

# ‘TIME IS NOT ALL POWERFUL’: THE JOHANNINE ESCHATOLOGICAL VISION IN EUGENE VODOLAZKIN’S *LAURUS*

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*Abstract*

Eugene Vodolazkin’s *Laurus* employs literary ‘distortion’ to capture and convey the eschatological paradoxes of the Fourth Gospel. Having outlined the complexity and contradictions of the Johannine eschatological vision, this article describes how *Laurus* meets the challenge presented by this vision. Rather than seeking to resolve the tension between vertical and horizontal eschatological dimensions, Vodolazkin reshapes time itself to accommodate both realised and future-oriented eschatologies. This remythologising of time is a distortion that brings the reader closer to the rich imaginative depths of Scripture: a powerful form of resistance to limited, inflexible accounts of the ‘real’.

*Keywords:* Eschatology; Revelation; Temporality; Gospel of John; Eugene Vodolazkin; *Laurus*.

## I. INTRODUCTION

In the Fourth Gospel, expectations of the imminent apocalypse, and anticipation of a final resurrection, exist alongside assertions of eschatological transformation enacted in the present. Polyphous, multi-valent patterns of thought foster ambiguity and tension where we long for resolution. Eugene Vodolazkin’s *Laurus* meets the theological challenge posed by this eschatological vision by reimagining the nature of time itself. Vodolazkin employs a form of revelatory, constructive literary ‘distortion’, bending temporality to accommodate the confounding qualities of Scripture.<sup>1</sup> It is this distortion of time that allows *Laurus* to do justice to the paradoxes of Johannine eschatology. Vodolazkin, a contemporary Russian author and expert in medieval folklore, has produced a novel dominated by eschatological concerns, which often disrupts our sense of the temporal as a succession of distinct moments. Diachronic

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time is dissolved in a fantasy of cycles, seasons and prophecy which can accommodate both 'vertical' and 'horizontal' eschatologies.<sup>2</sup>

*Laurus* presents a vivid picture of medieval Russia 'trembling with religious fervour', portraying such faith without recourse to irony or cynicism.<sup>3</sup> This, coupled with the novel's fluid portrayal of time, presents a powerful challenge to any worldview which cannot accommodate the complexities of biblical eschatology. In refusing to be governed by unilinear temporality, Vodolazkin's narrative not only performs a remythologising of time, but also allows this transformed perspective to impinge on contemporary predilections and presumptions. He reveals how literary fiction can play a crucial role in drawing out the 'uniqueness and genius of the Fourth Gospel narrative', showing how 'chronological inconsistencies' can be made 'more accessible to a broader public of Fourth Gospel audiences' through the medium of a novel.<sup>4</sup> So, as this article suggests, for any scholar of theology and literature interested in what literary fiction can contribute to biblical studies, and to the public reception of biblical texts, *Laurus* is worthy of close attention.

This article begins by briefly mapping out the difficulties inherent in the study of New Testament eschatology, with a particular focus on the Gospel of John. This survey will introduce a discussion of the range of attempts which have been made to resolve or explain away such difficulties, with Rudolph Bultmann's existentialist eschatology providing the paradigmatic example of this trend. In this context, *Laurus* can be presented as a radical alternative to the *Weltanschauung* which dictates Bultmann's treatment of Scripture. Vodolazkin employs a series of strategies which capture a 'very contemporary' sense of the 'malleability of time'.<sup>5</sup> These strategies serve to deconstruct the idealist dismissal of 'mythical' eschatology as an 'inadequate' fiction,<sup>6</sup> whilst encouraging a reaffirmation of the paradoxical interrelation of realised hope and future redemption. Furthermore, Vodolazkin illustrates how contemporary fiction can play a vital role in challenging the 'significant impact and long afterlife' of Bultmann's hermeneutical approach to the Fourth Gospel,<sup>7</sup> bringing to light the 'underpriced treasures of Johannine narrative prowess' for both a lay and specialist audience.<sup>8</sup> The article culminates in a final discussion of the theological importance of literary distortion, as a tool which can threaten the tyranny of the 'possible' in the service of the novelist and believer's collaborative attempt to 'penetrate the surface of reality'.<sup>9</sup>

## II. 'THE HOUR IS COMING, AND NOW IS': THE PROBLEM OF NEW TESTAMENT ESCHATOLOGY

Whilst the scope of this article cannot accommodate a detailed examination of the field, the purpose of this section is simply to show that the biblical account of Christian eschatology is far from straightforward. The intermingling of

Jewish apocalyptic expectations, belief in the imminence of the last days, and intimations of a fully realised eschatology results in an overall picture defined by ambiguity and tension. This enduring uncertainty is reflected in the scholarly debates regarding this topic, and the diversity of interpretations it has generated.<sup>10</sup> How, and when, the Christian promise would be fulfilled is a conundrum ‘still to be wrestled with’.<sup>11</sup>

This quandary is partly a consequence of Jesus’ recorded proclamations concerning the Kingdom of God. The Gospels contain several references to the Kingdom as imminent or ‘at hand’ (Mark 1:15 etc.) and expected to arrive in the near future (Mark 9:1).<sup>12</sup> Jesus is placed here in the role of the messianic figure destined to ‘usher in’ the new aeon which represented the fulfilment of Jewish eschatological hope.<sup>13</sup> Second Temple Judaism had developed the idea of a qualitatively different ‘Age to Come’, finding references to the doctrine of a future life in the Old Testament, and this seems to provide the content of such declarations.<sup>14</sup> However, this can be set against passages such as Luke 11:20, in which Jesus describes his performance of an exorcism as a sign that ‘the Kingdom of God has come’. The emphatically realised character of this pronouncement seems to imply that Jesus believed the Kingdom had already been manifested through the ‘crisis’ of his ministry.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, David Brown has argued that Luke’s overall intention is to extricate the Christian message from an imminent eschatology by translating ‘future expectation’ into ‘present reality’ (Luke 16:31 etc.).<sup>16</sup> In this interpretation, the failure of the *Parousia* to arrive is seen as having necessitated a re-working of the horizons of eschatological expectation, even as the New Testament authors were still completing their work. In contrast, E.P. Sanders has suggested we are deliberately exposed to two different ‘senses’ of the Kingdom, one relating to ‘redemptive sovereignty’ in the present, and one to the ‘final vindication’ of Divine rule in the future.<sup>17</sup> Explanations like this highlight the inescapable tension built into Jesus’ proclamation of the Kingdom, and also the perceived need to find some means of resolving them.

These inherent dualities are particularly pronounced in the Gospel of John, where realised and futuristic eschatologies are repeatedly juxtaposed. John 11:26 strongly implies the ‘possession of eternal life here and now’, as the logical consequence of the ‘resurrection’ announced in the previous verse.<sup>18</sup> This is not an isolated occurrence, as the claim that whoever believes in the Son has already gained eternal life is repeated in John 3:36 and elsewhere, reinforcing a sense of the eschatological ‘Last Things’ as a present and permanent possession.<sup>19</sup> However, John 5:28–29 provides a dramatic contrast to this by agreeing closely with ‘the eschatology of popular Judaism’.<sup>20</sup> Here we are told to look toward an hour which is still ‘coming’, as the time of a general resurrection and judgement which corresponds to certain elements of the Jewish apocalyptic expectation. Again, this cannot be dismissed as a solitary exception. John

3:5 can be read as purely future-orientated in its reference to spiritual rebirth as a prerequisite for entry into the Kingdom, and verses such as 6:39–40 also reference a ‘last day’ which seems to be set firmly in the future.<sup>21</sup> What we are left with is two distinct lines of eschatological thought which ‘appear to be diametrically opposed’, neither of which can be easily discounted or played down.<sup>22</sup>

What is particularly notable in John is that there is no clear attempt to resolve this opposition. In fact, there are moments when the Evangelist appears openly to embrace this as a creative tension, deliberately bringing together the vertical (salvation realised timelessly through the human–Divine axis) and horizontal (a more linear model of salvation concerned with the diachronic progression of time toward a final apocalypse) in a single phrase. The announcement that ‘the hour is coming, and is now here’ (John 4:23) resolutely refuses to offer the clarity of unidirectional eschatological movement, but rather employs the paradoxical as a mode of theological expression. John 5:25 restates this paradox, again transforming the dimensions of ordinary time and representing the overall metaphysical trends of the Gospel by moving beyond the literal, material world. The equivocacy identifiable in the Synoptic Gospels is accepted and foregrounded, and we are left with a text in which ‘eschatology is subsumed under Christology’.<sup>23</sup> The advent of the Incarnate *Logos* is framed by John as a demand for the radical redefinition of preconceived temporal horizons.

### III. JOHANNINE ESCHATOLOGY: RESOLVING THE PARADOX?

By focussing on the Gospel of John, we can observe how the instinctive reaction to notionally illogical eschatologies has often been an attempt to explain away such difficulties. When faced with John 4:23, scholars such as Jörg Frey have felt bound by this ‘problem’ to ask whether such a phrase is ‘self-contradictory’ and ‘meaningless’, or whether the tension can be ‘resolved towards either of the two sides’.<sup>24</sup> It is this search for resolution which has characterised many of the responses, such as C.H. Dodd’s argument that in John the present enjoyment of eternal life has become ‘the controlling and all-important conception’. For Dodd, when John 6:54 sets the immediate possession of ‘eternal life’ alongside a reference to the ‘last day’, the general resurrection has become a ‘truth of less importance’.<sup>25</sup> Frey’s own proffered solution reaches a similar conclusion, suggesting that the future resurrection is included at moments such as John 5:28 as a purely functional element intended to ‘allay the fears of a community in distress’.<sup>26</sup> Dodd and Frey find different routes toward the same reduction of futurist dimensions to an insignificant ornament. Neither will countenance the paradoxical retention of both strands in equal conversation, and so the apocalyptic and horizontal is subordinated to the realised.

The paradigmatic example of this apparent refusal to meet Johannine eschatology on its own terms is Rudolf Bultmann's treatment of 'mythical eschatology' in the New Testament. Bultmann's contentions hinge on the assertion that any expectation of the 'end of the world' cannot be preserved, as we have become 'estranged' from this.<sup>27</sup> He deals with the dilemma of the delayed *Parousia* by claiming that the notion of a future Kingdom or general resurrection is a 'myth' which talks about reality in an 'inadequate way'.<sup>28</sup> What drives such an approach is Bultmann's particular idea of the 'modern man', who must be liberated from this 'totally alien' mythology. Through the 'world view of science', and existentialist philosophy, this man has 'opened up an understanding for himself' which cannot accommodate apocalyptic expectations.<sup>29</sup> Bultmann believes futuristic eschatology has become 'untenable' because the return of Christ is yet to occur. Therefore, as the diachronic passage of time is seen to have disproved the horizontal dimension of scriptural eschatology, the 'mythical event' has become a matter for the present, not the future.<sup>30</sup>

The consequences of this are felt in Bultmann's commentaries on John. He sees any verses which might hint at the 'old realistic eschatology' as the work of a secondary editor, rather than part of the organic unity of the whole.<sup>31</sup> To support this hypothesis, Bultmann postulates a redactor who 'lacked logical skill', and added futuristic passages where they did not belong due to an insufficiently nuanced understanding of the Evangelist's intentions.<sup>32</sup> The problem with this methodology is that there are a number of passages in John which place  $\zeta\omega\eta\alpha\lambda\omega\nuio\varsigma$ , judgement or resurrection in the future, and are not 'easily detached or attributed to a redactor'.<sup>33</sup> Bultmann's commentary on John is replete with insightful analysis, yet his approach to the eschatological often forces him into conclusions difficult to support on literary grounds. Throughout the Gospel, language of present fulfilment and  $\kappa\rho\iota\sigmai\varsigma$  emerges alongside the refrain of 'not yet', and there is very little—stylistically speaking—which can be used to demarcate the elements he claims are the work of an editor.<sup>34</sup>

It seems these results may be the product of a hermeneutical fallacy. By starting with predetermined criteria for determining what is 'adequate', Bultmann ensures that we 'find the textual element concealed'.<sup>35</sup> He carries into his interpretations Heidegger's belief that a true understanding of time must focus exclusively on the 'now', as speculation on future events represents an '*uneigentlich*' grasp of the temporal.<sup>36</sup> Bultmann's work on the New Testament becomes a '*locus classicus*' of the idealist perspective which sees Christian eschatological models as 'fictive constructs' devoid of any pretension 'to depict a reality independent of the human condition'.<sup>37</sup> He sets up the Fourth Evangelist as a 'forerunner' of these 'modern interpretations', and in doing so is bound to ignore or redact any features of John which do not mirror his own theological convictions.<sup>38</sup> As Ruben Zimmermann observes: 'Bultmann could only demonstrate his "ideal" eschatological concept by postulating major intrusions into

and adjustments to the transmitted text.<sup>39</sup> For Bultmann, the hermeneutical process began with philosophical considerations which preceded the theologian's engagement with the actual content of the Scriptures.<sup>40</sup>

Bultmann's theology and philosophy were reacting against the modern progressivist understanding of time as 'linear and homogenous', which dominated the 19th century, and constructed a model in which eschatology could only be the future of a unidirectional temporal procession.<sup>41</sup> Bultmann's turn to existential transformation in the 'now' completely reversed this trend, replacing diachronic succession with qualitative metamorphosis. Yet whilst recognising the value of this move beyond the progressivist schema, Karl Rahner seems right to ask whether allowing such a thorough existentialising of eschatological assertions means that humans are themselves 'mythologised', as they are denied the 'sober fact' of time.<sup>42</sup> Bultmann's move to the discontinuous moment still imagined eschatology as a kind of zero-sum game in which the vertical and horizontal were dissolved into a single event point, rather than held in productive tension.

Crucially, this emphasis on a singular 'now' is what led Bultmann to dismiss any allusions to an 'old realistic eschatology' in John, choosing instead to attribute these to a misguided redactor. There is plenty to admire in Bultmann's desire to imagine an eschatological event that cuts across linear time. However, his application of Heideggerian existentialism to the Fourth Gospel left no room for the possibility that the eschatological paradoxes in John were the intentional work of a writer seeking to convey the impact of the incarnate *Logos*. Indeed, Bultmann's approach is typical of the instinct to reduce or resolve temporal paradoxes that still—as I have shown—shapes interpretations of the Fourth Gospel. Prominent biblical scholars continue to treat verses such as John 4:23 as a 'headache'<sup>43</sup> or 'problem'<sup>44</sup> requiring some form of solution. Far from being anomalous, Bultmann's decision to impose existentialist philosophy onto the complexities of time in John appears to be representative of an urge to bring something external into the scriptural text, rather than accept its more challenging, strange forms of temporal expression. The 'significant impact' and 'long afterlife' of Bultmann's methodological approach to interpreting the Fourth Gospel continues to shape scholarship today, as exegetes persist in attributing future and present eschatologies to redactional layers.<sup>45</sup> Theology is now tasked with challenging Bultmann's own *Weltanschauung* by returning to scriptural eschatology with open attentiveness, seeking imaginative models of time which might allow us to preserve, respect and enjoy the paradoxical.

#### IV. LAURUS: TIME AND POSSIBILITY REIMAGINED

In the context of this task, the value of literary distortion to the theologian becomes apparent. *Laurus* invites the reader to inhabit a world in which ideas of time, expectation and possibility are determined by eschatology. Rather

than setting linear progress against the irruption of eternity into the present, Vodolazkin's novel bends time into a shape that can allow these patterns to co-exist. *Laurus* uses a plethora of strategies for establishing a fluid, flexible kind of temporality that is naturally accommodating to the complexities of Christian hope. In this conceptual landscape, scriptural paradox ceases to demand resolution, and instead inspires the creation and testing of new models of reality.

By setting much of the action in a reimagining of medieval Russia, Vodolazkin is able to revivify and make present for the reader 'a world rich with wonder and superstition'.<sup>46</sup> The way in which this impacts upon the novel's treatment of time is exemplified by its measurement of duration using religious moments. The birth of Arseny, *Laurus'* main protagonist, is given to us as 'the 6,948th year since the Creation of the world' and 'the feast day of Arsenius the Great' (p. 9). Throughout the novel, dates and time periods are expressed in relation to liturgical cycles and positions of faith, with the effect that the very nature of temporality becomes bound to religious devotion. Vodolazkin's reader is drawn into a religious standpoint which instigates a refiguring of the 'ordinary', as we are asked to imagine life measured in 'seasons and harvests' rather than 'clocks and clicks'.<sup>47</sup> The transfiguration of temporality Vodolazkin performs may have something vital to tell the contemporary reader about our assumptions regarding time, faith, and reality.

A crucial example of this is *Laurus'* capacity to hold together seemingly incompatible eschatological perspectives. In the novel's opening chapter, it is suggested to us that Arseny 'possessed the elixir of immortality' (p. 4). Arseny, in his many guises, is repeatedly presented as the conduit for a dramatic realised eschatology. Whilst dwelling next to a cemetery, he is told by a monastic elder in confession that: 'It is live people who lie there,' as for God 'all are living' already (p. 30). This strongly implies the 'possession of eternal life here and now'—the Johannine pronouncement that those who believe have already secured ζωή ξιώνιος (John 3:16).<sup>48</sup> This conviction comes to dictate Arseny's own attitude toward death. When local villagers try to bury his deceased wife and child, Arseny protests with anguish that 'they do not understand ... that the dead can be resurrected [at any time]' (p. 89).<sup>49</sup> There is now little to separate or distinguish death from life, or the grave from resurrection to eternity. Yet, in typically Johannine fashion, this transcending of time is balanced by a vigorous belief in a future, apocalyptic 'end of the world' (p. 196). We are constantly reminded that the dead are still awaiting 'the universal resurrection' (p. 296), and Arseny himself is taught to look for 'the Saviour's Judgement Day in a future tyme [sic]' (p. 46). No attempt is made to resolve these conflicting positions, or to promote one above the other. Instead, the reader is simply told that 'attention to eschatology' is 'worthy of encouragement' (p. 204). Attentive consideration of the manifold complexities of eschatology is endorsed in place of the urge to rationalise or explain.

This exhortation to pay proper attention to eschatology is complemented by the dismantling of preconceived notions of time which might hinder this task. A key tool in this constructive deconstruction is *Laurus'* use of prophetic visions. As a child, Arseny sees a 'reflection of himself' as an elderly man in the stove fire, a vision which prompts the narratival present tense to slide into that of the venerable Arseny in his final years, alerting the reader to an uprooting of the concrete 'now' (p. 26). We are later introduced to the character Ambrogio, whose life is also punctuated by vivid, accurate glimpses of the future which continue to facilitate this fluidity of narrative, tense and setting. Ambrogio's foresight leads him to conclude that 'there is no time', and our consciousness of diachronic succession is 'given to us by the grace of God so we will not get mixed up' (p. 228).<sup>50</sup> For Vodolazkin's prophet time is no longer an inescapable brute fact, but a Divine concession to our human limitations. And as Ambrogio realises, when we entertain this possibility 'the very existence of time is open to question', as its 'necessity' is seen as a product of our cognitive weakness (p. 229).

As the prophetic mode dissolves the constraints of rigid temporality, the moment of Ambrogio's death captures the scope of what this perspective permits the author to attempt. When Ambrogio dies, he is granted a sibylline vision of an 'Mi-8 helicopter' lowering the gilded statue of an angel onto a cathedral in modern-day Saint Petersburg. However, this is not simply a leap into the future, as this vision then becomes contemporaneous with Ambrogio's demise. From the helicopter, an 'absolutely real angel' can be seen raising Ambrogio's soul to heaven in 'distant Palestine' (pp. 286–7). A radical simultaneity is introduced which completely transcends the boundaries of time, reminding us that the author is free to step outside of the 'concrete possibilities of his [or her] culture'.<sup>51</sup>

This esoteric treatment of time and eschatology is embodied in the novel's presentation of Arseny as a holy fool: the Russian Orthodox figure who 'testifies to the reality of the anti-world', performing the role of a 'prophetic Spirit-bearer' who proclaims 'the possibility of the impossible'.<sup>52</sup> Arseny fits this mould, as a prophetic figure who 'did not always understand what time ought to be considered the present' (p. 5). He is marked out as a character who manifests 'obvious grace from God' (p. 117), and thus becomes a focal point through which Vodolazkin can mediate his challenge to the 'possible'. The holy fool encapsulates 'a condition that embraces paradox', a form of madness which counterintuitively expresses 'a special line in the truth'.<sup>53</sup> Vodolazkin's desire to draw attention to this irony emerges in another fool's response to Arseny: 'I see you are the realest of holy fools. Real' (p. 145). The disorientated reader, now starved of the comfort of diachronic time, is told to look to the fool for the 'Real'.

Vodolazkin uses his holy fool to translate this disruption of time into an imperative which acts upon the reader. Access to Arseny's transformative powers and foresight is presented to a cynical highwayman as contingent on '*metanoia*' (p. 248), and throughout the novel it is dependent on a certain quality of faith. Kallistos Ware describes the fool for Christ as one who 'carries the act of *meta-noia* or "change of mind" to its farthest extent'.<sup>54</sup> Therefore, the privileged access to the 'Real' Arseny represents is only obtained through a surrendering of previously held preconceptions about the nature of reality. To acknowledge our need for repentance is to accept a 'change in thoughts' (p. 248), and the change *Laurus* prescribes is a concession to the malleability of time. Vodolazkin is using the superficially unreal to remind us that 'the Imagination is what Providence uses to get men into reality, into existence'.<sup>55</sup> The author and holy fool co-affirm the paradox that when we distort the world, we may in fact 'change it into itself'.<sup>56</sup>

In *Laurus*, repentance is portrayed as a reappraisal of the boundaries of possibility, and this form of *metanoia* paves the way for the exploration of new models of time better suited to accommodating eschatological complexities. For Bultmann, 'mythical eschatology' was rendered 'inadequate' by the passage of time,<sup>57</sup> yet in Vodolazkin's novel it is time itself which proves deficient. Whilst lying on the verge of death, Arseny experiences a moment when occurrences start 'shamelessly muddling prescribed sequences' so that 'time could not cope with them', as '[I]t refused to govern these sorts of events' (p. 167). This anthropomorphising of time as petulant and pedantic is an important part of *Laurus*' satirisation of conventional temporality. When, towards the end of his journeys, Arseny begins to sense his life is 'going backwards', he observes that: 'Time was coming apart at the seams, like a wayfarer's travelling bag.' Time's repeated failure to absorb the momentous events which shape Arseny's existence exposes the need for a radical reimaging of the temporal (p. 295). Reflecting on Time's deficiencies, Richard Bauckham links Bultmann's eschatological vision to Moltmann's 'discontinuous moment', suggesting both theologians envisage a 'depth' that 'cannot be reduced to the horizontal linear movement of time'.<sup>58</sup> What is ingenious about *Laurus* is that it acknowledges this incompatibility, but rather than resolving it by taking eschatology out of time, it uses distortion to try to bend time into a more accommodating shape.

This distortion of time creates a fictive world through which the reader can be introduced to an expanded, reconceptualised temporal realm. Vodolazkin offers a series of metaphors which imagine time in the language of circularity, culminating in Arseny's description of monastic life as a setting in which: 'Time no longer moves forward but goes around in circles.' His new vision represents the productive consequences of allowing time to be shaped by faith and worship. The daily and weekly worship cycles, as well as the 'largest' annual cycle determined by the 'great feasts and saints' days', generate a kind of

annular temporal motion (pp. 307–8). What is notable here is that Arseny's proffered image is immediately revised by a monastic elder, who suggests the alternative picture of a 'spiral' as a more 'open figure' which implies progress as well as repetition (p. 308). Vodolazkin's narrative thus produces a dramatisation of the creation of religious metaphors. These can be 'reality depicting' because they give access to the fundamental 'states and relations' of the world, yet they must also always be open to revision, and aware of their own limitations.<sup>59</sup> When literary distortion takes on a visionary quality this is not theologically valuable because it offers certainty, but rather because it can create uncertainty, and then suggest imaginative alternatives.<sup>60</sup>

The final step in Vodolazkin's reimagining of time is the transformation of the novel itself into a spiral. As the elderly Arseny, 'covered with wrinkles', completes his final years, he sees in the stove fire the young Arseny who watched him as a boy. At this point, the same words used in the opening of the work are exactly repeated, with the difference being that we have approached them from the perspective of the old man, not the 'light-haired boy' (p. 311). The structural form of the novel reinforces its content by immersing us in repetition with a difference: an 'open' circle which can accommodate both recapitulation and progress.

Through this prophetic episode, the spiral shape of *Laurus*' theological movements is completed. What is captured here is the 'vertical' and the 'horizontal' together. The discontinuous, eternal moment which transcends time is made visible from two different perspectives on the linear temporal plane. Vodolazkin began by placing eschatological paradoxes in direct relation to time, concluding that this necessitated the deconstruction of temporality. Having performed this dismantling as a call for a 'change in thought', he then returns to the structures of time with creative intent. Yet this return is not simply a repetition, as it yields a constructive distortion which permits and encourages the interrelation of realised and futuristic eschatological models.

#### V. FICTION, DISTORTION, AND TRUTH

Literary distortion can help the theologian to cultivate a form of dialogical relationship with scriptural testimony which avoids obscuring the truths it might reveal. By encouraging us to imaginatively inhabit worlds in which certain constraints have been stripped away, constructive distortions can inculcate in the reader a broadened sense of the possible, leading to a deeper appreciation of 'the importance of diversity, complexity and competing narratives in the Scriptures'.<sup>61</sup>

The theological significance of this imaginative expansion can be further elucidated using the biblical concept of truth as *aletheia*, borrowed from Hellenistic philosophy. As Guy Collins notes, this kind of truth is not

comprehended in the sphere of empirical evidence, but instead is generated through the ‘friction’ produced when a story causes us to doubt the ‘oversimplifying accounts of reality’ that ‘masquerade as human understanding’.<sup>62</sup> Whilst this should not be used to argue for a separation of biblical and empirical truths, it does suggest a specific form of theological truth which literary distortion might claim to access. When Ambrogio hypothesises about the apocalypse, what is important is not the precise calculations he offers, but the fact that the ‘principal source’ of his conclusions is a careful reading of ‘Holy Scripture’ (p. 220). What truth this betokens is manifested in his loyalty to the imminent eschatology he finds in Scripture. As in the Johannine sense of *aletheia*, this is truth concerned not with the ‘narrowly factual’, but with our relationship to God ‘as the ultimate source of all reality’.<sup>63</sup> From this perspective, time is not a concrete reality but a ‘curse’, which we are ‘locked up in’ because of our ‘weakness’ (pp. 228–9). Vodolazkin’s novel suggests that a deeper reality becomes attainable when we allow Scripture to act upon our sense of temporality and challenge its resistance to polyphonic eschatologies. Ambrogio believes that the future, and even the eschaton, ‘already exists’ in some sense, yet still retains a passionate interest in biblical accounts of diachronic progress toward the ‘end of the world’ (p. 228). In the open, dialogic model which *Laurus* proposes ‘we interpret texts’ and ‘texts interpret us’.<sup>64</sup>

By alerting us to possibilities which transcend more anodyne, rigid accounts of the world, distortion can undermine the foundations of these oversimplified pictures of reality. *Laurus* captures a strikingly modern sense of the ‘confusing and impenetrable’ post-Einsteinian world, in which we are ‘living in the shadow of the theory of relativity’.<sup>65</sup> Ambrogio’s story does not end in medieval Russia, as we are told that his theory of time was eventually turned into a ‘wildly successful’ book which ‘developed Einstein’s theory of the relativity of time’ (p. 324). Vodolazkin is not merely introducing the reader to an alternative description of time shaped by ambiguity and uncertainty, but he is using this to highlight the fragile status of our own default understanding of how time works. Contemporary science is increasingly bound to unverifiable models which claim ontological access to the world’s structures,<sup>66</sup> making it difficult to dismiss *Laurus*’ exploration of the ‘spiral’ of time as an unscientific flight of fancy. Indeed, Arseny and Ambrogio’s instinctive aversion to ‘time’s unidimensionality’ is redolent of David Wilkinson’s proposal that the science of multi-dimensionality is a potential path toward better understanding the relation of eternity to the temporal world (p. 186).<sup>67</sup> Vodolazkin’s novel betrays an awareness that ‘the artist’s work is inescapably a claim about reality’.<sup>68</sup> He does not afford the reader the comfort of confining his distortions to the realm of the unreal, but rather uses them to probe the fragile foundations of scientific facticity. By straying into the realm of science-fiction, Vodolazkin dredges up our ‘human awareness’ of the world as ‘arbitrary and contingent’; his forays into

this genre offer liberation from the ‘groove’ of real life in which our experience and instincts can ‘confine’ us.<sup>69</sup> Once *Laurus*’ work is done, the dichotomy between science and mythology which underpins Bultmann’s *Weltanschauung* seems less secure.

Vodolazkin’s refusal to operate within certain assumed boundaries could help biblical scholars to overcome externally imposed restrictions. It was Bultmann’s desire to lump together the historical and mythological and move on from both. Yet in *Laurus*, this neat distinction between past and present no longer holds. Vodolazkin’s language is an astonishing blend of archaic words, biblical quotes, medieval texts, and modern slang.<sup>70</sup> Throughout the novel, the reader is confronted with ‘one-word bursts of odd spellings’ or sentences in which archaic vocabulary sits alongside contemporary idioms and slang.<sup>71</sup> Rather than residing in one time period, the language of the narrative voice slips seamlessly between different linguistic ‘strata’, undermining our expectations.<sup>72</sup> Describing the fate of the ‘plague dead’, the narrative voice suddenly switches to appropriately archaic language, referring to those ‘kylled by kyllers, and stricken by fyre [sic]’ (*ubiitsy ubiisha, i ogn' popali* in the original) (p. 86). Yet when outlining the life and career of the 20th-century woman Francesca Flecchi, the narrative voice adopts the colloquialisms and casual, idiomatic language of modernity to reflect the historical period described, exhibiting a temporal fluidity mirroring the novel’s subject matter (pp. 323–4). Even more unsettling is the tendency for different characters to employ a wide variety of linguistic styles, seemingly unrelated to the historical moment they inhabit. For instance, a bandit Laurus encounters in medieval Russia speaks in the slang of the 21st century: ‘Akh ty, ё-моё . . . Ia zhe, blia, . . .’ (‘Oh jeez, you . . . Son of a Bitch’) (p. 128). Similarly, the Holy Fool, Foma, lives in 15th century Pskov, yet uses the insults of a modern teenager: ‘shithead’, ‘prick’ etc. (pp. 145–6). Foma is both a *yurodivy*—the historical figure of the Holy Fool, rooted in Russian Orthodox tradition—and an individual apparently free from any temporal constraints in the words he uses. Neither the narrator nor characters in *Laurus* seem to be tied to a particular time regarding their use of language, such that the text itself evokes an unstable, open temporality.

Janet Fitch describes these ‘anachronisms’ as moments which ‘speak to our dilemma as modern inhabitants of a world made in—and of—the past’.<sup>73</sup> There is much to commend in this argument, yet it can be taken further. Vodolazkin is deliberately creating a world in which the anachronism has ceased to exist. When ‘yellowed plastic bottles’ suddenly emerge from under the melting medieval snow, the tension this incongruity generates is a sign that we can longer delineate between past and present: the decaying splendour of modernity is being gradually exposed through a dialogue with the cyclical and the seasonal (p. 66). David Brown suggests that attempts to make saintly figures ‘creatures of our own day’ are often spoilt by ‘conspicuous historical

howlers'.<sup>74</sup> Here, Vodolazkin's intentionally pronounced 'howlers' are a sign that his holy fools cannot be confined to the past, and their mythological musings should not be disregarded as 'historical'.

*Laurus* reveals that fictional distortion might itself claim to have an eschatological dimension, in that it 'challenges the finality of appearance here and now'.<sup>75</sup> Vodolazkin brings together the medieval mind and its 'extraordinary capacity to think laterally as well as imaginatively', with our own age which is 'often more wooden' in comparison.<sup>76</sup> Because of its heady blend of linguistic styles, *Laurus* can dramatise this meeting within its own exchanges. When another holy fool, Foma, admonishes sceptical onlookers for their response to Arseny—'And you, you sons of bitches, think he's talking to walls'—it is hard to escape the feeling he is speaking to us (p. 149). Indeed, when Foma later tries to explain the 'paradox' of the holy fool's passive acceptance of suffering, his narrow-minded audience object in the voice of the 21st century: 'you're not, like, you know, allowed to beat holy fools' (p. 158). *Laurus* sets itself up in opposition to the 'Reason' which is allergic to paradox, and its use of distortion allows it to confront this threat to biblical faith in the past, present, and future.

#### VI. CONCLUSION

Attesting to the revelatory potential of distortion in this context ought not to necessitate a dismissal of alternative theological approaches to time and eschatology. In fact, part of what *Laurus* provides is a warning against exclusivism. Bultmann's project of demythologising was an important contribution to the study of scriptural eschatology as it challenged the dominant narrative by helping to puncture the tyrannical optimism of progressivist eschatologies. Vodolazkin's work can be taken as an attempt to find increasingly innovative ways of reminding his readership that any 'attention to eschatology, even on its own, seems worthy of encouragement' (p. 204). And in forming his own unique response to Scripture, Bultmann also helped to reawaken this attention. The model Vodolazkin suggests is one of oscillation, rather than stasis. To express the unsettling complexities of Johannine eschatology involves creating a perpetual blur of circles, spirals, and straight lines which lurches from demythologising to remythologising. As Martin Buber eloquently argues, to rest in a 'reliable world' of 'density and duration' is to embrace 'nothingness'.<sup>77</sup> Or, as an elder standing by the 'Empty Tomb' tells Arseny: 'Knowledge is repose and faith is motion' (p. 297); we should not rest in epistemological comfort when faced with the duplexities and contradictions which shape the biblical account of eschatology.

To define a work of literature as a distortion of reality the reader must be able to state with certainty what is 'real', and it is in this problem of definition that the theological value of Vodolazkin's work is found. If we read *Laurus* and return to

our own beliefs troubled by this difficulty, and less sure of the boundaries between authentic and illusory, then it seems something important has taken place. As Slavoj Žižek argues, 'as soon as we renounce fiction and illusion, we lose reality itself'.<sup>78</sup> To allow the biblical texts to 'read us real' we must see our own sense of reality as constructed, and therefore as malleable and fluid. Vodolazkin's work broadens reason out to include a 'rationality of narrative': a sense of truth which can encompass the persuasive power and imaginative depth of Scripture.<sup>79</sup> The theological truth Arseny proposes is that 'time is not all-powerful' (p. 270), as the perceived passage of horizontal time is not sufficient warrant to denounce all 'mythical eschatology' as 'untenable'.<sup>80</sup> As biblical scholarship seeks to do justice to the singular 'genius' of the Johannine narrative,<sup>81</sup> resisting the allure of Bultmann's hermeneutical approach, Vodolazkin has provided an example of how fiction can contribute to this project. For scholars striving to understand the rich complexities of the Fourth Gospel narrative, or for a lay audience exploring the treasures of this unique text, Vodolazkin offers literary fiction as a source of insight and inspiration.

Perhaps what Vodolazkin achieves is a reinvigorating of the spirit of theological enquiry which imagines truth-seeking in the apostrophic mode. His fiction is not claiming privileged access to the truth, but rather seeks to liberate us from the realm of concrete assertions. He is not asserting that time truly is a 'circle' or 'spiral', any more than he is suggesting that decaying plastic bottles really could be found in medieval Russia. But that is not the point. Theologically speaking, each new imaginative vision of temporality *Laurus* presents can be interpreted as a gesture toward that which resides beyond the world as we see it now.

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- <sup>2</sup> Eugene Vodolazkin, *Laurus*, trans. L.C. Hayden (London: OneWorld, 2015), p. 298. References to *Laurus* from this point on are given in parentheses in the main body of the text.
- <sup>3</sup> Ben Kalfus, 'Holy Foolery', *New Yorker: Page Turner* (15 October 2015).
- <sup>4</sup> Andreas Hoeck, 'Prolepsis and Analepsis in the Fourth Gospel: Under-priced Treasures of Johannine Narrative Prowess', *Scripta Fulgentina* 28.55–6 (2018) 7.
- <sup>5</sup> Lucy Popescu, 'Laurus by Eugene Vodolazkin', *Financial Times: Fiction* (8 January 2016).
- <sup>6</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology*, trans. S. Ogden (London: SCM, 1985), p. 155.
- <sup>7</sup> Ruben Zimmermann, 'Eschatology and Time in the Gospel of John', in Judith M. Lieu and Martinus C. de Boer (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Johannine Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 296.
- <sup>8</sup> Hoeck, 'Prolepsis', p. 7.

- <sup>9</sup> O'Connor, 'Novelist and Believer', p. 168.
- <sup>10</sup> For a sample of the diverse perspectives on this subject, see Martin Hengel on Jesus as the fulfilment of Jewish eschatological hope in *Studies in Early Christology* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1995); Dale C. Allison's claim that Jesus believed the Kingdom had already been manifested through the 'crisis' of his ministry, *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991); or E.P. Sanders' discussion of the two 'senses' of the Kingdom in the New Testament, *Jesus and Judaism* (London: SCM Press, 1984).
- <sup>11</sup> David Brown, *Discipleship and Imagination: Christian Tradition and Truth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 110.
- <sup>12</sup> Christopher Rowland, *Christian Origins* (London: SPCK, 1985), p. 133.
- <sup>13</sup> Hengel, *Studies in Early Christology*, p. 72.
- <sup>14</sup> C.H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), pp. 144–5.
- <sup>15</sup> Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth*, p. 152.
- <sup>16</sup> Brown, *Discipleship and Imagination*, p. 110.
- <sup>17</sup> Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, p. 151.
- <sup>18</sup> Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, pp. 147–8.
- <sup>19</sup> Jörg Frey, 'Eschatology in the Johannine Circle', in G. van Belle, J. G. van der Watt, and P. Moritz (eds), *Theology and Christology in the Fourth Gospel* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2005), pp. 47–82 (p. 48).
- <sup>20</sup> Dodd, *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, p. 147.
- <sup>21</sup> R.E. Brown, *An Introduction to the Gospel of John* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), p. 240.
- <sup>22</sup> Frey, 'Eschatology in the Johannine Circle', p. 48.
- <sup>23</sup> D. Moody Smith, *The Theology of the Gospel of John* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 105.
- <sup>24</sup> Frey, 'Eschatology in the Johannine Circle', p. 47. Hugo Mendez also characterises the Johannine eschatology as an 'eschatological headache' that must be 'resolved', in 'Mixed Metaphors: Resolving the "Eschatological Headache" of John 5', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 137.3 (2018) 711–32.
- <sup>25</sup> Dodd, *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, pp. 148–9.
- <sup>26</sup> Frey, 'Eschatology in the Johannine Circle', p. 81.
- <sup>27</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *Existence and Faith*, trans. S. Ogden (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1961), pp. 248–52.
- <sup>28</sup> Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology*, p. 155.
- <sup>29</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, Letter to Karl Barth, in B. Jaspert (ed.), *Karl Barth—Rudolf Bultmann Letters: 1922–1966*, trans. G.W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1982), p. 88.
- <sup>30</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, 'Kerygma and Myth', in H. Bartsch (ed.), *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate* (London: SPCK, 1961), p. 5.
- <sup>31</sup> Bultmann, *Existence and Faith*, p. 251.
- <sup>32</sup> Frey, 'Eschatology in the Johannine Circle', pp. 50–3.
- <sup>33</sup> Dodd, *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, p. 147.
- <sup>34</sup> Brown, *Introduction to the Gospel of John*, p. 241.
- <sup>35</sup> Bultmann, Letter to Karl Barth, p. 106.
- <sup>36</sup> Frey, 'Eschatology in the Johannine Circle', p. 53.
- <sup>37</sup> Janet M. Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), p. 145.
- <sup>38</sup> Frey, 'Eschatology in the Johannine Circle', pp. 53–5.
- <sup>39</sup> Zimmermann, 'Eschatology and Time in the Gospel of John', p. 296.
- <sup>40</sup> James M. Byrne, 'Bultmann and Tillich', in G. Jones (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Modern Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 372–87.

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- <sup>42</sup> Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Volume 4, trans. C. Ernst (London: DLT, 1966), p. 342.
- <sup>43</sup> Mendez, 'Mixed Metaphors', p. 711.
- <sup>44</sup> Frey, 'Eschatology in the Johannine Circle', p. 47.
- <sup>45</sup> Zimmermann, 'Eschatology and Time in the Gospel of John', p. 296.
- <sup>46</sup> Janet Fitch, 'The Russian Soul', *Los Angeles Review of Books* (11 February 2016).
- <sup>47</sup> A revealing parallel is Graham Ward's description of how Shakespeare uses a nostalgic appeal to the 'seasonal cycle' of the liturgical calendar to evoke a 'sacred space that transfigures the ordinary' in *Romeo and Juliet*. Of particular relevance is Ward's observation that this sea change in 'the nature of time' anticipates elements of what is subsequently 'replayed in postmodernity', *True Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), pp. 9–11.
- <sup>48</sup> Dodd, *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, p. 148.
- <sup>49</sup> Whilst the original text reads 'in no time', 'at any time' is arguably a more accurate rendering of the original Russian text, that uses the phrase '*vot-vor*': roughly 'any time now'.
- <sup>50</sup> This perspective is also presented in the work of John Milton, who reminds us in *Paradise Lost* that 'Time, though in Eternity ... measures all things durable/ By present, past and future' (V: 580–2), *Paradise Lost* (New York: Signet Classics, 1968), p. 165.
- <sup>51</sup> O'Connor, 'Novelist and Believer', p. 155.
- <sup>52</sup> Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (New York: SVSP, 1979), pp. 98–9.
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- <sup>59</sup> Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, pp. 132–41.
- <sup>60</sup> Neither is this metaphorical experimentation about a claim to exclusivity; possible sources of inspiration include Boethius' decision to place the 'infinity' of the Divine mind at the centre of a series of temporal 'circles' in *Consolations*, trans. H.R. James (London: Routledge, 1911), p. 158, and Wordsworth's description of the future as a coiled snake forced to 'unfold/His drowsy rings' by the Word in his 'Ecclesiastical Sonnets', in T. Hutchinson (ed.), *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth* (London: Henry Frowde, 1895), p. 452.
- <sup>61</sup> Guy Collins, *Faithful Doubt: The Wisdom of Uncertainty* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), p. 121.
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- <sup>69</sup> C.S. Lewis, 'On Science Fiction', in W. Hooper (ed.), *Of Other Worlds* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1966), pp. 59–74.
- <sup>70</sup> Lisa Hayden, Translator's Introduction, in Vodolazkin, *Laurus*, p. ix.

- <sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. x.
- <sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. x.
- <sup>73</sup> Fitch, ‘The Russian Soul’.
- <sup>74</sup> Brown, *Discipleship and Imagination*, p. 100.
- <sup>75</sup> Williams, *Grace and Necessity*, p. 21.
- <sup>76</sup> Brown, *Discipleship and Imagination*, p. 94.
- <sup>77</sup> Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. R.G. Smith (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958), pp. 31–2.
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- <sup>80</sup> Bultmann, ‘Kerygma and Myth’, p. 5.
- <sup>81</sup> Hoeck, ‘*Prolepsis*’, p. 7.