

Title: The Journey of “Karma”: What Goes Around Comes Around
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Abstract:

This paper takes as its subject the strange itinerary of the short story “Karma,” published by the German-American theologian and writer Paul Carus in 1894. Lev Tolstoy, having translated the story into Russian, was immediately hailed as its author and it was subsequently translated into German, French, and Spanish under his name. By 1896, “Karma” had been translated back into English as a translation of Tolstoy. Placing Tolstoy at the center of this translation drama, I develop several lines of inquiry. First, I ask whether the changes Tolstoy made to Carus’ original English are strategic manipulations of Buddhist thought, designed to strip Buddhism of the superstitions that Tolstoy found antithetical to his own moral system. Second, I put translation theory in dialogue with the Carus/Tolstoy drama, exploring the consequences of “speaking for” someone both in fiction and across cultures. And finally, I suggest that the poetics of Karma—as established in Carus’ story—can, in the context of world literature, serve as a model for the movement of texts: the “eternal round” of the self comes to resemble the circular journey across languages made by this particular story.