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## Scholarly Exchange

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### Could the Master Err? A Note on "God Sees the Truth but Waits"<sup>1</sup>

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"God Sees the Truth But Waits" [*Bog pravdu vidit da ne skoro skazhet*, 1872], originally written for Tolstoy's *Primer [Azbuka]* for children, is easily recognized as an expanded version of a fable related by Platon Karataev in the closing pages of *War and Peace*. The basic plot nucleus remains the same. The main character, a merchant, is wrongly convicted of murder and robbery, knouted, and serves many years in a Siberian prison.<sup>2</sup> There he by chance encounters the true murderer. Eventually the latter is moved to confess the crime to the authorities, but before the necessary documents have made their way through the bureaucracy to effect the innocent man's release, death has already claimed him.

In Karataev's version the true culprit is moved to confess simply by hearing the old merchant's story, related to a group of fellow convicts. What moves him is not so much the narrative of the suffering and deprivation the old man has undergone as the fact that despite his innocence of the crime for which he was convicted and despite his virtuous life and benefactions to the poor, he has come to accept his fate as a just retribution exacted by God for his sins and those of mankind [*za svoi da za liudskie grekhi stradaiu* (PSS 12: 155)]. His pronouncement of sacrifice, common guilt, and atonement affects the murderer so powerfully that he falls on his knees before the merchant and begs his forgiveness. The reply is, "God will forgive you. We are all sinners before God, and I am suffering for my own sins." It is this declaration that impels the man to confess, and as expected in

Tolstoy, human "justice" fails to right the balance.

Karataev's special ecstasy in relating this finale, which is communicated to Pierre, seems to come from the conviction that there is a moral order in the universe presided over by God, one that lies quite beyond human measurement and especially beyond any effort to impose morality here on earth by laws and punishments. We all share the universal guilt. Platon may also sense his own impending death, as he is soon to be executed by the French for the crime of being unable to walk any further, and may regard it, like the old merchant's, as a payment for the sins of mankind, another episode in the mysterious operations of divine justice.

This otherworldly moral conclusion perhaps remains the same in the expanded version of 1872, although its anonymous and "objective" narrator cannot impart to the conclusion Platon's mystically ecstatic emotion. The hero of "God Sees the Truth," Ivan Aksenov, although he has committed no crime at all, says to the now repentant murderer, "God will forgive you; perhaps I am a hundred times worse than you" [Бог простит тебя; может быть, я во сто раз хуже тебя]. He says this after he and the murderer have wept together, following which he "suddenly felt a lightness in his soul" [И вдруг у него на душе легко стало]. The point here may be slightly different from the Karataev version, stressing not so much the common, shared guilt of us all, but rather universal human sinfulness, so vast and so complex that it far exceeds any human measurements of crime, since sins of thought may on God's balances weigh as heavily as sins of deed.

In any case, the change of narrator from the peasant philosopher Karataev to the author Lev Tolstoy also involved a partial change of genre. The Karataev version may be called a parable or a fable, i.e., a schematic narrative designed to illustrate a moral truth. The new version, though still retaining some of basic features of a fable, also shows a strong pull in the direction of Tolstoyan realistic fiction. It becomes a *story*. Tolstoy's creative imagination, always fertile, was put to work

fleshing out the fable. He added a plethora of details, providing a much more rounded, fully developed representation of the characters and events than in Karataev's very schematic outline. The chief actors are given names and distinct personalities, the settings made more concrete and vivid, and the plot augmented by several new episodes.

To make the action more dramatic and the psychology more convincing, Tolstoy added a whole new dimension to the Siberian confrontation of the two antagonists. In real, Tolstoyan life merely hearing the old man's story would clearly not be enough to move the miscreant to repentance and confession. So a new episode was added. The true murderer, now named Makar Semenov, plans to escape from the stockade by digging a tunnel. Aksenov witnesses the digging and thus acquires the power to wreak vengeance on his enemy by denouncing him to the authorities—a more interesting psychological conflict than the total self-abnegation and acceptance of the Karataev version. Aksenov is now really tempted. He recalls his wife, his children, the twenty-six years of life with them that were stolen from him, and the suffering he has endured, and he wants revenge. When Semenov threatens to kill him if he tells about the digging, Aksenov replies, "You killed me long ago. And whether I report you or not, that will be as God affects my soul." [Ты меня уже давно убил. А сказывать про тебя буду или нет, как Бог на душу положит (*PSS 22: 429*).]

This sets the stage for a dramatic "moment of truth," when the prison commandant asks Aksenov, known as a particularly docile, obedient, and truthful prisoner, if he knows who dug the tunnel. Responding to a higher truth, Aksenov answers, "I did not see it and do not know." [Я не видал и не знал (*PSS 22: 430*).] It is this salvific act that moves Semenov to confess.

However, in the preliminary narrative before this climactic scene there are details that look very much like authorial errors on Tolstoy's part, perhaps the result of haste. The story was written fast, in early April 1872, and perhaps not revised as carefully as was the writer's usual practice.<sup>3</sup> The first of these flaws is perhaps not strictly an error at all, but only a case of psychological implausibility. It does not seem to me believable that

Aksenov's wife, with whom he is shown to have had a warm and affectionate relationship, would not have communicated with him at all during his twenty-six years of incarceration. To be sure, he had been deeply hurt to find after his arrest that she would even entertain the thought that he might have committed the horrible deed. But surely she would have come around to his side when he assured her that he was innocent. And afterwards, within the limits of what was permitted, she would surely have tried to keep him informed about her life and their children's.<sup>4</sup> But Tolstoy cannot allow it. "From home no one wrote letters to Aksenov, and he did not know whether his wife and children were alive." (Yet later he did somehow learn that his wife had died, and there is no explanation of this contradiction.) Even at the expense of psychological plausibility, Tolstoy needs the starkness of Aksenov's isolation, the individual totally alone with his God, as a graphic representation of man's ultimate existential state. We all must face death and eternity alone.

The second "error" is more technical and more direct. It occurs when Tolstoy tells about the day after Aksenov has observed Semenov digging the tunnel and been threatened by him. The text reads as follows: "The next day, when the convicts were led out to work, soldiers noticed that Makar Semenov was scattering [or had scattered] earth; they began hunting in the stockade and found the hole. The commandant came to the stockade and began asking everyone who had dug the hole." [На другой день, когда вывели колодников на работу, солдаты заметили, что Макар Семенов высыпал землю, стали искать в остроге и нашли дыру. Начальник приехал в острог и стал всех допрашивать: кто выкопал дыру? (*PSS 22: 429-30*).]<sup>5</sup>

The question immediately arises, why did the soldiers not report that they had caught Semenov emptying dirt, or noticed that he had done so? Tolstoy offers no explanation. If they refrained out of some desire to protect Semenov (class solidarity?), surely this motive would require explanation and elucidation. Anyway, such an interpretation seems most unlikely. The very fact that the soldiers followed up the evidence of the scattered earth by hunting for the hole clearly implies the opposite. Like any normally indoctrinated sol-

diers, they were doing what was expected of them, fulfilling orders, enforcing the rules. It seems much more probable that Tolstoy simply slipped here when he inserted Semenov's name in the sentence about the dumped earth. The whole sequence would be perfectly believable if the soldiers simply discovered scattered dirt, not connected with any individual, investigated, found the hole, and reported it. Who had dug it remained a mystery.

It is puzzling that this apparent error went so long unnoticed and uncorrected. The text of "God Sees the Truth But Waits" was reprinted many times after its original publication in the journal *Beseda* (No. 3, 1872)—in the *Primer*, in the *Third Russian Book for Reading*, in various editions of the Collected Works published by the Countess, and in many cheap pamphlet editions published by the firm *Posrednik* [The Intermediary] for consumption by the common folk. In all of them the questionable sentence remains intact.<sup>6</sup>

The only alteration made in the text stemmed from quite different considerations. Vladimir Chertkov, Tolstoy's disciple-in-chief, who bore much of the responsibility for the *Posrednik* editions, worried about the story for different reasons, more serious than a technical error in the plot. He wrote Tolstoy on 31 January 1885:

I have long been troubled by your story "God Sees the Truth." When the commandant asks about the digging and says to Aksenov, "Old man, you are truthful, tell me before God who did it," Aksenov answers, "I did not see it and do not know." But in fact he both saw and knew. Consequently he is resorting to a deliberate lie in order to save his comrade. Moreover, this very act gives the impression of being the greatest deed of his life. But this act could remain such even if he were freed from deceit. Aksenov could say that he did not dig the tunnel and remain silent about whether or not he knew who did. (*PSS* 85:141)

Tolstoy was convinced by this argument. He replied to Chertkov as follows:

To the elimination of the passages you wrote about I very gladly and gratefully agree. Only do it yourself. If I started to do it, I would redo everything, and I need the time for other things. (*PSS* 85:139)

A new speech was written for Aksenov, though by whom is a question:

"I cannot say, Your Excellency. God does not permit me to tell. And I will not. Do what you like with me; I am in your power." No matter how hard the commandant struggled with him, Aksenov said nothing more. Thus they never found out who had dug the tunnel. 'Не могу сказать, ваше благородие. Мне Бог не велит сказать. Я не скажу. Что хотите со мной делайте — власть ваша.' Сколько ни бился с ним начальник, Аксенов больше ничего не говорил. Так и не узнали, кто подкопался. (*PSS* 21: 334)

Whether written by Tolstoy or not, this text obviously had his approval and is later than the one in the *Primer* and the Collected Works.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, the editors in charge of the Jubilee Edition did not use it in their supposedly "canonical" version, which retains Aksenov's unnecessary lie. I do not agree with this decision.<sup>8</sup> The "I won't tell" text is the latest approved by the author, and according to standard textological principles it should stand as canonical.

The question remains, who wrote the new "I won't tell" version, Tolstoy or Chertkov. On this point Professor Jahn and I differ; I say Tolstoy, he says Chertkov. A strong argument in his favour is Tolstoy's "Do it yourself" letter to Chertkov of 5-6 February 1885, quoted above. To counter this evidence that Chertkov, following Tolstoy's authorization, proceeded to write the new sentence himself, one would need strong arguments. I believe such arguments exist.

First (and weakest), the editor of the Tolstoy-Chertkov correspondence, Liubov' Gurevich, says (*PSS* 85:140) that Tolstoy determined [*установил*] the new, "I won't tell" version as the final text. The word *установил*, however, is ambiguous: does it mean "wrote" or simply "approved"? I of course vote for "wrote."

Second, later that year, in a letter of 15-16 October 1885 (*PSS* 85:267) despite the "Do it yourself" prescription and his fear of wasting time on the story, Tolstoy himself did supply a new subtitle for the story (though for some reason it was never used): "A Story of How an Innocent Man Died at Forced Labour for Another Man's Sin and Forgave the Perpetrator."

Third, and to me most decisive, is simply *style*. The new, "I won't tell" version sounds to me unmistakably Tolstoyan. It is *perfect*. The psychology is right, the language is right. Chertkov just could not have written that passage; he did not have that kind of talent. He was hardly even a Salieri to Tolstoy's Mozart. So, I believe, Tolstoy must have written the new version and sent it to Chertkov for insertion.

In addition, the new version just seems to me artistically *better*. Aksenov would have thought just like Chertkov: lying is a sin (even in the name of a higher, divine truth). And there was no need to lie; he could just refuse to tell. If the commandant threatened him, he would be no more intimidated than he was by Semenov's threats. "I am in your power." He was quite ready for martyrdom if that was to be the consequence of his refusal.

To return to Tolstoy's alleged error, in all the published texts, book and pamphlet alike, the soldiers still observe Semenov spilling (or having spilled) dirt and yet never report him. All except one. Louise Maude, wife of Tolstoy's English disciple, friend, and biographer Aylmer Maude, translated "God Sees the Truth" into English in 1900. She apparently noticed the obvious discrepancy and undertook to fix it, but as far as we know without clearing the new version with the author. In her translation Makar Semenov's name has been removed from the troublesome sentence, which now reads, "Next day, when the convicts were led out to work, the convoy soldiers noticed that *one or other of the prisoners* [my italics] emptied some earth out of his boot. The prison was searched and the tunnel found" (Tolstoy 1928, 8-9). (Incidentally, Louise Maude also used the revised, "I won't tell" version of Aksenov's speech.) Aylmer Maude wrote Tolstoy asking Tolstoy for his written approval of his wife's (Mrs. Maude's) translation, a document apparently demanded by her publisher. Tolstoy replied in early September, 1900, "I would write Luiza Iakovlevna my authorisation [English word], but I don't know how to formulate it. Send me the form" (PSS 72:449).

Very likely Tolstoy never reviewed Mrs. Maude's translation at all, but was quite ready to write his "authorisation" simply out of friendship and trust. There is also no evidence that the

Maudes ever called Tolstoy's attention to the correction Mrs. Maude had made in translating Tolstoy's text. Thus the Russian original remains uncorrected to this day.

## Notes

1. This article owes a great deal to the thorough and incisive criticisms of Gary Jahn, who is the major non-Russian authority on Tolstoy's *narodnye rasskazy*, those stories primarily addressed to uneducated, non-intelligentsia readers, including children. Professor Jahn is the author of a fine article on this story ("A Structural Analysis of Leo Tolstoy's 'God Sees the Truth, But Waits'," *Studies in Short Fiction*, 12 [1975], 261-70), a much more substantial study than the present note, which attempts only to call attention to certain puzzles and anomalies connected with the story. Professor Jahn and I have agreed to disagree on certain questions, but I am delighted that he has consented to present his points of view in the form of a rejoinder to this note. Let the readers be the jury.

I am also grateful for assistance to my colleagues Olga and Robert Hughes.

2. Earlier, the anti-legal, anarchistic Tolstoy places in Karataev's mouth the characteristic aphorism, "Где суд, там и неправда" [Where courts are, there is injustice], *War and Peace*, Four: I: 12.

3. See commentary by V. S. Spiridonov in PSS 21: 655.

4. Just how much communication was permitted is unclear to me. Many of the exiled Decembrists were allowed some correspondence with relatives. Dostoevsky received no letters at all from his brother Mikhail or any other relative during the first four years of his exile, when he was in *katorga* [forced labour]. Mikhail petitioned "long and zealously" for permission to write, but was refused. Dostoevsky, however, did send one letter to Mikhail through official channels, and others were carried by individuals. See commentary in Dostoevsky 28(1), 451. Aksenov seems to have been in *katorga* for all 26 years of his imprisonment; so perhaps he was not allowed to receive any letters at all. But one would expect that over so long a time his wife would have found some way of getting news to him. And as noted, he did somehow find out that she had died.

5. The choice in translation between "was scattering" and "had scattered" rests primarily on whether one reads the aspect of *высыпал* as imperfective, with

stress on the last syllable, or perfective, with stress on the first. But either way, Makar Semenov is part of what the soldiers observed, though the perfective/pluperfect version does put the emptying of dirt before the soldiers' noticing, thus reducing the ambiguity somewhat. My colleague Olga Hughes, a native speaker of Russian, is willing to absolve Tolstoy of carelessness on this basis. However, I still think Tolstoy could have done a better job with this sentence, making clear that the soldiers saw only the incriminating dirt, not the man, e.g., Солдаты заметили ту землю, которую Семенов (раньше) высыпал ог, using a participle instead of a "which" clause, Солдаты заметили землю, высыпанную Семеновым.

6. Actually, the error was already present in the only surviving manuscript variant, in which the character is not yet named. "The next day the soldiers noticed that the new convict was spreading earth. They began to search in the stockade and found the hole." На другой день, солдаты заметили, что новый колодник высыпал землю, стали искать в остроге и нашли дыру (*PSS* 21: 475).

7. True, there were later editions of the *Third Russian Book for Reading* and of the *Collected Works*, but there is no evidence that Tolstoy took any part in these publications.

8. In the commentary to the story by V. S. Spiridonov in the Jubilee edition (*PSS* 21:654) there seems to be an implication that the revised *Posrednik* text was Chertkov's and only had Tolstoy's passive assent: "These changes were introduced into the text of the story by V. G. Chertkov with Tolstoy's consent" (655). But the only evidence for this is Tolstoy's "Do it yourself" letter of 5-6 February. Spiridonov then does point out that the *Posrednik* ("I won't tell") text was used in the Sytin edition of the *Collected Works*, edited by P. I. Biriukov (Moscow, 1913). He then says simply, "In this (the 'I don't know') version it [the story] is printed in the present [Jubilee] edition." He does not argue the point or explain how this decision was reached. In my opinion, the decision was incorrect.

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## Was the Master Well Served?: Further Comment on "God Sees the Truth, but Waits"

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In a paper appearing in this issue of *Tolstoy Studies Journal* Hugh McLean draws our attention to certain problematic passages in Leo Tolstoy's "God Sees the Truth, but Waits." I am very pleased to have been asked to contribute some remarks of my own to complement, and to contend with, those of Professor McLean. I am delighted at the attention given to a story which I (and Tolstoy himself—in *What Is Art?*) count among his best. I am sure that both Professor McLean and I will be content to let the readers of *TSJ* make their own judgements about the issues that we raise.

I turn first to Professor McLean's contention that the following sentence does not make sense:

На другой день, когда вывели колодников на работу, солдаты заметили, что Макар Семенов высыпал [perfective ВВсыпал or imperfective высыПАЛ] землю, стали искать в остроге и нашли дыру.