

In Translation

Teacher of Consciousness (Leo Tolstoy)

By Andrey Bely

Translated and with an Introduction by

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With "Teacher of Consciousness (Leo Tolstoy)," Andrey Bely endeavors to place Tolstoy side by side with thinkers like Socrates and Confucius.¹ Whereas in his earlier essays Bely sought an aesthetic response to Tolstoy's creativity, in the present study Bely's points of reference are more metaphysical.² The obvious sources are those from which Bely quotes freely, namely, The Bhagavad Gita, as well as Tolstoy's diaries and On Life.³ Another significant presence is Rudolf Steiner, whose lectures on The Bhagavad Gita played an immense role in Bely's thought.⁴ Focusing on Tolstoy's post-conversion period, Bely discusses Tolstoy's philosophy in terms of a system that bridged the East and the West. Lest one forget, Bely, of all the Symbolists, sought the reconciliation between these polarities. According to Bely, Tolstoy as a "teacher of consciousness" emerges as the summit of enlightenment, somewhat of a self-styled yogi, at once creating his own Christian Gospel, and at the same time embodying the ancient wisdom of the East. Tolstoy's knowledge of the East was by no means superficial.⁵ One encounters references to his favorite books of wisdom, those of "the Brahmins, of Buddha, Confucius, Lao-tse, [...] books by which all humanity has lived."⁶ Just as much has been written about Tolstoy's interest in China,⁷ and it is common knowledge that Tolstoy's model served as the cornerstone of Gandhi's own principles of non-resistance.⁸

While Tolstoy did not exert as powerful an influence as, say, Gogol' or Pushkin, in Bely's works, nevertheless, he is clearly important both in Bely's personal and creative life. Apart from numerous childhood episodes depicting Tolstoy's visits to the Bugaev household when Bely "sat on Tolstoy's knee,"⁹ there is the personal depiction of Tolstoy as Old Man Winter in his poem "To Leo Tolstoy" (1908).¹⁰ Magnus Ljunggren maintains that not only had Bely sought an "ego-ideal" in Tolstoy, but that he found uncanny similarities between Tolstoy and his father, Professor Nikolai Bugaev.¹¹ In 1918 Bely wrote a preliminary sketch of Professor Korobkin in the short-story, "The Yogi," whose spiritual make-up bears striking similarities to Tolstoy.¹² Moreover, Bely developed this image further in his final novel, Masks, and provided one of the most convincing portrayals of living according to Tolstoyan pacifism in Korobkin's practice of non-resistance to evil. Clearly what appeals to Bely about Tolstoy are his distillations of truth, made accessible to everyone.¹³ Tolstoy stands as Everyman, asking the perennial

questions about life and death, perceiving the omnipresent struggle between the forces of light and the forces of darkness.

As is the case in virtually all of Bely's essays, be they literary, philosophical, or aesthetic, an air of idiosyncrasy dominates "Teacher of Consciousness (Leo Tolstoy)," but not without perspicacious insights. Bely discerns the connective tissue between several concepts in Tolstoy's On Life and Sanskrit literature. As a student of anthroposophy, Bely often turned to the sacred Hindu epic, The Bhagavad Gita.¹⁴ Briefly summarized, The Bhagavad Gita, consists of eighteen chapters, in which the principal figures Krishna and Arjuna represent manifestations of the divine and the human in the universe. Unable to reconcile himself with the wanton destruction of his brothers and kinfolk, Arjuna undergoes a crisis on the battlefield and seeks counsel from Krishna. The latter instructs Arjuna in the ways of yoga, ultimately the sum of what one must do to realize the higher Self.¹⁵ Thus, Arjuna must discover that in order for the soul to evolve it must be free from the world of the senses. Bely seizes on the ethical principles of the epic, those entailing transcending the lower self.

Saturating it with citations from The Bhagavad Gita, Bely commences his study with an association between Tolstoy and Hindu philosophy. One of the chief lessons of The Bhagavad Gita, that the pursuit of selfless actions will lead to Self-realization, essentially dominates all of Tolstoy's thought.¹⁶ Because Tolstoy cultivated the moral discipline of self-renunciation in his everyday activities, Bely attributed the characteristics of the yogi to Tolstoy himself, whether he actually preached yoga or not. And the message of Bely's discussion of yoga, indeed, the force of the Gita, is only made clear when taken together with the Tolstoyan concept of "rational consciousness." Where Bely mentions "consciousness" one should read "rational consciousness." For example, the line "life begins only with the manifestation of consciousness" is a paraphrase of Tolstoy's "human life begins only with the manifestation of rational consciousness."¹⁷ According to Tolstoy, "rational consciousness" is that faculty which distinguishes man from animal. Throughout On Life "rational consciousness" is pitted against "animal personality," the latter standing for the pursuit of selfish goals, expressed in human desires and sensory pleasures. What takes place in time and space is not true life, but rather, "animal personality." "Rational consciousness," on the other hand, is synonymous with eternity. Life only begins when man renounces the self and begins to put others ahead of himself. Then death ceases to preoccupy man, for he passes into a new relation with the world.¹⁸

For Tolstoy, as for the teachings in The Bhagavad Gita, there is no conflict between reason and consciousness. Bely's application of Tolstoy's practical wisdom as a "spiritual science," is particularly apt, as this is exactly what Rudolf Steiner called his own brand of practical wisdom, namely, anthroposophy, for it, too, integrated the material and the spiritual. Interestingly, Bely's treatment of

"manas" reveals not only an understanding of Hindu terms, but also his dependence on other Steinerian interpretations of The Bhagavad Gita.¹⁹ Here the intellectual kinship between Tolstoy and Bely becomes more telling, for Bely's discussion of manas entails more than a Western understanding of the mind as the dwelling place of thought and intellect. Because human evolution requires the power of the mind over body, Bely concentrates on yoga as the most effective exercise in gaining higher levels of consciousness. Thus, one can never underestimate the active mental activity involved, the sheer power of consciousness to shed its attachment to selfish desires. According to Bely, our ego is the "glove" hiding our real Self, and in distinguishing between the ego and the Self, Arjuna learns that his essential nature is spiritual, and therefore eternal. Bely implies that Tolstoy's resemblance to the Hindu ancients is based on mental discipline, on a Socratic understanding of knowledge as virtue. Just as Krishna teaches Arjuna to train himself in abandoning the ego to evolve to a higher state, so does Tolstoy, the Teacher, make that demand of his followers.²⁰

NOTES

1. Andrei Belyi, "Uchitel' soznaniia (Lev Tolstoi)," Znamia (No.6, Dec. 1920), pp. 37-41.
2. See Bely's Tragediia tvorchestva. Dostoevskii i Tolstoi, Moscow 1911 (rept. Letchworth: Prideaux Press, 1971). See also Bely's "Lev Tolstoi i kul'tura" in O religii L'va Tolstogo, Moscow, 1912, pp. 142-171 (rept. Paris: YMCA Press, 1978).
3. Lev Tolstoi, "O zhizni," Sobranie sochinenii v dvadtsati dvukh tomakh, Vol. 17 (Moscow: Knud. lit-a), 1984, pp. 7-135.
4. See Rudolf Steiner, The Bhagavad Gita and the Epistles of Paul (New York: Anthroposophic Press, 1971). There is evidence that in 1912 Bely was present in Cologne when Steiner lectured on The Bhagavad Gita. Belyi-Blok, Perepiska, Moscow, 1940, p. 308 (rept. Munich: Fink Verlag, 1969).
5. In his Tolstoi und der Orient, Biryukov lists 54 books, pamphlets and periodicals, which related to various eastern civilizations, that he found in Tolstoy's library at Yasnaya Polyana. (Zurich and Leipzig: Rotapfel-Verlag, 1925).
6. On Life in The Complete Works of Count Tolstoy, trans. Leo Wiener, Vol. 16 (New York: AMS Press, 1968), p. 269. See also My Confession, where Tolstoy mentions the religions of Christianity, Buddhism and Islam.
7. Derk Bodde, Tolstoy and China (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1950), p. 7.
8. See Martin Green, Tolstoy and Gandhi, Men of Peace (New York: Basic Books, 1983).
9. Andrei Belyi, Na rubezhe dvukh stoletii, Moscow, 1930, p. 9 (rept. Chicago: Russian Language Specialties, 1966).

10. See his poem "L'vu Tolstomu" from the collection Urna in Stikhotvoreniia i poemy (M-L: Sov. pisatel', 1966), p. 329.

11. Magnus Ljunggren, The Dream of Rebirth: A Study of Andrej Belyj's Novel 'Peterburg' (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1982) p. 16.

12. Andrei Belyi, "Yog," Rasskazy, ed. Ronald Peterson (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1979), pp. 63-79.

13. This theme can be traced back to Bely's early brochure, The Tragedy of Creativity in Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, where life transcends art in the very act of willing oneself to die. Bely insists that Tolstoy's greatest creative act was his exit from life. See Tragediia tvorchestva, op. cit., pp. 44-5.

14. See Belyi's Rudol'f Shteiner i Gete v mirovoznrenii sovremenosti (M: Dukhovnoe znanie, 1917), pp. 38-40, pp. 102-106; see also my "Gogol's 'Strashnaia mest'" and Bely's Prose Fiction: the Role of Karma," forthcoming in Russian Language Journal.

15. The word "yoga" had many meanings, four of which are advanced in The Bhagavad Gita and implied in Bely's essay under the all-encompassing capitalized "Yoga." Jnana yoga is the yoga of knowledge, bhakti yoga is the yoga of devotion, karma yoga is the yoga of selfless action and raja yoga is the yoga of meditation. See The Bhagavad Gita, trans. with an intro. by E. Easwaran (Berkeley: Nilgiri Press, 1985), p. 31. While all of these manifestations of yoga are intrinsic to this epic, the meaning which dominates is that of a disciplined detachment from one's lower nature and the realization of one's higher spiritual nature.

16. Although the word is not used per se, karma is the implication here. Karma (which in Sanskrit means "deed" or "action"), states simply that whatever you do will come back to you. An interesting sidelight to the subject of karma in Tolstoy entails the short story "Karma," which for a long time was attributed to Tolstoy himself, but which, in fact, was Tolstoy's translation of the story by Paul Carus. When Tolstoy learned that his translation had been circulated under his name, he wrote a letter of apology, dated July 1897, to Carus, concluding that "I should be very happy were I the author of this tale. It is one of the best products of national wisdom and ought to be bequeathed to all mankind, like the Odyssey, the History of Josephus, and Shakyamuni." In Paul Carus, Karma Nirvana (La Salle, IL: Open Court Publ., 1973), n.p.

17. On Life, op. cit., p. 266.

18. Few critics attribute any importance to Tolstoy's On Life with the exception of G.W. Spence, who calls On Life "Tolstoy's most systematic attempt to expound a metaphysics." In Tolstoy the Ascetic (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1967), p. 82.

19. According to The Harper's Dictionary of Hinduism "Manas" is defined as: "Mind (in its widest sense as applied to all mental powers), intellect, intelligence, understanding, perception, will, etc. In philosophy, manas is the internal organ or perception and cognition." Margaret and James Stutley (New York: Harper and Row, 1977),

p. 176. Similarly, Steiner lectured about "manas" in The Bhagavad Gita, lectures, which, as mentioned earlier, Bely personally heard. See Steiner, op. cit., pp. 16-36.

20. While I have consulted several translations of The Bhagavad Gita, all translations of Bely's citations from The Gita are my own. Readers may find that the admixture of Bely's poetic philosophizing and citing references is often encumbered by subjective ratiocinations. This is typical of Bely's philosophically oriented texts.

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One encounters the truths of wisdom in Leo Tolstoy's Diary; much of what he tells us is told by a supra-individualistic consciousness, which according to Hindu philosophy is called Manas, the "I." However, the "I" is spirit.

The appearance in history of the problem of the "I" is depicted in the magnificent image of Krishna, who appears to Arjuna, the student of Yoga. On a battlefield Arjuna grieves: "It is better to live by giving...than killing... We do not know what is better...to be conquered or to conquer." (The Bhagavad Gita). And Krishna replies to him: "Man can neither kill nor be killed. He was never born, he will never die. Look at you actions, and not at the fruits of your actions... Give yourself to Yoga; Yoga is art in action." (idem). The path of these actions leads to the renunciation of senseless actions; Yoga is the study of inaction in action, of peace in battle.

Krishna's lesson is that Yoga answers Arjuna's question as to how to depart from war. It does not recommend an external rejection, but rather specific actions for transforming the struggle. The purification of actions with action is yoga. "Let the Yogi...exercise yoga...he will not be disturbed by the greatest of sorrow." (idem).

What is Yoga all about? In the ability to subordinate oneself to the higher "I." And who is Krishna? He is the "I," who has blown up the personality of Arjuna, the mask; he is the "I" of Arjuna, his cosmic consciousness: "I am the wellspring of the universe." People are but the fingers of one organism, hiding from one another in a glove, which is pulled over them. This glove constitutes the scales of one's perceptible, individual life.

How does one remove it?

"He who controls all the gates of the body, and confines the mind to the heart, has set his breath in the head... He who abandons his body, uttering...[Om], meditating on me, will reach the highest goal." (idem Chapter Eight).

There are two sides to Yoga: 1) immersion into the mind's heart, 2) the animation of consciousness; the path of the mind's immersion is the path of mystics; the path of animation of consciousness is gnosis; two acts are combined by yoga: cerebral (or intellectual) activity with heartfelt activity. The history of man's self-consciousness is the tale of two paths: of mystical wandering and of man's gnostic wandering throughout the ages; but both paths are but the gloves which we must remove; only in Yoga do we stand before the "I," released from perceptible scabs, the "I" that has not become the reasonable "I," nor the abstract "subject of cognition" of modern philosophers. The "I" is the name of God: the "I" is greater; but this "I," appears to us as the "He" in us: "Our Father!" Later "He" reveals himself in us, as the authentic "I" in the unauthentic "I"; that is what Krishna proclaims: "Feelings are great; greater than feelings is the mind; greater than the mind is pure reason, greater than pure reason is He." (idem).

The "I" is the impulse of Love; the "I" is not that which observes objects of a static world, but that which combines objects with the subject and creates: "I am Thou."

Yoga reveals this concretely: here is the path of achieving peace in battle, the resolution of the problem posed by Arjuna on the battlefield.

2.

Tolstoy is the precursor of Love to come; The "He", or the Voice, which reads the signs of man's fate, already resounded in him very clearly; that voice is Manas; the "He" is Tolstoy's demon, resembling Socrates' demon; and the "He" is greater: the "He" is louder; more sonorous, more imperious the "He" has pronounced his word out of Tolstoy by Tolstoy; and through "Him" the writer Tolstoy became our new teacher. In The Diary Leo Tolstoy calls "Him" at times "Father," at times "Master."

Manas is an eagle, spread out over our personal consciousness, resembling Knowledge of world consciousness; His two wings are the two sides of Reason: 1) the side, clothed in the clarity of reason's waking consciousness and 2) the sur-rational side, the unclear side, not revealed in the word; we know that Vladimir Soloviev's philosophy speaks about the latter rationally; and the wordlessly great who are blessed with Manas are silent. One and the other display the Eagle as one-winged. The Eagle does not soar clearly for everyone. He clearly soars in Tolstoy.

Tolstoy knows of the unification of Manas and Life; his consciousness "On Life" is the high point of transparent clarity in revealing the Manas of ancient yoga; without any of the rational dazzle clear thought is announced here in the image of wisdom. In Soloviev there is still a lot of dazzle; and people do not understand him; Tolstoy is understandable; and as a result he can invest profound meaning

into his intelligible word; his thought is not the mirror's reflection of shores in the water of thought, but rather the very depth of transparent waters, the very revelation of water's life with all its "fish-thoughts"; one can throw out a net into Tolstoy, and pull out "fish," and get nourishment one's entire life; with the reflection of the shores on the water, with the reflections of even the heavens of Soloviev's philosophy you will not get enough nourishment in life; all of Tolstoy's "fish" are but new meanings of rational meanings; Soloviev did not tower before the touch of Manas in clear, peasant words: all that became of him was a "philosopher," Tolstoy became a teacher.

Within Tolstoy there is a Socrates; he also carries within him Silenus (the thundering chaos of mysterious, Dionysian life); but the Silenus, who inhabits in Tolstoy's world, engages in battle with the rebellious "Socrates"; he clashes with the self whom the world already honors as an artist, and clashes with the other one, who is "vulgar and vain"; "I started thinking about myself, about my hurts...and I came to my senses..and all was well...there is that one who is annoyed by the vulgar, silly, vain and sensitive Leo Nikolaevich..."¹

Descartes' "Cogito" genuinely as a powerful Socrates in Tolstoy: "Reason is the weapon for cognition, it is proof, it is a critique."²

We "know something...for what it is." "What then?—" "That which we cognize is namely the very thing we know."³ But Tolstoy raises the goal of cognition to cognition; cognition without a goal is insanity, however logical it may be: "Rational activity is distinguished from insane activity only in that rational activity assigns its judgments in order of their importance."⁴ Reasoning which is not tied to a common goal..is insane, no matter how logical it is."⁵ The absence of a goal in the organization of concepts creates all the insanity of abstract conclusions as to what life is: "It is not that which we call science which defines life, but our concept of life which defines what should be acknowledged as science."⁶ "Before anything else we have to decide what science is." They say that science studies life from all its sides; but the trouble is that every object has as many sides as there are radii in a sphere, that is, an endless number, and it is not possible to study it from all sides, but we must know from which side it is more necessary." "True knowledge consists in knowing that we know what we know, and do not know what we do not know"—Tolstoy incessantly advances this thesis by Confucius.

In his book On Life Tolstoy marvellously reveals an entire series of confusions which we commit in defining life with the help of various official abstractions subordinate to life; he reveals that life begins only with the manifestation of consciousness; life and consciousness are one and the same; we are born into life only when we realize the center of consciousness within ourselves, and not when we appear on earth biologically; our appearance on earth is not life (life-consciousness); this is a "trifle." Understanding the voice of one's own life is understanding "Manas." "There were times when I felt that I was becoming a bearer of God's will... The truth would go right through me... I hope to God that their(truths) passage through me will not defile

these truths."⁸

Krishna teaches: "I am Manas; out of all beings I am consciousness." Within us consciousness itself is Manas. Tolstoy confirms that life is consciousness; thus he becomes the spokesman of Krishna's teachings in a new light. The aspiration for concrete practical wisdom shows up once again in him; he (Tolstoy) calls this science of practical wisdom a spiritual science; he searches for its traces in the truths of wisdom from all the ages and peoples: "There are thousands of superstitions, but not faiths...there are not even ten teachings about faiths and yet all of them come together in one and the same faith, only expressed differently."⁹ "Religion is the consciousness of those truths, which..are understood and which are indubitable like $2 \times 2 = 4$. The goal of religion...is to express these truths."¹⁰ The path of expression is action--this is yoga: "When a truth...is uttered, it..transforms life."¹¹ Manas emerges in us in the praxis of the world of consciousness; any philosophy is praxis... Hindu yoga exactly looks like this; our cognition is yogic. Tolstoy says: "Materialists...so not know what Hindus have done in the criticism of cognition."¹²

3.

Yoga is the teaching for the chosen and the few; Tolstoy opens up the portals of Yoga for all; from now on, because of Tolstoy, Yogism is a universal concern, a "peasant's" concern. It (Yogism) is the spirit of Manas, which was at one time merely the consciousness of a few; but now a different epoch is upon us: mankind has come of age, when Manas will open itself just as the laws of reason are now open to each and everyone, who studies science: science is accessible to everyone.

Tolstoy is the spokesman for accessible Wisdom for everyone: he is the revelation of culture to come. Having risen, Leo Tolstoy went before all of Russia into the enormous expanses of universal light; Leo Tolstoy's departure first from an already decaying culture, then from his very home, through death into the life of immortality, is the greatest and most accessible symbol.

Immortality has drawn near.

And Tolstoy's voice is the Voice of another world to come. We will properly encounter It through all our experiences.

NOTES

1. Diary (?)
2. Idem.

3. Idem.
 4. On Life
 5. Idem.
 6. Idem.
 7. Idem.
 8. Diary, I, p. 231.
 9. "On faiths," XV, p. 330.
 10. "On religion," XV.
 11. Idem.
 12. Diary, I, p. 53.
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