Copyrighted Material

INTRODUCTION

THE PRESENT VOLUME is composed of essays and reviews largely written over the years when I was working on the five volumes I devoted to studying Dostoevsky and his times. Such incidental pieces were of course conditioned by my concern with that key figure in Russian literature, but it is impossible to write about Dostoevsky without dealing with many others as well, and especially his great rival Tolstoy. Moreover, since my aim was to approach Dostoevsky not primarily as a biographical personality but as a writer whose work in effect provided "a condensed history of 19th century Russian culture"[1] (seen of course from his own idiosyncratic point of view), it was necessary to range over a much larger area than merely the details of his existence could provide. In my view, Dostoevsky's stories, novels, and journalism essentially responded to the moral-philosophical and moral-religious issues raised by the evolution of radical ideology during his lifetime (positively in his works of the 1840s, negatively, as its most devastating critic, beginning in the 1860s). It was thus necessary to become acquainted with his entire social-cultural context, and I kept an eye out for various books as they appeared that dealt with one or another facet of this broader horizon. Some of these works did not concern Dostoevsky directly but dealt with problems of Russian culture that formed the essential background of his creations. I have added to this collection a piece on Vladimir Nabokov's *Lectures on Literature*, which, although not dealing with Russian works except indirectly, is too fascinating to be eliminated for this external reason. It was, after all, written by a Russian author.

The title I have given this volume, *Between Religion and Rationality*, also indicates a general sense of what distinguishes the thematics of the Russian novel from those of other literary traditions. The distinctiveness of the Russian novel was noted at the end of the nineteenth century by the unjustly neglected figure of the Vicomte Eugene Melchior de Vogüé, whose book, *The Russian Novel* (1866), first brought this body of work to worldwide attention. The vicomte, himself a minor man of letters and later novelist, was stationed in the French Embassy at Petersburg for several years. He was one of the few foreign diplomats who made an effort to learn the Russian language and, marrying into the highest strata of Russian society, gained entrance to the court circles surrounding Alexander II. He was also personally acquainted with Turgenev and Dostoevsky (much

[1] Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Mantle of the Prophet* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), xiii.

Copyrighted Material

more with the former than the latter) and became intimately familiar with Russian history and culture as well. After the publication of his book, sales of the few Russian novels already translated into French shot up like sky-rockets, and a whole new translation industry was created to make others available to the reading public. Vogüé's book, written in an expressively personal style filled with firsthand impressions of Russian life, the Russian landscape, and the authors he had met, was translated everywhere and had the same results elsewhere as in France.

Writing in the context of a French Naturalism dominated by the pessimism and determinism of Flaubert and Zola, and whose end result as he saw it was *Bouvard et Pecuchet*, what impressed Vogüé most was the Russian refusal to accept such moral nihilism as their final word. The most important Russian novelists, as he accurately presented them, all came out of the so-called Natural School, whose ancestors were Gogol's novel *Dead Souls* and his novella *The Overcoat* (the latter so important for Dostoevsky's *Poor Folk*). Their images of life did not spare the sordid and the degrading, but what Vogüé admired in the Russians was a much broader view of humanity than was apparent in his own literature. "In going through their strangest books," he writes (and many Russian novels now considered masterpieces, such as *The Brothers Karamazov*, were still "strange" to his French classical tastes), "one senses a regulatory book in their neighborhood, a venerable volume that occupies a place of honor in the Imperial Library of Petersburg, the Ostromir Evangel of Novgorod (1056)."[2] It was this volume, dating from the early centuries of Christianity in Russia, that represented for him the source and spirit of much of the later literature that followed.

For Vogüé, the attraction of the Russian novel stemmed from its refusal to submit to a world in which the latest discoveries (or theories) of science took precedence over the age-old injunctions of Christian morality. It was only in the English novel of the time, as both Vogüé and other French critics suggested, that one could find anything comparable to the Russian. Indeed, he remarks that "despite my definitive taste for Turgenev and Tolstoy, I perhaps prefer that enchantress Mary Evans"[3] (George Eliot's real name), whose novels like *Adam Bede* and *Silas Marner* gave voice to the morality of English Protestantism. The novels of Dickens as well are filled with those overt Christian sentiments that Vogüé finds so lacking in his own literature. But while the nineteenth-century English novel may portray the difficulties of its characters to live up to the prescriptions of Christian morality, one does not find in it the same depiction of the struggle

[2] Eugène-Melchior de Vogüé, *The Russian Novel*, trans. H. A. Sawyer (London: Chapman and Hall, 1913), 18.

[3] Ibid., 15.

Copyrighted Material

with the source of that morality itself, the Christian faith. Religion in the English novel is simply part of the social background, as one can see in the novels of Jane Austen or, a bit later, in Trollope's *Barchester Towers.* There is nothing in English to compete with Dostoevsky's remarkable attempt in *The Idiot* to dramatize the dilemmas of "a perfectly beautiful man"[4] modeled on the image of Christ.

Certainly one reason is that, before the eighteenth century, there was very little that could be called "the Russian novel." The genre previously had been represented almost exclusively by the hagiographic lives of saints, by the translation of a few Byzantine and Hellenistic romances, and, centuries later, by the imitation of Western models. The history of Russian culture contained nothing comparable to the efforts made since the Renaissance in Europe, inspiring its literature, to reconcile the Christian ethos with the demands of secular life, a process that has been superbly traced in that classic of modern criticism, Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis.* Russian literary realism, as Auerbach remarks, began very late, only during the second half of the nineteenth century, and is "based on a Christian and traditionally patriarchical concept of the creaturely dignity of every human individual regardless of social rank and position, and hence . . . is fundamentally related rather to old-Christian than to modern occidental realism."[5] Russian literature thus took off at a relatively late stage, and it took some time before, instead of being merely imitative, it was capable of adapting these imported, unfamiliar forms to Russian realities.

The first important writer who really did so was Pushkin, and his irresistible narrative poem *Eugene Onegin* has often been called the first great Russian novel. No Russian writer was more familiar with European literature; but it is typical that his appealing heroine Tatyana, the origin of a whole line of similar female figures, ends by an act of self-sacrifice to a marriage vow. There is nothing specifically religious about her decision, but it is linked in the poem with the effect on her sensibility of her peasant nanny, whose values were those of a Russian religious tradition steeped in reverence for the self-sacrifice of Christ. The effect of such peasant religiosity on the Western-educated upper classes can also be seen in such a figure as Platon Karataev in *War and Peace*, whose serene acceptance of the vagaries of his life persuades Tolstoy's hero Pierre Bezuhov to accept all the harrowing incidents of his fate with tranquility and even with joy. Nor should one forget Konstantin Levin in *Anna Karenina*, whose life is transformed by hearing peasants speak of God as he is mowing hay in their midst.

[4] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Polnoe Sobraniie Sochinenii*, ed. and ann. G. M. Fridlender et al., 30 vols. (Leningrad, 1972–1990), 28/bk. 2:241; December 31, 1867/January 12, 1868.

[5] Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 521.

Copyrighted Material

These are only several examples of the manner in which the disintegrating effects of the imposed Western culture assimilated by the educated upper class in Russia come into conflict with, and ultimately give way to, the religious sensibility absorbed from the omnipresent peasant world. It was Dostoevsky, as already suggested, whose great novels contain the most explicit expression of this clash. Dostoevsky dramatizes it in an incomparable fashion by depicting the various doctrines then in vogue to transform and (presumably) to improve a society dominated by social injustice and glaring inequality. His genius consisted in his consummate ability to depict the moral-psychological consequences of such ideas on his major characters—their struggle with, as it were, their Russian conscience—and to raise such struggles to the level of high tragedy. Despite the brilliance and originality of Mikhail Bakhtin, it has always seemed to me that Vyacheslav Ivanov's characterization of Dostoevsky's works as "novel-tragedies" came closer to their effect on the reader than Mikhail Bakhtin's emphasis on their "dialogism"—the competing clash of ideas and attitudes taking place between (as well as within) his characters. The harried circumstances of Dostoevsky's life, including his four years in a prison camp, also allowed him to portray such conflicts ranging through both the heights and depths of the Russian social order.

The "ideological" nature of the Russian novel, the manner in which its characters discuss and dispute as well as embody the reigning social theories of the day, has often been noted. Usually, this feature is attributed to the strictness of Russian censorship, the lack of any public venue where such issues could be safely disputed; and certainly this was an important factor. But a deeper reason could be the novelty of such ideas suddenly intruding on a world totally unprepared to receive them by any period of transition and compromise, such as had been worked out in European literature for several centuries. Russians themselves have often noted that the "radical" ideas of the West, when they came to Russia, were immediately driven to their most extreme consequences; they were not merely theories to be discussed, as was largely the case in other countries, but plans to be put into action. The greatest work inspired by this tendency is of course Dostoevsky's *Demons.*

Not all these incidental pieces deal directly with this perennial Russian problem, but it hovers in the background of Russian culture as a whole and keeps appearing and reappearing as an essential aspect of the Russian moral-cultural psyche. Chekhov, for example, wrote, "I can only regard with bewilderment an educated man who is also religious."[6] But then, in his beautiful story *The Student*, he portrays how two peasant women weep

[6] Anton Chekhov, *Polnoe Sobraniie Sochinenii i Pisem*, 30 vols. (Moscow: Nauka, 1974–1983); *Pisma*, 11:234; July 12, 1903.

Copyrighted Material

on hearing a recital of Peter's betrayal of Christ; and the seminary student addressing them, whose faith itself is shown to be questionable, realizes to what extent these emotions are still alive among the common people after nineteen hundred years. Also, there is the unforgettable scene in Andrey Sinyavsky's study of Russian religion of his encounter with the *Raskol* (Old Believers) in his prison camp, who meet secretly at night in the boiler room to recite *The Apocalypse*, each of them having memorized a chapter.

To what extent this problematic of Russian culture will continue to exist amidst the transformations that have taken place since the rise and fall of Soviet communism can remain a matter of speculation only. But since it managed to survive the attempt of the ex-seminary student Stalin to stamp it out entirely, and flourishes once again in the relative religious freedom prevailing since the collapse of the Soviet system, one may assume that it is still destined for a long life.

I should like to express my gratitude to my teaching assistant at Stanford, Irina M. Erman, for her invaluable aid in locating the sources of quotations and references in my articles, as well as obtaining permission for their republication.