

Recent Dissertations

HAGIOGRAPHY IN THE PROSE OF TOLSTOY AND LESKOV

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ABSTRACT

Tolstoy and Leskov, like Karamzin, Pushkin, and Dostoevsky, sometimes turned to Old Russian literature as a source for literary raw material. However, unlike Karamzin or Pushkin, Tolstoy and Leskov drew directly from hagiography or religious legends derived from hagiography. Their aims were not only literary, but also openly didactic: that is, they produced stories, legends, and short novels which taught Christianity in the moral and ethical interpretation usually called Tolstoianism.

This dissertation examines the genres of the stories that Tolstoy and Leskov wrote in relation to the genre system of medieval literature, especially hagiography. It considers the didactic mechanisms these two authors used to preach their religious messages in literature, and compares the interrelation of content, style, and genre not only in the medieval sources but also in the modern texts. This study leads to insights in a number of areas: the relations between the two men, especially in the 1880s, their handling of narrative discourse, the problems of transplanting narratives from a medieval to a modern genre system, and the use of didactic techniques in modern literary works. It sheds light on the question of the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction in the modern period, and between genres in both periods.

The stories considered here include seventeen pieces by Tolstoy (written 1871-1893), and nine "Prolog tales" of Leskov (wr. 1886-1891). They can be described by a four-fold typology of hybrids: story-short saint's life, story-legend, short novel-legend, and short novel-saint's life. Chapter 1 contrasts some aspects of the genre system of hagiography in Old Russian literature with analogous genres in 19th century Russian literature, and discusses the place of the oratorical genres in medieval literature. It defines certain critical differences between medieval and modern literature as seen by D. S. Likhachev and others, and also considers the concept of the saint. It reviews those aspects of Tolstoian-Leskovian moral philosophy which most affected these stories, as well as the relevant secondary literatures on the two authors. Chapter 2 gives the criteria for the proposed typology, and identifies each story by type.

Chapters 3-6 are devoted to close readings of eight stories, four from each author. The Tolstoy stories are "The Moorish

Woodcutter" from the "Primer" (PSS 22:130-134), the "story for the people" "The Two Brothers and the Gold" (5:28-30), "What Men Live By" (25:7-25), and "Father Sergius" (31:5-46). Each chapter summarizes the story and its medieval source. For each story type I examine the relationship of author and narrator, the didactic mechanisms, the language of narrator and characters, the handling of supernatural elements, plot structure, and character development, as well as the author's worldview and model of reality. Each chapter concludes with a discussion of genre, differences between the authors as revealed by the stories, and their success both in the synthesis of diverse elements into a new narrative, and in terms of reception history. Chapter 7 offers some conclusions.

Tolstoy's "Father Sergius"

The saint was "the friend of God."
 "Holy" meant simply one who had been
 marked by God, as a workman might put
 a stamp on a chair[...] It did not
 have much to do with goodness, except
 that the Workman was good and proud
 of His good work.

Michael Mott, The Seven Mountains of
 Thomas Merton

A few of the reworkings of hagiography considered here are so different from their medieval originals and so extensively developed by modern literary techniques that they are in effect short novels which happen to have hagiographic sources. This is particularly true of "Father Sergius," which is also unique among these stories in drawing on more than one hagiographic source. By far the most important is the "Life of Our Holy Father Iakov the Ascetic Who, Having Fallen, Repented."¹ A similar event, where the hero must mutilate himself to conquer lust, occurs in Avvakum's autobiography,² but the parallels with Iakov's story are clearer and more extensive. Certain motifs in the characterization of Pashen'ka are reminiscent of the "Tale of Juliana Lazerevskja": "seeking holiness not in a monastery but in the world," both saintly women "for some time did not attend church but prayed to God at home."³

Use of Sources and Development of Narrative Structure

Tolstoy changed the ending of Iakov's Life by bringing in a new model of holiness, the saintly Pashen'ka. Her great virtue, humility, overcomes the lure of social opinion, and the story focusses around the mechanism which produces meaningful moral change in human lives. Prayer, in Tolstoy's telling, is important, but not church; penitence matters but penance does not; the example of living saints is more important than hagiographic depictions. In terms of narrative structure, we see the same sort of selectivity in religious matters. Tolstoy absorbed his source text almost

intact, without limiting himself to the specific episodes, or to the moral message of the original. He treated it as raw material for a short novel with such success that few readers recognize or even suspect its source.

Grossman's "History of Composition and Publication" in vol. 31 of the PSS gives some interesting information on the process of amplification which the plot underwent in Tolstoy's hands. Without mentioning a specific source for "Father Sergius," he quotes a "cursory entry" for the diary on 3 February 1890: "The story of a saint's life and a music teacher.--Would be good to write.--Merchant's daughter sick--seductive because of her sickness--and in a criminal act--he murders her"(31:257 quoted from 51:16).

Almost every episode mentioned here comes directly from the "Life of Iakov," including the murder which Tolstoy used in one variant (No.7) and then discarded. What Gossman calls Tolstoy's "concept" consists in not inventing the temptation and downfall of the hero, but in bringing the hagiographic plot into modern times and in confronting his saint with someone yet more holy, in the person of Pashen'ka, the music teacher. She is the new and more perfect type of saintliness, and judging from Tolstoy's diary entry, is an integral part of the plot from its inception.

Each of these episodes represents a digression from the canonical text of the saint's life and points the reader toward the final encounter between Sergius and the wealthy travelers which in Grossman's view "as it were crowns his quest"(31:264). The hero ends his life following the example of Pashen'ka, who also "teaches children and cares for the sick"(31:46). Tolstoy's additions to the life of Iakov make "Father Sergius" more typical of the saint's-life pattern than the original itself. Tolstoy begins earlier, giving his version of the saint's parentage, childhood and education before his tonsuring (the first episode in the "Life of Iakov"). Sergius then follows the ancient pattern of a novitiate in the communal monastic life, withdrawal to the eremitic life, and a return to social contact as a healer and miracle worker.

The second temptation and the hero's fall, not typical episodes in hagiography, are in fact borrowed from the medieval narrative. Both heroes then set off into the world to expiate their sins. Each finds a new and humbler life, and so regains his ability to serve the sick and needy, although Iakov's miraculous gifts are strengthened by his return to grace, while Sergius's confession to Pashen'ka in Ch. 8 replaces all three of Iakov's confessions, including the final confession to God in the isolation of the tomb, which is central to the medieval version. In place of Iakov's "passing away" and posthumous veneration (and continued miracle-working), Sergius's "death" consists of his disappearance into the abyss of Siberia, and his complete merging with the people as a nameless "servant of God"(31:45).

Despite these changes in the final episodes, Tolstoy's message remains much the same as the marginal summary at the beginning of Iakov's "Life": "pride is harmful and pernicious."⁴ Tolstoy said as much in a letter to Chertkov: "The struggle with lust is just an episode here, or rather one level. The main struggle is with something else, with social opinion" (87:71, quoted 31:262). The process of sanctification, whether in Iakov or in Sergius, demands self-abnegation, simplicity and humility; the second element in the medieval formula, "the power of repentance," is almost lacking in Tolstoy's version. With the music teacher Tolstoy seeks instead to build on the definition of sanctity found in Iakov's "Life," sharpening and refining its more message to his own taste.

Language

Tolstoy was evidently drawn to the spirituality which he saw in Iakov, and unlike Leskov he showed little interest in the linguistic trappings or colorful episodes of medieval narrative for their own sake. Tolstoy's language is colorful, varied and flexible, but it is basically standard literary Russian. This reflects his intended audience; unlike "What Men Live By," "Sergius" was not intended for a child or peasant reader, and was never published by Posrednik. Tolstoy had written mainly for himself, something which pleased him but did not "seem to him necessary" (72:480) for the moral education of the people. In the "stories for the people," by contrast, Tolstoy never brings up the sexual themes so prominent in "Sergius," "The Kreutzer Sonata," and "The Devil."⁵

The close ties between the language of the author and the omniscient narrator have caused some confusion among critics. S. Bulgakov wrote that the story is "simply an autobiography of Tolstoy."⁶ It is true that Tolstoy does not distinguish himself from his narrator here as he did in "What Men Live By." In "Sergius" the voice and sensibility of the narrator are those of an educated Russian looking back over several decades at the life of an exceptional man. Both hero and reader are treated as the peer of the narrator. In talking about Kasatskii's court and military career, the narrator uses the correct terminology naturally and comfortably. He is less precise in ecclesiastical matters, but this seems to fit well with the persona that Tolstoy builds up for his narrator; most lay people do not know clearly what life in a monastery is like. It could also be a minor error on the author's part, like having Kasatskii leave his estate both to his sister (31:5) and to his first monastery (31:12): the story was never finished to Tolstoy's satisfaction.

On occasion the narrator's language reflects the speech of a character, in a way which is distinct from inner monologue: "Praskoviia Mikhailovna herself was kneading the dough for the rich raisin bread which the serf cook had made so well in her papa's day" (31:38). Only Pasha would refer to her father as "papa" and this the sort of reminiscence a poor gentleman might often repeat to her grandchildren, yet the voice is the narrator's. However, the use

of what Bakhtin calls the "character zone" is much less prominent here than in "What Men Live By."

The narrator shows no interest in creating an illusion of orality: this is clearly written, not spoken, language, whatever voices echo through it. It is a work in an established genre of modern literature, not a stylization on a folk legend. Sergius's own speech is initially quite conventional. When he enters the monastery his speech takes on a veneer of false humility, so that he says to the abbot whom he despises, "Your Reverence deigned to summon me?" (31:16). At the end of his life, his speech becomes simpler and plainer again. When he comes to Pashen'ka he says only "Pashen'ka. I have come to you. Receive me" (31:39). At the end he hardly speaks at all. During his encounter with the wealthy travelers in the final scene, he says only that he is "the servant of God" and acknowledges their alms with the minimal response, "Christ save you" (31:45). Speech becomes another arena in the struggle for control over one's fellow beings, another avenue for violence, and the hero must communicate by his silence his new humility and desire for service, his rejection of the state's power over human lives.

The characterization of secondary characters by their language is precise and richly varied. The general who visits Sergius at the monastery speaks in an offensively familiar way to his "brother officer" (31:16). The merchant who brings his daughter Mar'ja to be healed by the hermit uses delightfully overblown "sacred" language in his petition: "Holy Father, bless my ailing daughter and heal her from the pain of illness" (31:32). Yet in chasing away his fellow pilgrims so that he can speak to Sergius alone, he speaks quite differently: "Get out of here, beat it! He blessed you, well, what more do you want? March. Or else I'll wring your neck, really" (31:32). ("—Otets sviatyi, blagoslovi dscher' moiu boliashchuiu istselit' ot boli neduga...—Ubiraites', ubiraites'. Blagoslovcvil, nu, chego zhe vam eshche? Marsh. A to, pravo, sheiu nammu.")

The clear differentiation within the language of the story between characters and narrator, and the evolution toward silence in Sergius's own discourse, are elements entirely alien to the medieval text, where a single voice tells the whole story, and the saint's penitence returns his teaching and healing gifts to him. These devices serve not only a literary function, in furthering the telling of the story, however. They also lay bare the story's ideological message. The ideal of non-violence and extreme self-abnegation is acted out in the sphere of communication just as it is in the hero's actions. Both modern and medieval texts depend on the saint's deeds to exemplify their moral message, and their messages remain quite similar; but Tolstoy's particular use of language represents his experiment in using a modern literary means to his own didactic ends.

Narrator

The narrator serves in critical but subtle ways to orchestrate the story's blending of the modern and the medieval. He presents episodes in the hero's life and makes general pronouncements about his character, especially at the beginning of the story, very much in the manner of the medieval scribe. He says directly, "The boy was distinguished by brilliant abilities and enormous egoism" (31:5). Both virtues and faults are illustrated by a series of telling incidents with his fellow cadets and a superior officer, showing his "explosive temper" (31:6).

The narrator presents Kasatskii as others see him: "handsome, a prince, a squadron commander in the Life Guards..." (31:5). At the same time, he analyzes his hero's inner life, attaining an understanding perhaps deeper than Kasatskii's own: "A complex, tense process was going on within him" (31:7), that is, the drive for self-perfection. Although pursued in unfruitful ways, both in the world and the monastery, this striving does not in itself differ substantially from the goal the Orthodox church holds up to every believer: "Such, according to the teaching of the Orthodox church, is the final goal, at which every Christian must aim: to become God, to attain theosis, 'deification' or 'divinization.' For Orthodoxy man's salvation and redemption mean his deification."⁷

Sergius and Iakov are driven by the same force, are tripped up by pride, and are ultimately saved—Iakov within the church, Sergius outside it. The narrator's lexicon for this process echoes the formulation above: "Pashen'ka appeared to him as salvation [my emphasis] (31:38). During his wanderings after leaving the monastery, "little by little God began to manifest himself within him" (31:45). In the Tolstoian version, it is only the separation from the ecclesiastical power structure that permits God even to appear in the pilgrim's heart.

The modern narrator is clearly the spokesman for the authorial point of view, then, but does not announce the fact openly. Where the medieval author devotes the opening paragraph of his narrative to telling the reader what lesson to glean from Iakov's fall and redemption, Tolstoy's narrator usually allows the events of the story to put forward their own message. Occasionally he steps forward with direct moral pronouncements: he prefaces his comments on contemporary Russian society with the phrase, "I think..." (31:8,9). Each interjection relates to the story line, and establishes the narrator early on as a critic of existing institutions, but is tied only tangentially to the central didactic point. As the story develops, the narrator becomes yet more self-effacing, relying on objective description and dialogue to articulate his critique of church and society.

In the passage immediately preceding Sergius's seduction of and by Mar'ia, in fact, the narrator seems to merge with the hero's

self-awareness and conscience. It is as if in lucid moments Sergius were condemning his own manner of life, then lapsing back into complacency: "[Mar'ia] considered him a saint, one whose prayers are answered. He rejected this, but in the depth of his soul he did consider himself a saint" (31:34). Ultimately, "he was about to reconfirm his healing power" (31:34), but "suddenly he became ashamed of his vanity" (31:34-5). After the fact, he "was horrified at himself, when he examined her body" (31:36). The narrator does not simply merge with either Tolstoy or Sergius, nor does he put forth a single spiritual or moral teaching. Instead the characters act and speak for themselves, so that this can hardly be an "unambiguous plot" in the medieval mold.⁸

Reality and the Supernatural

Supernatural elements such as "devil" and "angel" retain their place in Tolstoy's narrative, but are really immaterial to the story of Sergius's sanctification. At the end, all his miraculous powers are stripped away, leaving only God immanent in human beings, not God transcendent and triumphant as he is in Iakov's "Life." Having used the form and imagery of hagiography, and its approach to God through prayer and sacraments, Tolstoy faces the task of creating a counterbalance, a new and compelling type of virtue. If he fails, there is a disjunction between Chapters 1-7 of "Father Sergius" and Chapter 8. More than in his other reworkings of hagiography, like "Two Brothers" or "What Men Live By," Tolstoy has admitted here elements of mystical spirituality. Sergius prays the "Jesus prayer" of Hesychast tradition (31:34), and experiences joy and peace through his prayers: "he felt not only light, but joyfully moved" (31:20). By prayer and recollection of hagiographic tradition he successfully overcomes Makovkina's temptation (31:20). His elder belongs to the line of monks who helped to revitalize Russian spirituality in the 18th and 19th centuries and who themselves followed the Hesychast prayer practices. When Sergius later falls to temptation, it is because the "spring of living water" (31:28) is no longer flowing in him as it was before. These images and phrases are so charged with positive associations, particularly for Orthodox readers, that a very direct attack would be required to discredit them. Tolstoy does not attempt this, and instead tries to add a further stage, the ultimate perfection of the mystic, where such practices are no longer important or necessary. The reduction from rich complexity to bare simplicity makes Chapter 7 a sharply delineated part of the narrative, furthest removed from the norms of complex realistic fiction. In the earlier chapters, Tolstoy integrated his hagiographic source material so that it is almost imperceptible. Here, he paradoxically moves furthest from his sources while moving closer to the medieval manner of writing about sanctity. Taken as a whole, however, "Father Sergius" transcends its generic connection to the medieval genre, synthesizing disparate material into a new work of art.

NOTES

1. "Zhitie prepodobnago ottsa nashego Iakova postnika, padshago i pokaiavshagosia." Entry for March 4 in the "Kniga zhitii sviatykh," M., 1837. This is the edition which Tolstoy himself owned, and his copy is preserved at Yasnaya Polyana(23:534).
2. From the "Zhitie protopopa Avvakuma," Khrestomatiia po drevnei russkoi literature, ed. by M. Fedorova and T. Sumnikova, p.242.
3. From the "Povest' o Iulianii Lazarevskoi," Khrestomatiia po drevnei russkoi literature, ed. by Fedorova and Sumnikova, p.349.
4. From the first page of the "Zhitie Iakova"(unpaginated).
5. Jahn, "Tolstoj's 'Stories for the People' on the Theme of Brotherly Love," unpublished dissertation, p. 18.
6. In "Chelovekobog i chelovekozver," Voprosy fil. i psikh., kn. II(112), 1912, p. 55(Cited by Pletnev, p. 55).
7. Ware, Orthodox Church, p. 236.
8. Lur'e, Istoki russkoi belletristiki, pp. 23-4.

[Editor's note: The following is a condensed version of the author's conclusion.]

CONCLUSION

For myths are realities, and
themselves open into deeper
realms.

Thomas Merton,
Cold War Letters

Genre, content, and style, so closely interconnected in medieval literature, are no longer bound up in the same way in modern literature. They might appear to be entirely unconnected: Likhachev stresses the importance of both the "style of the epoch" and "authorial principle" as features distinguishing the modern period from the medieval. However, this study points to an equivalent interaction of genre, content, and style which, although very different from the strict rhetoric governing medieval prose, operates in analogous ways in these modern narratives. Bakhtin says at the beginning of Discourse in the Novel:

The separation of style and language from the question of genre has been largely responsible for a situation in which only individual and period-bound overtones are the

privileged subjects of study. The great historical destinies of genres are overshadowed by the petty vicissitudes of stylistic modifications, which in their turn are linked with individual artistic and artistic movements. For this reason, stylistics has been deprived of an authentic philosophical and sociological approach to its problems; it has become bogged down in stylistic trivia; it is not easy to sense behind the individual and period-bound shifts the great and anonymous destinies of artistic discourse itself.¹

In the stories considered here, it is religious ideology, rather than political or ideological orientation, which is crucial. However, some aspects of Bakhtin's analysis of prose discourse are relevant and useful in examining these works, where Bakhtin's "great historical destinies of genres" such as hagiographic legend are played out, as it were, in miniature.

Each of these stories combines modern and medieval literary techniques in varying proportions. Medieval rhetoric dictated simple stylistic means in didactic works like short saint's lives. In longer works such as sermons or full-length "Lives" a more elaborate style was required to edify and uplift the audience, sometimes even to draw them into contemplation of the divine nature in the Hesychast tradition.² What parallel can be drawn between such a rhetorical system and the style of these modern stories? The aim of all these stories is to inculcate the Tolstojan moral-ethical understanding of Christianity. Seven of the eight are openly didactic, ostensibly written for a peasant audience or young reader. "Father Sergius" is the only one of these works written for Tolstoj's peers, and he chose not to finish it. Only "What Men Live By" appears to have satisfied both author and readers, whatever the inner strains on its stylistic system.

In Tolstoj, unlike Leskov, both the short novel-legend and the short novel-saint's life show implied or direct connections with the Hesychast tradition. The transfiguration of the angel in the final scene of "What Men Live By" and Sergius's prayer practices both have parallels in the 14th century "Life" of Sergius of Radonezh, and, stylistically speaking, the longer periods found in "Sergius" are akin to Epifanii's elaborate phraseologies. Even in the modern period, elements of mystical theology maintain a connection, however tenuous, with their stylistic correlates as dictated by medieval rhetoric.

Truth in Art

[In this section, Professor Chester discusses the Hesychast elements in these stories, and how Tolstoj and Leskov differ in their use of Old Russian material.]

Style and Content

In the four stories which I consider as examples of story-short life and story-legend, stylistic simplicity and didacticism correlate completely. Only the short-novel type stories had any degree of acceptance with a broad readership, and only these types, with their novelistic features, approach the type of prose which Bakhtin discusses in "Discourse in the Novel." Particularly in Tolstoy's stories, the characters' discourse has achieved a significant degree of differentiation from the narrator's discourse, and their inner monologue spills over into "character zones," coloring the narrator's language. This "speech diversity"⁶ shows up not only in the syntax and lexicon but in the moral viewpoint as well. The narrator in such stories tends not to comment directly on the story's moral teaching, and instead allows the characters to serve as mouthpiece for the author's message. Both Mikhaila in "What Men Live By" and Sergius take on this role at the end of the story, after appearing to be natural or morally ambiguous characters throughout the early chapters. In Bakhtin's terms the author allows "dialogizing" of the text. But this autonomy, combined with a greater number of complex characters, inevitably weakens the story's didactic focus. This is somewhat less of a problem in stories like "What Men Live By": the short novel-legend is a good example of "double-voiced narrative," using the legend form with its medieval roots to transmit a message subtly altered from the original. Pluralism, a variety of potentially valid moral viewpoints, is alien to the old legend form, which normally presents and clarifies only one value system. In addition, the legend, particularly in Shchegolenok's telling of the source of "What Men Live By," with its "geographical-toponomic" moral, is hardly an authoritative text on a par with, say, Scripture.

According to Bakhtin's model, the problems in handling authoritative texts should be greatest in a work like "Father Sergius," which is a true short novel. The problem of integration is greatest, I believe, in the concluding section of "Sergius." In both "Sergius" and Leskov's tale "Mountain," however, the characters' point of view dominates whole sections of the story. Validating their angle of vision implies some acceptance of their moral vision as well, and this interferes with the integrity of the author's intended message.

Certain parallels, then, can be drawn between the style and genre systems of the two periods. Simplicity of stylistic means and particularly of narrative techniques permits the author to transmit an unambiguous moral message. As the complexity of the style and the richness of narrative discourse increases, as it approaches the techniques of the modern novel, the clarity of the didactic message is inevitably blurred, subordinated to the linguistic and moral "heteroglossia" of human discourse. The spirituality which informs the saint's life, particularly those with roots in

the mystical tradition, are least amenable to Tolstoian ultrasimplicity and tend to bring in elements of a non-rational faith which contradict the author's overt message.

NOTES

1. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," Dialogic Imagination, p.259.
2. Eremin, Lektsii po drevnei russkoi literature, pp. 62-3.

[Footnotes 3-5 belong to the section of "Truth in Art" that is omitted here.]

6. Bakhtin, "Discourse," p. 272.
7. Bakhtin, p. 272.

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Professor Chester writes that her future plans include an article comparing "What Men Live By" with Leskov's "Lion of Elder Gerasim," and papers on "What Men Live By" and "Father Sergius" for upcoming conferences. Further ahead she is interested in the question of Hesychast elements in the latter two stories, and in the relevance of Bakhtin's theory of the novel to Tolstoy's prose. Eventually, she would like to move on to other areas where the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction blur, such as the autobiographical and semi-autobiographical narratives of 20th century women writers.

