



Dostoevsky and the Mystery of Russia

by David Allen White

The novel is the baby of the major literary forms. The lyric poem stretches back to the Homeric Hymns and the Psalms, the epic to Homer; drama prizes were being distributed in Athens in the fifth century B.C. and the short story is as old as the myth, the fables of Aesop and the parables of Our Lord Jesus Christ, not surprisingly a master of the short narrative given His larger creation. The novel, however, rises out of a potent combination of the printing press, the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, the rise of the middle class and an increase in leisure time. The new reader with some time on his hands and some pocket money quite reasonably wanted to read about what he knew best – himself. The novel thus is born in realism and becomes the place where the writer captures or recreates the details of recognizable worlds. The first acclaimed and successful popular novel, and perhaps still the greatest, is Cervantes’

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Don Quixote (1605). The dusty roads, the inns, the mountains, the cheese and the bread and the rusty armor, all are rooted in a reality new to literature.

Cervantes’ great novel established another significant defining element of the novel at its inception. The early novels were comic in nature. Examining a real world, they of necessity were social. Many of the early novels depicted the usual social dance of love and marriage, work and play, gain and loss. Even the hugely popular *Robinson Crusoe* (1720) looked at the attempt to build a little world of one’s own on a desert island. Comedy’s central concern is the tension between individuals and the society in which they attempt to live and such tensions rooted the novel in a recognizable, but artistically shaped, real social order.

Not until the eighteenth century in France did the novel take a turn down more shadowy lanes. Perhaps because the French knew in their deepest being the dark possibilities of social disruption, their novelists turned the comic dance of the novel into a more solemn walk. Novels such as *Manon Lescaut* (1731) and *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (1782)

begin to direct the movement of the novel down darker and more haunted paths.

The nineteenth century saw the haunted darkness expand in the gothic novel and the novel of unfulfilled romance. The novel seemed capable of exploring all possibilities of human experience and new perspectives opened up, most importantly, the perspective of the tragic.

Tragedy is the “*rara avis*” among literary forms. The grandest and most powerful of visions, tragedy is the most difficult to capture. Greece in the fifth century B.C., England at the turn of the seventeenth century, France in the latter part of the seventeenth century all produced tragedy, but the nineteenth century saw tragedy move into new forms, the opera or music drama and the novel. America produced one great tragic novel, Melville’s *Moby Dick* (1851). When the last golden arch falls into the dust and the last video or computer screen goes blank, America will be remembered for two astonishing accomplishments – the placing of a man on the moon, the result of our great science and engineering skills and our great wealth, and a novel about a mad

sea captain and a white whale, the product of our troubled spiritual foundations.

Tragedy in the novel reached its apotheosis in the nineteenth century in Russia in the works of those two giants of the long fiction form, Count Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoevsky. Tolstoy certainly possessed great genius and his accomplishments are remarkable. His influence cannot necessarily be called beneficial, however. His great epic/tragic novel *War And Peace* serves up a vision of history firmly in line with contemporary philosophical thought. Tolstoy's view of history denies the "great man" theory of history and, operating in line with Hegelian principles, presents history as an inevitable flow of events. The "great man" in the novel, Napoleon, by trying to impose his own will on events is crushed by the forces of inevitable movement, while the wise old Russian general, Kutuzov, observes the pattern of the sweep of change and accommodates himself to it, thus securing victory. The greatness of Tolstoy's vision lies not in his illustration of recent theories but in his creation of the world of Russia in the Napoleonic wars, the soirees, the battles, the landscape, the first love of Natasha, the courage of Andrei, the questions of Pierre.

Tolstoy's greatest tragic vision lies in *Anna Karenina*, a profound moral tragedy. This masterwork also provides insight into Tolstoy's Christian vision. He believed himself a Christian and spoke the language of Christianity, but with a restricted vocabulary. Tolstoy's Christianity is grounded in forgiveness, charity, virtue, brotherhood and peace. It is a vision stripped of the supernatural. This is the reason that Tolstoy became so important to the peace movements of the mid-twentieth century. His views

strongly influenced men such as Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. The crux of this vision of action attaches man only to earth; no transcendent spirituality or drama of eternal salvation informs the work.

Dostoevsky's works bubble over with life-and-death struggles of suffering and loss, salvation and damnation. Born in 1821, he did not come as did most other major Russian writers of the century from the landed gentry. His father, an authoritarian figure, worked as a doctor in a small town. His mother, a devout woman, had an enormous influence on her children. In his later days he stated, "I came from a pious Russian family. In our family we knew the Gospel almost from the cradle."¹ His mother read him the Gospels as well as the lives of the saints. The tales permeated his imagination from his earliest years.

A single episode from his childhood provided another defining moment in his faith. The family would leave the small town where his father worked to vacation in the countryside. On one such vacation, the young Dostoevsky was walking in the woods when he heard voices shouting that a wolf was loose in

now, go!" and he made the sign of the cross over the child, afterward crossing himself. Dostoevsky remembered that he returned home with a feeling of complete security.

He went to study at a military-engineering school, even though from his earliest days he hoped to be a writer. His father insisted that he receive a science-based education and the young man complied with his father's wishes. He proved to be an adequate student in a curriculum that along with the science and engineering studies included religion, history, architecture, Russian language and literature, French language and literature, German language and literature, portrait drawing and art history.

He immersed himself in the popular ideas of the day and read heavily in the great romantic writers – Schiller, Hugo, Balzac, his first publication being a translation of Balzac's *Eugenie Grandet*. He absorbed a theory of German philosopher and romantic aesthetician Friedrich Schelling who taught him that art is a means of "metaphysical cognition, the means by which the highest transcendent truths are revealed to mankind."² He imagined

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the area. The young boy, terrified, began trying to retrace his steps but found himself lost in the woods. He saw a peasant plowing a field in the distance and ran toward him. The man smiled and comforted the boy, pointed him toward home and reassured him by saying his eye would remain on the youngster all the way to the boy's home. The peasant then said, "Now, Christ be with you,

himself as an artist with a high calling and saw his art as possessing a high mission for the good of the Russian people.

He served his time in the military and then decided to pursue his life's ambition to become a writer. His first novel *Poor Folk* (1846) received very positive reviews as it powerfully stirred up compassion for the disadvantaged, being in line

with the social concerns of the day. By 1848 he had begun to associate himself with the Petrashevski group in Saint Petersburg, young intellectuals devoted to the study and implementation of the ideas of the French utopian socialists. The socialist movement in Saint Petersburg consisted of two separate wings: those who based their ideas on Christian principles of assisting the poor and downtrodden, and the atheist faction who abandoned any mention of Christianity, claiming its adherents had done nothing over the centuries to improve social conditions. Dostoevsky felt himself torn between the two groups, longing to be intellectually radical but possessed of a heart shaped by

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In 1849 the group was arrested and charged with having read banned material and setting up a printing press to distribute controversial and forbidden material. Dostoevsky was condemned to death with the others. The morning of the execution, wearing the hoods on their heads and hearing the guns cocked, they learned that their sentences had been commuted to exile and imprisonment in Siberia.

The arrival at the prison in Siberia returned his thoughts to his childhood. Outside the walls, women who had followed their husbands into exile waited and watched. They pleaded with the officers to free the new prisoners and when their requests were refused, the women handed copies of the New Testament to the prisoners and,

making the sign of the cross in the direction of the inmates, called out blessings on them.

Dostoevsky absorbed the New Testament in prison. He also learned an important life lesson. Earlier, in a letter to his brother Mikhail, he had written, "Man is an enigma. This enigma must be solved. And if you spend all your life at it, don't say you have wasted your time; I occupy myself with this enigma because I wish to be a man."³ Part of the enigma clarified for him during his prison years. He discovered that not all the underprivileged were high-minded or good. Many were degenerate scum. He rejected the "noble peasant" idea found in most of Tolstoy's

writing and realized men must be judged one by one, on their individual merits. Social class could not be used as a key to defining character.

He also learned from experience something about the savage nature of human beings. Through observation of his fellow prisoners he saw that we are disordered creatures, subject to outbursts of irrational passions and destructive action. The more the individual personality was confined and controlled, the more subject it became to these frenetic explosions of willfulness. Part of this turbulence could be defined as a desire of the individual will to express its own freedom. Human freedom had a compulsive need to demonstrate its own existence. Dostoevsky's great biographer Joseph Frank puts the idea this way, "To fulfill this drive, men will sacrifice all other goods and values; and if

they are unable to satisfy it in any way, the results can be disastrous."⁴

Dostoevsky himself proved this "disastrous" freedom by making a bad marriage in 1858 and giving in to his temptation for gambling, a vice that haunted him for his entire life but did produce his brilliant dissection of the addiction, *The Gambler*. He also came to be afflicted with epilepsy. He distanced himself from his old friends as his political views became more and more conservative. He saw clearly that man does not above all need material well being in this world, but rather spiritual redemption. What Christ taught mankind, he now knew, was that salvation can come only through suffering. Man must be ready to share the sufferings of Christ in order to find salvation. In a world increasingly absorbed with progress and utopias and comfort, Dostoevsky shouts, "No! Christ lives and what He teaches us is that we must suffer."

Such belief could be neither easy nor constant in the modern world. "I will tell you that I am a child of the century, a child of disbelief and doubt. I will remain so until the grave. How much terrible torture this thirst for faith has cost me and costs me even now which is all the stronger in my soul the more arguments I can find against it. And yet God sends me sometimes instants when I am completely calm. At those instants I love and feel loved by others and it is at those instants that

I have shaped for myself a Credo where everything is clear and sacred to me. This credo is very simple. Here it is: To believe that nothing is more beautiful, profound, sympathetic, reasonable, manly, and perfect than Christ. And I tell myself with a jealous love that not only is there nothing more but there can be nothing more. Even more,

if someone proved to me that Christ is outside the truth and that in reality the truth were outside of Christ, then I should prefer to remain with Christ rather than with the truth.”⁵

Joseph Frank summarizes Dostoevsky’s view of modern man in this way, “Not to believe in Christ and immortality is to be condemned to live in a senseless universe and the characters in his great novels who reach this level of self-awareness inevitably destroy themselves because by refusing to endure the torment of living without hope they have become monsters in their misery.”⁶ This great struggle between belief and disbelief informs all the great novels from *Notes From Underground* through *The Brothers Karamazov*. After nursing his wife through her fatal illness and then losing his beloved brother Mikhail, Dostoevsky was granted the grace of a devoted second wife, Anna Grigoryevna Snitkina. Hired to be his secretary, she became his spiritual consolation. He dictated

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to her the vast fictional canvases on which an array of recognizable human souls struggle with grand passions and high ideas. Dmitri Karamazov says God and the devil are fighting and the battlefield is the heart of man. The novels of Dostoevsky come closer to the core of the modern dilemma than any other body of modern literature and his knowledge of human beings is the keenest in art since Shakespeare.

But some great artists may also

be graced by God with another gift. Some artists have oracular flashes, offering up profound prophetic pronouncements. Such instances stretch from the vision of Vergil in his Fourth Eclogue (37 B.C.) which suggests the coming of Our Lord as a child who will bring a reign of peace to a troubled world to the chilling example of the Japanese man in Strindberg’s play *The Great Highway* (1909) who announces that he is named for his native town Hiroshima just before he steps into a furnace and

is incinerated. No artist ever set down more accurate prophetic pronouncements than Dostoevsky. In his great novel about the revolutionary movement, *Demons* (1872), Dostoevsky accurately predicted not only the coming of socialism to Holy Mother Russia, as he termed his country, but also the devastating consequences. At more than one point in the novel, he has characters pronounce the cold fact that the revolution will triumph “by

radically lopping off a hundred million heads.”⁷ Shigalyov, the character presenting the plan, admits a problem, for “[s]tarting from unlimited freedom, I conclude with unlimited despotism.”⁸ Dostoevsky seemed to witness the abyss into which his country would descend in the twentieth century. He combines his vision of the nightmare looming over Russia with the incident of the Gadarene swine from the Gospel of Luke, a passage he uses as one of the epigraphs for the novel. He again quotes the passage from Luke when a character in the novel, Sofya Matveevna Ulitin, a woman who travels from town to town passing out Gospels, reads the words at the request of the dying liberal professor, Stepan Trofimovich Verkhovensky, the man whose soft socialist teaching has unleashed the “demons” in the next generation. After hearing the passage, the dying professor says:

Terribly many thoughts occur to me now: you see, it’s exactly like our Russia. These demons who come out of a sick man and enter into the swine – it’s all the sores, all the miasmas, all the uncleanness, all the big and little demons accumulated in our great and sick man, in our Russia, for centuries, for centuries! Oui, cette Russie que j’aimais toujours. But a great will and a great thought will descend to her from on high, as upon that insane demoniac, and out will come all these demons, all the uncleanness, all the abomination that is festering on the surface... and they will beg of themselves to enter into swine. And perhaps they already have! It is us, us and them, and Petrusha... et les autres avec lui, and I, perhaps, first, at the head, and we will rush, insane



and raging, from the cliff down into the sea, and all be drowned, and good riddance to us, because that's the most we're fit for.⁹

Russia is presented as a possessed madman, out of whom demons will rush, infect others and push multitudes of those so “possessed” into destruction. The connection with Our Lady’s message to the shepherd children at Fatima on the eve of the Russian revolution is unmistakable: “Russia will spread her errors throughout the world.”

Dostoevsky makes many Catholic readers uncomfortable. In many of his novels he rails against the Catholic Church. His knowledge of the Catholic Church, however, came largely from the French socialists who had such a profound influence on him in his youth. Dostoevsky viewed the Catholic Church as an

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institution that had abandoned its spiritual beliefs in a quest to give mankind earthly happiness. He has the Catholic Grand Inquisitor state to Christ in *The Brothers Karamazov*, “You promised them heavenly bread, but, I repeat again, can it compare with earthly bread in the eyes of the weak, eternally depraved, and eternally ignoble human race?”¹⁰

Dostoevsky related his sense of how the Catholic social preoccupation worked. “The Catholic priest searches out some miserable worker’s family and gains their confidence. He feeds them



Revolutionaries attack priests in Russia all, gives them clothes, provides heating, looks after the sick, buys medicine, becomes the friend of the family and converts them to Catholicism.”¹¹ This sense of the socially obsessed Catholic Church which places earthly comfort before redemptive suffering and peace on earth before peace of soul must make any post-Vatican II Catholic uncomfortable in its precision. The only error when applied to

the Novus Ordo Church is that the priest would no longer attempt to convert the family. The sentimental socialism of the nineteenth-century French intellectuals whom Dostoevsky came to despise found a happy home in the post-conciliar Church.

With his insistence on suffering and salvation, the supernatural and sacrifice, Dostoevsky echoes many of the teachings of the Catholic Church. With his prophetic vision of a possessed Russia unleashing her demons into the world, he echoes the prophecies of Fatima, and not only those prophecies that

already come to fruition. The above quoted words from the deathbed of Stepan Trofimovich Verkhovensky in *Demons* conclude with the following remarks:

But the sick man will be healed and “sit at the feet of Jesus”... and everyone will look in amazement.... Dear, *vous comprenez apres*, but it excites me very much now.... *Vous comprenez apres.... Nous comprendrons ensemble.*¹²

Russia will be healed; Russia will sit at the feet of Our Savior and the whole world will be amazed. “In the end my Immaculate Heart will triumph, Russia will be converted and a period of peace will be granted to mankind.” Heaven granted this man, a modernist, a tormented doubter, a gambler and epileptic, a foe of socialistic Catholicism, a novelist, a glimpse of the Fatima prophecies before heaven chose to reveal them to the world, a fact that presents us with mysteries as to the nature of art and the will of God. In his final novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky has the wise elder Father Zossima on the brink of the grave say, “This star [the image of Christ] will shine forth from the East.” The same promise has been given us by Our Lady and we who suffer here in the maelstrom of the modern atheistic, materialistic world still await that glorious moment. ✠

1. Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Seeds of Revolt 1821-1849* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 43.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 64.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 91.

4. Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Years of Ordeal 1850-1859* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 153.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 160.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 159.

7. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Demons* (Vintage Books, 1994), p. 405.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 402.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 655.

10. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (Vintage Books, 1991), p. 253.

11. Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Stir Of Liberation 1860-1865* (Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 188.

12. Dostoevsky, *Demons*, p. 655.