

Dostoevsky: A Revolutionary Conservative

EDWARD WASIOLEK

THE FORCE and power of Dostoevsky's novels has commanded the admiration, and at times almost the worship, of country after country and generation after generation. The enthusiasm has not been restricted to literature. There is hardly a modern discipline that has not paid its homage to Dostoevsky. List the great thinkers of the last seventy-five years and more than likely you will find most of them acknowledging their debt to Dostoevsky. Nietzsche, who was proud unto madness, humbly acknowledged that Dostoevsky alone taught him anything; Freud wrote an essay about him, placed him in the company of Sophocles and Shakespeare, and Freudians have found almost every important discovery of Freud anticipated in Dostoevsky's works; Sartre claimed that all modern existentialism was already contained in the words of Ivan Karamazov: "If there is no God, then all is permitted."

Berdyaeu and Strakhov saw in Dostoevsky's teachings new faith for modern man: Berdyaeu saw this faith as a new religion; Strakhov, as a terrifying but true nihilism. Believer and non-believer; liberal and conservative; friend and foe of modern psychology—all have found sustenance in Dostoevsky. He is one of those rare geniuses whose work has commanded the admiration, even the assent, of opposing ideologies, beliefs, and world views.

All this is true of Dostoevsky's creative works, but it is not true of the man and his opinions. There seems little hope for a man who could steal the wedding ring of his pregnant wife for another turn on the roulette wheel, or who could worship the Czar who had unjustly punished him, see war as morally uplifting, and urge Russian swords on to Constantinople. He was a defender of the Orthodoxy in a century when Belinsky saw the clergy as "representatives of gluttony,

miserliness, and shameless groveling," and Tolstoy was proud of his excommunication. He hated Germans, Frenchmen, Englishmen, Poles, and when he bothered to refer to them, Americans. He hated everything un-Russian, and in his messianic and narrow nationalism, he was convinced that the Russian soul would unite the world. For social and political historians he is a political anachronism, and his running commentary on the events of the day in *The Journal of a Writer* is crude and superficial. The novelist and the man were not one, and tributes to Dostoevsky often ring with this distinction. For Lenin Dostoevsky was "repulsive and great"; for Mikhaylovsky he was cruel and dangerous because he wrote so well and thought so badly. But—so the common opinion goes—he had the good sense to keep himself and his political and social thinking out of his novels.

The view is not accurate. Dostoevsky did not keep his politics out of his novels. His politics and his psychology are inseparable and both are at the heartbeat of his talent. The man and his art are one. Dostoevsky the man is a conservative, and Dostoevsky the writer is a conservative. There is this difference: as a journalist, relieved of the confining discipline of artistic form and free to speak in his own person, he could be, if not crude, hasty and simplistic. In *The Journal of a Writer* he was a man in a hurry to make his conclusions. He needed the responsibility and perspective that "other voices" gave him. Everything we find in his journalistic writings, we can find in his creative works, but in the novels we find something else: the other "case" stated honestly and argued for vigorously. Dostoevsky *stated* his ideas in his newspaper articles; he *tested* them in his novels. In his journalistic writings, Dostoevsky is a conservative, but in his novels he is a great conservative.

What did Dostoevsky's conservatism

consist of? More, assuredly, than the defense of the Czar, rabid nationalism, and a hatred of technical progress. His conservatism begins with his return from four years of imprisonment and four years of forced service in the Siberian army, and ten years of absence from his beloved St. Petersburg. Before he left in 1849, he was a young man in his twenties who had flirted with the beautiful abstractions of the Petrashevtsy, a mildly subversive group whose spiritual sustenance was the writings of French utopians: Fourier, Saint Simon, Cabet, Proudhon, and Considérant. For more than two years Dostoevsky had frequented the meetings of the Petrashevtsy and thrilled to a rhetoric that promised to make the earth beautiful and the people who inhabited it good and virtuous by a simple rational reorganization of society. Much later—in the 1870's—he was to recall in *The Journal of a Writer*, the enthusiasm he had felt at the time:

It was impossible for all of us to resist the conviction that a Christian society, religion, the family, and property rights were immoral. We were convinced we had to destroy national distinctions and to feel contempt for the fatherland because it stood in the way of progress etc. We couldn't resist these ideas: they seized our hearts and minds with the power of something sublime.

And in these same 1870's he was to judge the enthusiasm he had felt as a youth:

Some of us came in contact with French socialism and accepted it without the smallest doubt as the final answer to humanity's unity, that is, as the answer to all the dreams that swept us at the time. In this way, in accepting its goals, we accepted what was the height of egoism, the height of inhumanity, the height of economic nonsense, the

height of insult to human nature, and the height of destruction of human liberty—but none of this bothered us a bit.

In prison Dostoevsky met man as he *was*, and he was never the same again. Fourier, Saint Simon, and their Russian counterparts had told him that man was inherently good, beautiful, and virtuous, and that only the social system needed to be changed to bring his inherent goodness into play. Instead, he found man capable of anything and limited by nothing. He found the *executioner* in each man, and the axe was turned not only against others but against himself. An abyss had opened up before Dostoevsky, and he refused to turn his back on it. He had lost his faith in the clouds; he was to find it again in the abyss. But what he learned did not reach the nerve ends of his talent until five years after he returned from prison and exile, when he published one of the most remarkable documents of the nineteenth century: *Notes from the Underground*. What moved him to the fury of a man betrayed were the claims that were being made by a new generation of liberals.

The high-minded and dreamy socialism of the forties had come to rebirth in a determined, vulgar, active nihilism in people like Chernyshevsky, Dobroliubov, and Pisarev. The most famous and influential of the group was Chernyshevsky. In works like *The Aesthetic Relations of Art to Reality*, "The Anthropological Principle of Philosophy," and "A Russian at a Tryst" (*Russki chelovek na rendez-vous*), Chernyshevsky provided the theoretical base for a new view of reality, society, and man; and in his incredibly popular novel *What is to be Done* (1863), the image of the "new man" that was to be the product of a new society. The basic law of this new view of reality and man is "the unity of the laws of nature" (*edinstvo zakonov prirody*). In "The Anthropological Principle

of Philosophy" Chernyshevsky argues that there is no essential difference between a mineral, plant, polyp, animal, and man. Each obeys the same law of nature, and all differences are merely differences of complexity. The same "acids" (the building blocks of nature for Chernyshevsky) are present in minerals as well as in man. Consequently, all "special" natures are the fantasies of a pre-scientific age: religion is a fairy tale; free will makes as much sense as saying that "the plate broke because the plate broke"; and man's moral nature will someday be known as well as man's physical nature.

Reason, it was implied, could perceive the law of human nature, construct society according to this law, and usher man into a life of perpetual bliss. What had traditionally besieged the physical nature of man—poverty, crime, disease—and what had always besieged his moral nature—envy, hate, spite, distrust, selfishness—would be eliminated. Reason and the human will would discern and put into effect the circumstances necessary to produce the eternal happiness and well-being of man. In his popular novel *What is to be Done* Chernyshevsky went on to give a picture of the new man, Rakhmetov, and in Vera's fourth dream, a picture of the happy new society joyfully cavorting in a "Crystal Palace."

Against all this, against the laws of reason and the whole mighty edifice of man's systematic accumulation of knowledge, Dostoevsky pits the puny, spiteful, sickly nature of the Underground Man. Against the ideal of the Crystal Palace, which for Chernyshevsky was the symbol of ultimate rational determination of man's social and moral happiness, the Underground Man opposes his unique, capricious, subjective world of feeling: wish, dream, hope, and cruelty, suffering, pettiness, and viciousness. If the laws of nature (as defined by

reason) really exist, then "free will" is a private dream, an illusion that will be dispelled by reason like a mist over humanity's dawn. But if the Underground Man is right and man, rather than assured happiness, prefers sticking gold pins into others or having them stuck into himself; and if his subjective revolt is really the pledge of a reality that is full, complex, and true—of which reason is only a small part and not the whole—then the laws of reason are an illusion, a dream that has arisen like a mist over the scientific infancy of man. Which is the dream and which the reality in this weird dialectic?

Do the laws of nature exist? Is man a function of some infinite calculus or is he free to follow the sweet curve of his foolish will? The more the Underground Man is conscious of the "wall" (the laws of nature), the more his resentment and spite are kindled against it. It is in the defiance and spite that he finds the will to oppose the wall. His free, foolish, unfettered caprice is his only weapon against the laws of nature, and his only gauge of freedom. He can know his freedom by acting his freedom. But if the will is free—and Dostoevsky believed with the Underground Man that it was—then it is contained by no law. And if it is limited by no law, then it is a fury unleashed upon the world. All truths become illusions; social relations become a duel of wills; and society becomes possible only by force. This was the view of the universe that sent a chill running down J. Middleton Murry's spine, brought D. H. Lawrence to reluctant agreement with Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor, and sent Strakhov into dark ecstasy over the nihilistic emancipation of the world.

Much of Dostoevsky's work that follows *The Notes from the Underground* is a dramatization of this view, and explains his political views. His satire of "socialists" in *The Possessed* is precisely the dis-

parity between the "dreams" the socialists carry in their heads, and the reality of their natures, which is always dominated by "self-interest." Liputin dreams of Fourieristic phalansteries, but he is a petty tyrant at home; Virginsky believes that it is liberal and right for his wife to take a lover, but he cannot contain himself and beats up the lover; a young girl campaigns for "needy students" and yet can't stand the student sitting next to her; socialists gather with Peter Verkhovensky to discuss plans for revolution and the universal happiness of mankind, and they can't stand each other. What Dostoevsky wants to show again and again in his dramatizations of social questions is the futility and danger of schemes that are not based on the reality of man's condition.

And the reality of man's condition is to be self-interested; no matter how much he may deceive others and deceive himself, he will always seek his advantage. All his ideas and plans for the betterment of the world are so much chaff in the hot breath of his desire. "Touch the vanity of those innumerable friends of humanity," cries Lebedev in *The Idiot*, "and they will set fire to the four corners of the world from petty revenge, like all of us, and to be honest, like myself, vilest of all, for I will bring the fuel for the fire and then run." The same sentiment is voiced by the Underground Man and indeed by Dostoevsky himself. As a young man he flunked algebra in the military engineering school he was attending, and he had to repeat a year. In that moment of hurt pride, he wrote his brother that he was ready to destroy the world.

We can understand why "the rational organization of human happiness" becomes for him "the compulsory organization of human happiness." Shigalyov in *The Possessed*, the logician of socialism, comes to the conclusion that the rational

organization of human happiness (his conception of freedom) will logically and ineluctably eventuate in a state where 90 per cent of the people are reduced to the state of happy cattle and 10 per cent will be free to rule them. His conclusions, he insists to the outraged cries of the other socialists present, are incontrovertible, because they are based on the nature of man. All other social thinkers have been "dreamers, story tellers and fools" because they have believed in fairy tales and not the nature of man. Irving Howe and others have seen Shigalyov as representing the utter extreme of Dostoevsky's forebodings about socialism, but the fact of the matter is that Shigalyov has his "fiction" also, or in the words of Peter Verkhovensky he is also an aesthete and not a realist. Why 10 per cent free? As Peter implies, Shigalyov has stopped short of the necessary consequences of his premises: the same process that reduced 90 per cent to the state of "happy" slaves would continue to work within the 10 per cent until there remained only one will. Without God, for Dostoevsky, there is only the will; and without God, society can be unified only by force. And this brings us to Dostoevsky's alternative to his terrible realism.

There are rare moments when the duel of wills—Dostoevsky's conception of social relations—is momentarily and miraculously suspended, and when man is graced with liberation from the steel circle of hurting and being hurt. These moments for Dostoevsky are always individual, mysterious, unwilling, and they are the empirical basis for his God. Dostoevsky's God is a concrete God, and Shatov's much ridiculed definition of God as a "Russian" God means just that. Every great nation—and a great nation is one that believes in its greatness—believes in its own God; as soon as a nation begins to believe in a general God, it is on the way to a decline. For Dos-

toevsky this means simply that if God is a living consciousness, and not just an idea, he will be *your* God and not *everybody's* God. As long as the people *live* their God, God will be theirs alone (like any other truly lived thing), but as soon as they begin to *think* him, he will be everyone's and no one's. As a concrete living God, he is for Dostoevsky the feeling men and nations have of revolt against any limitation of their natures: he is the consciousness we have of truly free—because unlimited—natures. An act of faith, for Dostoevsky, is the supremely free act, for with that act we "choose"—and hence create what is infinite in us.

Dostoevsky's final vision of the world, of faith, freedom, and politics, is caught in perhaps the greatest piece of prose literature in existence, "The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor." It is a terrifying vision of a society in which the people have given up voluntarily, even eagerly, their freedom of conscience to a few "masters." It is a picture of deluded masses slipping quietly and willingly from birth to death, guaranteed by bread against the anxieties of need, and guaranteed by proof and the examples of others against the anxieties of a free conscience. The "guarantor" is the gaunt ninety-year-old Grand Inquisitor, who has deserted Christ and taken upon himself the suffering and sacrifice of deluding the people, so that they may be spared the needless sufferings of a free conscience.

For Dostoevsky the free man does not cry "feed me first and then I will be strong and good and virtuous"; he does not cry out "prove to me that my belief is correct and then I will believe"; nor does he demand that others believe as he believes. He stands alone and he believes *without conditions*, guided only by the movement of his heart and soul and the image of Christ. His act of "free" faith is

an existential leap unqualified and thus unlimited by rational proof, the examples of others or the anxieties of material or psychological need. But in his long monologue before Christ, the Grand Inquisitor argues that man cannot bear such freedom; fifteen centuries had shown that he would always barter freedom for bread and comfort. In asking men to bear what they are too weak to bear, Christ has visited needless suffering on men and had shown himself to be cruel and inhumane. Christ does not answer the Grand Inquisitor—for he cannot answer; the “proof” is all on the Grand Inquisitor’s side; only the silent and individual testimony of the heart, in the lonely anguish and terror of its choice, in the supreme act of faith, can guide in Dostoevsky’s eyes the free man. Thus, the interview ends, not with Christ’s arguments, but with the act of love: Christ silently kisses the bloodless lips of the savior of mankind.

Never had Dostoevsky granted so much to his antagonists; the Grand Inquisitor argues out of love and sacrifice for his fellow men, and on the testimony of things seen and verified by fifteen centuries. So strong, indeed, has been the Grand Inquisitor’s argument that many distinguished thinkers—Rozanov, Guardini, Shestov, among others—have taken the side of the Grand Inquisitor against Christ. The feelings of D. H. Lawrence typifies this reaction. Recalling that he had first read “The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor” at the suggestion of J. Middleton Murry and had found it to be rubbish, D. H. Lawrence went on to say:

Since then I have read *The Brothers Karamazov* twice, and each time found it more depressing because, alas, more drearily true to life. At first it had been lurid romance. Now, I read “The Grand Inquisitor” once more and my heart sinks right through my shoes. I still see a trifle of cynical-satanical showing off,

but under that I hear the final unanswerable criticism of Christ. And it is a deadly-devastating summing up, because borne out by long experience of humanity. It is reality versus illusion, and the illusion was Jesus, while time itself retorts with reality.

The Grand Inquisitor and D. H. Lawrence argue from the testimony of things seen, for men are as the Grand Inquisitor has painted them, and as the depressing reality of their natures had impressed itself on D. H. Lawrence. History has shown men to be weak, craving for comfort, and easily satisfied with lies. Dostoevsky does not deny this. He does not argue from history, but from the nature of man, not as it has been, but as it can be. “What is possible” is also historical fact, in the sense that examples—no matter how rare—have actually occurred. Christ is what men can become, because he actually did become Christ. He is for Dostoevsky the living confirmation of a radical individualism that goes beyond the examples of multitudes, the testimony of history, and the seduction of material comfort. His radical individualism is the core of his conservatism, and his conservatism is a revolutionary conservatism.

Dostoevsky was a conservative in the most essential sense: he believed in radical individualism. He hated all forms of liberalism in the most essential sense: the conception of mankind as constituting an essence that can be rationally defined and rationally manipulated. Dostoevsky was against all forms of liberalism. If he battled against a particular brand of socialism in his country, this was partly because it was what he knew and partly because in the febrile atmosphere of the sixties and seventies it embodied the logical and inevitable structure of all liberal programs. When he had occasion to comment on other liberal programs—as he did in *Winter Notes and*

Summer Impressions and in his *Journal of a Writer*—he was just as caustic. He looked at political programs “qualitatively,” and the parliamentary technocracy of the United States was no different from the Crystal Palace of Chernyshevsky. It was all bad, because it was based on a deception. Only men existed for him, and they used things well or badly. Men made concepts and men used them; social plans were as good as the men who conceived and directed them. Those who placed their faith in rational schemes of social improvement were either self-deceived (if ignorant) or deceivers (if clever).

Dostoevsky’s individualism was radical because it was anchored in God, and his conservatism was revolutionary because it was anchored in God. By placing his faith in God, Dostoevsky’s hero placed himself outside the control of other men and of man-made institutions. He is necessarily a man in revolt, and it is his faith and freedom that have made him such. Although Dostoevsky himself never made these deductions in his journalistic writing—how could he in Czarist Russia when he himself was under police supervision almost to the very end of his life—he was a revolutionary in a sense that made Lenin’s program look like child’s play. His free man is in revolt against all societies, all institutions, all men, and against himself. He

cannot, if he is free, be subject to anyone’s will and governments and institutions were for him the work of arbitrary wills, whether single or collective.

Dostoevsky’s radical individualist can give obedience, but it cannot be demanded of him. He can join society, but he cannot be forced into it. No man can control him, and yet he is responsible to all men. No man can control him because his conscience belongs to God, but he is responsible to all because in choosing his freedom in God, he is all. The free man’s nature is inviolate because it is not rooted in the institutions men made or circumscribed by their reasons and wills. Dostoevsky carries the sanctity of individualism to its ultimate roots—in God—where it is forever beyond the tamperings of men and their weaknesses. No one can violate this sanctity, but the individual himself can choose to violate it.

Dostoevsky is a revolutionary conservative because he calls for man to revolt against every violation of the absolute freedom he carries within him: to revolt against the societies, institutions and concepts that limit his freedom and force him to be the kind of man the societies and institutions need or want; and to revolt—and this is the hardest of all—against the slothful, slavish conception man has of himself.