but complete, preformed and sheer mouthpieces for the author’s ideas (*Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*)—

scholars like Caryl Emerson have suggested that Bakhtin might have exaggerated Tolstoy’s monologism for the sake of maintaining the age-old Tolstoy/Dostoevsky dichotomy. As Emerson argues in her revisionist look at Bakhtin’s ideas about Tolstoy, despite his promotion of egalitarian dialogue, Bakhtin did not grant Tolstoy a fair dialogue and did not investigate his art in its full complexity (76). Perhaps, had he done so, he would have dispensed with the strict dichotomy between what he saw as Dostoevsky’s pluralistic dialogism and the tyrannous monologism he ascribed to Tolstoy.

Emerson’s efforts to restore an “authentic dialogue” between Tolstoy and Bakhtin reveal an interesting correspondence in these two thinkers. Though Bakhtin refused to see it, Tolstoy’s literary characters were examples of “selfhood in process.” In Tolstoy’s fictions, this process involved multiple ideas passing through a single personality. “The ability to assume and shed ideas,” writes Emerson, “to pass through and remain open to as many life situations as possible, is precisely what defines a major Tolstoyan hero” (76). In many ways, Emerson’s definition of the Tolstoyan hero suggests a close kinship between the developments laid out for these heroes and Bakhtin’s understanding of *Bildung* as education in interaction with one’s environment. Tolstoy’s novelistic heroes never grow in isolation; they are prompted to change by bouts of awareness provoked by environmental factors.

While there is no “mixture of good and evil” in him, Jesus is susceptible to the kind of environmental *Bildung* that Bakhtin writes about. As Tolstoy’s narrative advances into Jesus’ developing years, his incompleteness becomes manifest. The meeting between Jesus and John the Baptist on the banks of the Jordan proves pivotal and facilitates an evolution in Jesus’ ideas about God. Less interested in the ritual of baptism, Tolstoy contemplates the interaction between Jesus and John the Baptist and presents an interpretation of

this relationship that departs from the traditionalist view of John as a paler version of Jesus. Instead of merely paving the way for the arrival of the true Messiah, Tolstoy's John the Baptist, much in the tradition of the novel of education, receives a privileged position as a critical mentor in Jesus' spiritual development:

Jesus was then 30 years old. He came before John in the Jordan and heard his sermon about the arrival of God [...] Jesus did not know his fleshy father and considered God his father. He believed John's sermon and said to himself: If it is true that God is my father and I am the son of God, and what John says (about God's coming) is also true, then I need only cleanse myself through the spirit in order for God to come to me. (PSS 24: 95)

John the Baptist plays the role of a catalyst for the thirty-year-old Jesus, who needs to embark upon his own true path. Jesus may be aware of his bond with God, but John the Baptist's suggestion that one could channel the spirit of God on earth moves him to commit himself fully to God. Tolstoy obviously elides the moment when John the Baptist recognizes Jesus as the Messiah and angels descend from the heavens while the voice of God resounds. Instead, he drastically prosaizes the narrative, and represents the encounter between John the Baptist and Jesus as an ordinary instance of education closer to the sphere of the *Bildungsroman* than to the miraculous gospel. Like many Tolstoyan characters and novelistic characters before him, Jesus emerges as someone acutely aware, and receptive to, the important ideas he can discover in the world around him.

Since Jesus' development and his theology are facilitated by an interaction with his environment, we can note a definite connection between his development and Bakhtin's observations about the novelistic qualities of the *Bildung*. While Tolstoy may not have been directly invoking

a specific literary model in his portrayal of Jesus' education, the correlation between the development of Jesus (and the developments of many other Tolstoyan characters) and Bakhtin's ideas about the *Bildungsroman* is not coincidental. For the most part, the realist novel in general and the *Bildungsroman* in particular depicted ordinary individuals in their ordinary environments and assessed their lives as impeded or aided by that unexceptional environment. For his part, Tolstoy had a long history of seeing this ordinary life as the core of existence and the true test of morality. Tolstoy scholars such as Gary Saul Morson have argued that Tolstoy's fictional narratives are dominated by a preoccupation with the ordinary. As Morson suggests, Tolstoy believed that real life was lived in the "small and ordinary moments" and was lived best when it was both "prosaic and undramatic" (72). More than anything, it is the small and ordinary circumstances of their lives that propel Tolstoy's characters to change or have an epiphany. In Tolstoy's so-called "post-conversion" fiction, ordinary moments could propel a person to have a moral transformation and to want to lead a morally good life. Prince Nekhliudov's "process of awakening" in *Resurrection*, for instance, is prompted by the chance encounter with Maslova while serving as a jury member.

Although John the Baptist is not ordinarily credited with a separate theology in traditional Christianity, Tolstoy represents, by means of some unusual interpretations of the Greek original, a separate theology which he identifies with John. Tolstoy bases his argument on Matthew 3:2: "and saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near'" (New International Version). The passage is rendered in the canonical Orthodox Bible as "И говорит: покайтесь; ибо приблизилось царство небесное." Tolstoy translates the verse as "Иоанн говорил: одумайтесь потому что наступило царство небесное" [John said: Come to your senses for

the kingdom of heaven has arrived”] (PSS 24: 54). Tolstoy makes only a single significant change but manages to overturn the entire meaning. The original verb “приблизиться” [to approach, draw near] conveys a certain degree of open-endedness: an arrival in time—the kingdom is often conceptualized on temporal rather than spatial terms—or a reference to the arrival of Jesus. This last meaning is perhaps more in tune with the general understanding of John the Baptist as someone sent to prepare the way for Jesus, whose divine origin signifies a bridging of God’s divine distance and closer communion between God and his creatures. In Tolstoy’s version, however, a sense of the Kingdom’s greater immediacy is also conveyed through “наступило,” and it gives rise to a whole separate theology.

This theology—one might call it a theology of the ordinary—serves as the driving force for Jesus’ development. John the Baptist recognized, Tolstoy argues, the proximity of the Kingdom of God, as well as the possibility of its arrival without outwardly dramatic events:

For all the Jews in the attendance, the Kingdom of God meant the coming of God into the world and his enthronement over men, that which fills the prophecies of Zechariah, Hosea, Malachi, Joel, Jeremiah. The uniqueness of the meaning of John the Baptist’s speeches in comparison to those of the other prophets is that while the other prophets spoke indefinitely of the future enthronement of God, John the Baptist says that this kingdom has arrived and the enthronement is completed. Nearly all the prophets predicted external, miraculous, and terrible events upon this enthronement; Jeremiah is the only one who predicted the enthronement of God among men not by external phenomena, but by an inward union of God with men, and so the assertion of John the

Baptist that the kingdom of heaven has arrived (наступило), although no terrible event has taken place, means that what has arrived is the inward kingdom of God, which Jeremiah predicted. (PSS 24: 55)

Tolstoy suggests that John the Baptist was the first among the Hebrew prophets to proclaim the notion that the Kingdom of God could arrive without an apocalypse or other eschatological event. In spite of all the “external, miraculous and terrible events” that the Jewish prophets had predicted would accompany God’s enthronement on earth, John argues that this reign has *already* arrived, though much more modestly. The people did not need to wait any longer; the Kingdom was on earth and present in the shape of earthly life.

This interpretation was problematic on a number of levels and it neglected many of the linguistic realities of the original text, but its substance bears a predictable Tolstoyan touch. The separation of the Kingdom from miracles and the depiction of its coming as a tranquil, barely noticeable event harmonize well with Tolstoy’s philosophy of the ordinary and his deep dislike of extremes. Through his radical interpretation of John the Baptist’s teaching, we can see that Tolstoy relocates the Kingdom of God to this same ordinary life that he embraces as the only truly important realm. Its function in the individual’s life *Bildung* is illustrated nowhere better than in Jesus’ behavior on the banks of the Jordan.

It was this belief in the importance of the ordinary plane—a belief that led Tolstoy to depose the Kingdom of God—that drives the environmental *Bildung* that Tolstoy gave Jesus. Even when dealing with the holiest of holies, Tolstoy could not renounce his deeply held conviction that real life happens in ordinary moments. It was this belief that would compel him, even in the religious setting of the *Harmonization*, to rely

on a genre beholden to the ordinary such as the novel. By that same token, this belief would also prompt him to turn Jesus into a man who would partake in a thoroughly ordinary life and experience thoroughly ordinary emotions.

The Limits of the Novel

Eventually, as he surpasses the test of the Temptation in the Wilderness, Jesus enters his ministry and his development concludes. Jesus embraces the spirit of “*metanoia*” and chooses God above all else. As he enters his ministry, we can also note that the humanity that Tolstoy restores to him slips away as easily as it is conjured. After he overcomes the Temptation in the Wilderness, Jesus gradually rejects all personal ties—family, career, and nation—for the sake of a higher universal brotherhood in God. All divisions and exclusions, everything that set a person apart from those around—who, like him or her, are children of God—were to be abandoned, as all humanity joined in an all-encompassing brotherhood, a community larger than the self, the family, and nationality.

Under no circumstances could the novel—a medium that violently binds human beings to the smallness of individuality in “epic individual[ism]” (Lukacs 66)—accommodate such a character. Fittingly, Jesus would thus finish his story outside the realm of the novel. In the later portions of the *Harmonization* he ceases being a fleshy person and grows into an abstraction, a mere personification of his teaching. He would affirm this depersonalization in his parting words to the disparaging disciples and speak of himself and his teaching as one and the same thing. “You will never be alone,” he says to the disciples, “if the spirit of my teaching is with you. I will die, and the people of the world will not see me; but you will see me, because my teaching lives, and you will live by it.”⁴⁷ And indeed, when the man Jesus died, there was little reason to mourn him. Except for his theology of love and

universal brotherhood, Jesus had already lost all particularity in the *Harmonization*, and his theology would surely survive his physical death.

One might suggest that Tolstoy utilizes the novel up to a certain point and then dispenses with it. He was known for creating generic hybrids in his fiction, including in his last novel proper, *Resurrection*, which seems to present a similar—albeit far more artistic—generic mixture. Just like the *Harmonization*, *Resurrection* begins as a novel and ends, much to the disappointment of critics, on an authoritarian gospel note. Nekhliudov’s spiritual development ends with him embracing the teachings of Jesus and the theology of love for all humanity that was so dear to Tolstoy. Yet though the gospel might have been intended as an absolute authority at the end of *Resurrection*, it nevertheless does not prevent the reader from doubting Nekhliudov’s final resolution. Like many Tolstoyan characters, Nekhliudov goes through several different ideological phases over the course of his life; many ideas bounce through him, and many of them are eventually discarded even though they are originally upheld as ideals. Konstantin Levin and Pierre Bezukhov similarly embrace and discard several life philosophies before arriving at some revelation at the end of the novel; but with Tolstoy we are always left wondering whether a given enlightenment will last long. Even in *Resurrection*, we are still left wondering if Nekhliudov will be able to live for his fellow man.

With Christ, however, Tolstoy eliminates all doubts. He takes advantage of the gospel medium and its lack of concern for realism and allows Jesus to become a moral ideal whose firm convictions are never questioned. Unlike many Tolstoyan characters, Jesus comes upon the morally correct life ideal right away and remains faithful to it until his death. As Gustafson has argued, in Tolstoy’s theology of self-perfection, human beings should be constantly and relentlessly striving towards perfection. They cannot

expect to reach it, but they must keep trying and keep investing effort in a “process of perfection.” “Self-perfection,” writes Gustafson, “means infinite and eternal approximation toward perfection.” Human beings are thus in constant flux, ever striving, yet never fully complete or perfect (431). When it came to Jesus, however, Tolstoy found that he would grant this protagonist the right to closure and perfection. To do so, he had to discard the novelistic genre he had invoked for an ironed out ideal. Too often a stage for characters plagued by human imperfections and a strong sense of individuality, the novel was guilty of too many loopholes and ambiguities to house a definitive theological platform.

That said, however, the mere fact that Tolstoy chose to humanize Jesus is noteworthy and not accidental. It reveals a need in Tolstoy to have a human ideal. And despite his final virtues and perfection, Jesus begins the *Harmonization* fully human and becomes who he is through his humanity and through the world that surrounds him. The conditions of his ultimate graduation into a moral ideal are fully human and thoroughly ordinary.

Tolstoy did what Renan did, only perhaps better and more respectfully. Tolstoy angrily declared in a letter to Strakhov from April 1878 that he did not understand how the latter could have enjoyed Renan’s *Le Vie de Jesus*. One of his two objections to the book involved Renan’s emphasis that Jesus was someone who “sweated” and had to attend to other bodily functions. For Tolstoy, such details were worthless and knowing them gave the reader no additional insights about Jesus’ teaching (62, 413-14).⁶ While in his own portrayal of Jesus Tolstoy brought out this same humanity, his portrayal did not degrade an ideal moral figure to the level of base humanity. Rather than emphasizing Jesus’ carnal nature, he illustrated Jesus’ humanity only insofar as it related to his faith and propelled him towards God. The kind of humanity that Tolstoy brought

out did not degrade Jesus, but rather illustrated the endless potential of humanity.

In a discussion of the Resurrection, Tolstoy asserted that this miracle was particularly dangerous because it taught ordinary people that it was impossible to be like Christ and do the things that he did without being special entities like him (PSS 24: 790). Yet by showing Christ to be a man before becoming anything else, Tolstoy seems to invite his readers to become conscious of their own moral potential. If a fellow man like Jesus could become who he was, others could attempt similar processes of self-perfection as well. Perhaps they could not be exactly like him, but his thoroughly human example provided the impetus for ceaseless effort.

Notes

I thank Liza Knapp for all her help and encouragement with this project, and the participants of the “Tolstoy and World Literature” conference at Yasnaya Polyana (2007) for their enthusiasm for Tolstoy’s gospel.

1. As Maurice Friedberg informs us in his *Literary Translation in Russia: A Cultural History*, a translation of the complete Bible in Russian from the Old Church Slavonic was considerably delayed. Though the Russian Bible Society had published the entire New Testament by 1824, the Holy Synod did not issue an official Russian Bible until 1876, just a few years before Tolstoy’s translation. Several unauthorized Russian versions of the Bible were in circulation but most were published in non-Orthodox Western Europe; the Synod was highly suspicious of such endeavors (22-24).

2. Leo Wiener, an early translator of the *Harmonization*, translates “разумение” as “comprehension,” but here I am opting for its translation as “awareness,” which is provided by Inessa Medzhibovskaya in her recent book *Tolstoy and the Religious Culture of His Time*. This translation tends to add a more proactive element to the term, which, as Medzhibovskaya

suggests, fits with Tolstoy's original intention. See Medzhibovskaya 205-06.

3. David Matual provides a numerical representation of Tolstoy's omissions of Biblical verses, which is revelatory even at a quick glance. As he points out, of the 3700 verses found in the original gospels, Tolstoy included only about 1882 in his diatessaron, and even fewer verses in the abridged versions. His verse selections from the four gospels convey a preference for the Iohannine gospel. Passages from John amount to 32% of the *Harmonization* and show that Tolstoy preserved over 70% of the original gospel. The narrative is framed by an introduction from the proem in John's gospel, and, in certain versions, ends with a conclusion from John's first epistle. The remaining gospels fare much worse. Of the remaining three, the Matthean gospel appears most often while the Markan and Lukan gospels are equally ignored (Matual 31). The text of the *Harmonization* thus emerges enveloped in a negative space populated by absent verses.

4. In addition to removing the miracles from the original gospels, and transforming the meaning of verses from a purely subjective perspective so that it would fit with his own ideas, Tolstoy also seemed to have been influenced by a strong anti-historicist bend in his editorial work. Scholars have investigated Tolstoy's standards for the elimination and retention of verses. Richard Gustafson suggests that Tolstoy longed to separate the New Testament from the Old Testament and the Hebraic tradition, which he believed was the historic legacy of Saint Paul. As Gustafson argues, in part Tolstoy did this in an effort to wipe out the image of a wrathful Yahweh and replace him with a God of love (190). Likewise, Tolstoy's dislike of the Old Testament was accompanied by a general dislike of the historical Jewishness of the text itself. Tolstoy found that the nation and history only served to separate individuals from one another and hampered universal brotherhood. Jesus' teachings had to be universally applicable (outside of space and time) and not bound to their historical

setting, which was not universal and did not stand the test of time. For this reason, we find that Tolstoy also deleted the Acts of the Apostles for being too connected to the particular historical setting and ideological bent of early Christian communities.

5. In her study (*Tolstoy and the Religious Culture of His Time—A Biography of a Long Conversion, 1845-1887*), Medzhibovskaya singles out three key religious Greek motifs that also double as aesthetic terms: *metanoia* (will to change), *kairos* (propitious moment or timing), and *khamartia* (sin or tragic flaw) (209). According to Medzhibovskaya, "Tolstoy interpreted these Greek words aesthetically and spiritually rather than as theological categories." "*Metanoia*" is a willingness to renounce everything for God; "*kairos*" is Tolstoy's version of non-spiritual time that is punctuated by false, phenomenal signs and "convenient moments to do things in the interest of the socially proper side of life," whereas "*khamartia*" refers to "willful or unwillful self-deception, the closing of the conscious will that is unable or not eager to attain *razumenie*" (Medzhibovskaya 210-11). As Medzhibovskaya argues, these artistic patterns that Tolstoy traced in the gospels would "infuse Tolstoy's post-conversion art" (209). For a more in-depth discussion of these concepts see Medzhibovskaya 209-13.

6. I was directed to this quotation by Hugh McLean's discussion of Tolstoy's attitude toward Strauss and Renan and comparison of their and Tolstoy's attitudes toward Jesus. For a more in-depth discussion of this topic see McLean *In Quest of Tolstoy* 120-26.

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