

*Rewriting an Older Genre:
The Example of Norman Tutorow's Addendum
to the New*

Norman E. Tutorow. *The Encounter of Jesus and the Atheist as Told by the Centurion Cornelius Nepos IV: A Tale of Everyman; Roman*. Half Moon Bay, California: Chadwick House Publishers, 2010. xviii + 697 pages. ISBN 0-9674-3533-1.

Norman Tutorow is highly esteemed as a meticulous researcher in the history of the American West; indeed, his work in certain special areas such as the succession of land titles is considered to have forensic value. He is probably best known today for his two-volume classic, *The Governor: The Life and Legacy of Leland Stanford, a California Colossus* (2004). What then should literary scholars make of this massively learned book, set in antiquity, whose title openly flaunts its status as fiction, given that it is written by a “pure” historian, our contemporary, yet engages in an elaborate play of irony. Right at the start this challenge is embodied in the blatantly pseudo-documentary term “autobiography” as well as in the German or French term *roman*, which straddles English “novel” and “romance.” On the one hand, Tutorow carries out a kind of Cervantine game by qualifying the chapters through a rich assortment of anachronistic epigraphs and by bracketing them between the historical and terminological data of the “Preface” and a more argumentative “Postlegomenon” when the outer editorial voice returns in firm command to recapitulate the larger history down to our times. On the other hand, as we read forward in the inner tale – about meetings between Jesus and the intellectual centurion Cornelius at an Essene establishment in July of 68 C.E., a momentous year in the struggle of the Jews against Roman power – we recognize that Tutorow has marshaled an impressive apparatus of historical lore, with a maximum effort to

calibrate his fiction and its ancient context as precisely as feasible. Sometimes he employs Jesus, sometimes the centurion as an internal narrator to relate historical subject matters or to characterize various philosophic and religious views and practices from all around the ancient world and more particularly those connected with Judaism.

It is an impressive repertory, and in the religious leader and the cultured military officer Tutorow has invented spiritually capacious, forceful discussants to represent the contest of themes and choices as these existed in the first century of the Common Era – of course, filtered inevitably in retrospect by the outer author. This is not a Dan Brown mystery steeped in Gnostic hysteria which purports to unravel the secret of a controlling cabal rooted in the past; rather, it is openly a fiction that seeks to support a philosophic perspective. Paramount, in Tutorow's view, is a still unfulfilled need to emerge from the religious story, however noble some of its attributes, and to accept something like a humane moral atheism (as distinct from any nihilism). The standpoint is akin to the sort of Enlightenment deism which the reformist rationalist Voltaire propounded in many guises in philosophic tales (e.g., *Zadig* [1747], *Memnon* [1750], *Micro-mégas* [1752]) and in lengthy open criticism of Judaism and Christianity in his huge *Dictionnaire Philosophique* (1764). Voltaire's earlier *Le fanatisme, ou Mahomet le prophète* (1741) was immediately suspected of being an attack on the baleful aspects of the Judeo-Christian legacy of Europe. The vitalist D. H. Lawrence, whom Tutorow cites, counts among the more immediate predecessors who were more daring in presenting an unorthodox Jesus. The *Autobiography* reaffirms the assertion that natural human love is a high value, but it avoids the exotic *sensualism* of Lawrence's *The Man Who Died* (originally titled *The Escaped Cock*, 1929), which exploits the Egyptian craze of the twenties and thirties.

Tutorow's background includes undergraduate training in the ancient classics, including biblical studies, and advanced degrees in philosophy, history, Spanish, and German. He happily takes advantage of certain recently popularized topics, most notably materials come to light in the Dead Sea scrolls, the resurfacing and new discoveries of apocryphal "sacred" books, and speculation about the status of Mary Magdalene and Jesus's family relationships. In

Autobiography, Jesus, who has survived the Crucifixion, is a gentle, matured, reflective leader and father, inseparable from his wife Mary. He resembles the protagonist of a *Bildungsroman* who – thanks to Tutorow’s intricately crafted reconstructions of biblical and other exegetical lore – has the opportunity of relating his whole life’s course in a coherent narrative to an appreciative non-believer, a worthy rationalist. Romantic and early modernist writers (e.g., Jean Paul Richter, Vigny, Nerval, Rilke, Jeffers) sometimes pictured Jesus as a suffering spiritual hero in intimate close-ups, and he was accorded respect as a protagonist of values by many nineteenth-century philosophers of culture and religion, albeit usually classified as a particular anthropological phenotype (e.g., Schopenhauer, Feuerbach, Renan, Strauss). Tutorow radically humanizes Jesus by showing him not only as an honorable evaluator of his own past, but as a thoughtful discussant who is quite able to hold his own in an extensive discourse with Cornelius on fundamental questions regarding the nature and purpose of life and the drama of history.

The pairing of voices in an examination of “our” human estate is familiar in modern literature. Thomas Mann’s use of the far-ranging debates between Settembrini and Naphta in *Der Zauberberg* (1924) comes readily to mind as an example of this device when it is internalized as a substructure. The split between the commenting narrator Zeitblom and the narrated story of his artist friend Leverkühn in Mann’s *Dr. Faustus* (1947) exhibits one of numerous variants of the mirroring practiced in *Autobiography*. Furthermore, there is a long tradition which antedates the role both of Jesus and of Cornelius as correlated, yet contrastive educational protagonists in Tutorow’s *roman*. While Flaubert follows the (in many respects obtuse) “hero” Frédéric Moreau more of the time in *L’éducation sentimentale* (1869), he pairs Moreau principally with his old school chum Charles Deslauriers, and their lives reflect directly and indirectly the shiftings of French society. Tutorow’s Cornelius seeks out Jesus more in the manner of the explicit educational pilgrim or quester whom we know from a long string of European novels and romances. In this way, not Jesus as the object of the search, but Cornelius turns out to be the “stealth” figure whose investigation or discovery more adequately prefigures the hoped-for modern mind.

It is helpful to recall a few educational romances set in antiquity in order to appreciate just how Tutorow inserts his fiction into this long line of works constituting an accommodating flexible genre. John Lyly's *Euphues, or the Anatomy of Wit* (1579) represents more or less the standard core in the late Renaissance. In it we follow a young man of the Athenian golden age as he explores the societies and repertory of his times, including dangerous or negative aspects as in corrupt Naples. In Baltasar Gracián's *El Criticón* (1619), a tutor (Minerva in disguise) guides a sometimes erring prince Telemachus through a variety of societies and philosophies toward a higher standard embodied in Roman civilization, a stand-in for later Christianity. François Fénelon's *Les aventures de Télémaque* (1695) employs this same basic model, exploring various politics and cultural choices behind which we recognize allusions to the author's contemporary world. In *Die Geschichte des Agathon* (1766 ff.), Christoph Martin Wieland expands the encounters of his protagonist with the variety of societies and philosophies of the ancient Greek world into a psychological novel that simultaneously reflects the problematics of Enlightenment sensibility. Skipping over an abundance of illustrations, we can recognize that, in the pseudo-futuristic novel *Giles Goat-Boy; or, the Revised New Syllabus* (1966), John Barth uses the educational pathway of his protagonist also to comment on the dilemmas and choices which humanity faces in the second half of the twentieth century.

Two further examples will serve to highlight that the passion of the historian long ago found a compatible vehicle in the romance of education transposed onto antiquity. Daniel Casper von Lohenstein's compendious novel *Arminius* (1689–90), an elaborate *roman à clef*, is set in the axial first century C.E. and uses a rich mixture of real and invented figures to display in extraordinary and complex detail the nature of the doomed Roman empire, the history and character of various peoples of Europe, Asia, and Africa, and the contending philosophies and religions at the threshold of what will become the Christian era. Weaving his way through the many cultures as a first-hand explorer is the Persian prince Zeno who encounters other exceptional spiritual seekers such as the Brahmin priest Zarmar and learns important, virtually buried facts about great figures of the yet

remoter past such as Prometheus. What makes the *Arminius* even more challenging is that Lohenstein expected his contemporaries to detect sometimes multiple later and modern identities implied behind the novel's actual or fictional characters and to discern behind the ancient contest of ideas and politics the cultural evolution and current state of things in modern Europe. An analogous vast project in ancient history is Jean-Jacques Barthélemy's erudite, encyclopedic *Les voyages du jeune Anarcharsis en Grèce* (1788), set in the age of Pericles and Alexander. In a new edition of *Arminius* (1731), Lohenstein's admiring editors appended a huge index to aid readers in deciphering the modern import of its referential system. Barthélemy did his readers the favor of footnoting the ancient dating, monetary values, names, and other information page by page.

In effect, Tutorow organizes the most relevant supporting information – as known or conjectured in the light of hindsight around 2000 C.E. – and puts this in the “Preface” and “Postlegomenon.” That allows him to telescope together the contest of ideas in the encounter between Jesus and Cornelius in the chapters and to focus intensively on the dramatic convergence of historical forces and impulses in the struggle between the Jews and Romans in the late first century C.E. (The rough analogy in Lohenstein's *Arminius* is the struggle between the Germanic peoples and the Romans to be the legitimate inheritors of a future mandate of civilization.) Naturally, in ostensibly “adding” to, and “correcting,” the New Testament he is confronting an enormous textual edifice which over time has grown exponentially through midrashic accretion – a proliferation beyond the “doubling” of scripture in the movement out of the foundations of the Judaic Old Testament to the (eventually) Christian New Testament as a refounding. Thus the *Autobiography* is proudly a miniaturized “newer” testament that attempts to point the way toward superseding many aspects of the enormous inheritance of textual habits which the bible tradition has imprinted on Eurocentric cultures – a subject treated in major studies such as Northrop Frye's *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (1981). In “rewriting” Scripture, in no small measure against untold generations of preceding exegetes, but also in selective agreement with more recent biblical scholarship, Tutorow is in fact aligning himself with

one of the most traditional modes of authorship. For many readers, this act of attempting to claim “authority” under the license of ludic irony will amount to hubris. But the interchange between Jesus and Cornelius will strike others – including believers whom Erasmus, Rabelais, and writers down to Mann have taught the art of humanizing irony – as a welcome heightening of awareness of important issues.

Not a negligible percentage of readers will close *Autobiography* with the thought: This ought to be converted into a movie. The reasons are obvious. In “rewriting” tradition, *Autobiography* – with its skillful blending of history, philosophy, religion, and literature – engages probably the major plot line in the grand narrative of Western civilization. Because of the wealth of very accessible motifs and themes, most educated persons will keenly sense that Tutorow is drawing them into the great conversation over the centuries, even though relatively few will possess the breadth of expertise needed for evaluating in any detail the significance of the novel’s multifarious references. (Unlike the novelist, most of his readers today lack, for example, training in the “sacred” languages – Hebrew, Greek, and Latin.) Hence here we see how, once again, “rewriting” is a winning strategy by which an author of our day can succeed in marrying popular literature and serious scholarship. The question, how a screen writer might extract a specific outline of such a rich book, should remind us of the “Preface” and “Postlegomenon” in which Tutorow has, in essence, faced the ultimate issue: What is “my” interpretation of this great heritage. Each reader can have the pleasure of reaching his or her conclusion.

References

- Tutorow, N. E. *The Autobiography of Jesus as Told to the Centurion Cornelius Nepos IV: A Tale of Everyman; Roman*. Half Moon Bay, California: Chadwick House Publishers, 2010.