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Irving Howe

## DOSTOEVSKY: THE POLITICS OF SALVATION

**I**N NINETEENTH CENTURY Russia the usual categories of discourse tend to break down. Politics, religion, literature, philosophy—these do not fall into neat departments of the mind. Pressed together by the Czarist censorship, ideas take on an extraordinary concentration; the novel, which in the West is generally seen in terms of portrayal, acquires the tone and manner of prophetic passion. Not till the rise of the Symbolists at the end of the century does the cult of aestheticism, with its tacit acceptance of a fragmented experience, prosper in Russia; for the most part, Russian thought is seized by that “mania for totality” which is to become characteristic of our time. Where ideas cannot be modulated through practice, they keep their original starkness; where intellectuals cannot test themselves in experience, they must choose between complete intransigence and complete surrender. For the subtler kinds of opportunism, such a society offers little provision. The seriousness we all admire in Russian literature is thus partly the result of a social impasse: energies elsewhere absorbed by one or another kind of thought are here poured into the novel. And that is why, in dealing with the Russian novel, one is obliged to take religion as a branch of politics and politics as a form of religion. The school of criticism which treats the novel mainly in terms of social manners will consequently face grave difficulties when confronted with a writer

like Dostoevsky, for whom the act of creation invariably means an act of prophecy.

During Dostoevsky's lifetime the intelligentsia multiplies at an astonishing rate. A belated seepage from Western thought, the frail beginnings of capitalist production in the cities, the decay of both serfdom and communal peasant holdings in the countryside—these are but a few of the reasons. It is an intelligentsia of a kind found only in "backward" countries: ablaze with activity yet brutally confined in its power to communicate, brimming with the boldest ideas yet without a tradition of freedom, aspiring to independence yet reduced to an appendage of the city poor.

The problem which more than any other obsesses the Russian intellectuals is their relationship to the people, the dark unsounded mass of peasants on top of whom has formed a skim of proletarians only yesterday peasants. One may read 19th Century Russian history as a series of attempts by the intellectuals, frequently desperate and always pathetic, to make contact with the people. That fashionable disdain for the masses which in the latter part of the century arises among Western literary men is virtually unknown in Russia, for there the intellectuals, deprived of even a marginal independence, sense that their fate is bound up with the fate of the people. Political discussions repeatedly focus on the question: how can we awaken the peasants? And so long as this question remains unanswered, there will always be some who despair of answering it and decide to do the job themselves—to force history by sacrifice and terror.

Dostoevsky once wrote that Russian literature was "a literature of landowners." Despite its touch of malice, his remark is extremely acute. A great many writers of the century, from Griboyedov to Turgeniev, are disaffected noblemen. Both Tolstoy and Turgeniev owe a large debt to Aksakov, an author whose pastoral chronicles flow with the evenness and fullness of the Russian seasons. Some of the loveliest passages in Tolstoy and

Turgenev are nostalgic in tone, romantic turnings to 18th Century manorial life which seems to them, at least from a distance, relatively stable and free from modern troubles. Dostoevsky shares their tendency to romanticize the peasant, but like Gogol before him and Leskov beside him, he represents a decisive break from the literature of landowners; he is a creature of the city, his writing beats with the rhythms of urban life, his greatest achievement is to penetrate the problematic moods and ideas of homeless intellectuals.

Only superficially does it seem odd that the rise of an urban intelligentsia should coincide with the flourishing of Slavophile ideas. Though themselves men of the city, the Slavophiles placed their faith in the Russian peasants; they believed that Russia could and should avoid the path of the West; and from their vantage-point in the social rear they were able to see the terrifying consequences of the atomistic individualism that had sprung up in the West—though in their disdain of the liberal ideal they were far less perceptive. Their faith in the peasants is a sign of their distance from the peasants, their belief in a special Russian destiny a sign of their helplessness before the problems of Russia. It is fitting that the leaders of Slavophilism should have been two citified sons of Aksakov, a writer so deeply a part of the Russian countryside that he felt no need for an ideology by which to claim it.

Popular opinion generally assumes that the Slavophiles were a gang of reactionaries brewing fantastic theories about the Russian soul, but while such Slavophiles no doubt existed, it would be a mistake to suppose the movement to have been consistent and homogeneous. One can find traces of its influence in the work of almost every Russian writer and thinker of the time, including such extreme “Westernizers” as Herzen and Turgenev, who wished to copy from the West but were repelled when they looked too closely at their models. *Narodnikism* (from *Narod*, folk or peasant), a populist movement aiming for a non-industrial

socialism based on the *mir* (peasant commune), bears the Slavophile stamp. And so does Bolshevism—for while desiring an industrialized Russia, the Bolsheviks did not suppose that it had to retrace each step of Western history. Slavophilism may therefore be divided into at least three main tendencies: the pan-Slavists who provide a rationale for Tzarist imperialism; a middle group which tries to conciliate between its desire to retain Russian distinctiveness and its desire to reform Russian society within the framework of a constitutional monarchy; and the radicals who aspire toward a peasant democracy. Now the key—at least one key—to Dostoevsky is that he managed, with varying degrees of emphasis and clarity, to hold all three perspectives at once.

The dominant formal theme in his work is a conception of Russian destiny. Everything characteristically Russian, he wrote, “everything that is ours, preeminently national (and therefore, everything genuinely artistic)—is unintelligible to Europe.” For Dostoevsky, Russia was inseparable from the Orthodox Church, the unsullied vessel of Christianity in which alone was preserved “the Divine image of Christ.” But Russia was also a world power with imperial ambitions, and Dostoevsky shouted: “Sooner or later Constantinople will be ours.”

A disturbing though not unusual paradox: the writer whose most sacred image is Christ turning the other cheek demands the conquest of Constantinople, the almost craven apostle of humility exalts the use of brute power. Part of the truth about Dostoevsky is that this extraordinarily sensitive man who trembles for the slightest creature can also be a coarse and brutal reactionary.

For there *was* something coarse and brutal in Dostoevsky. He knew it perfectly well, hence his desperate straining for love and humility. The love-seeker or God-seeker is particularly vulnerable to self-torment if he inwardly believes that he seldom experiences true love and that instead of embracing God he

merely celebrates his own ego. This is a central ambivalence of neurotic character—one is almost tempted to say of modern character; and it is nowhere more spectacularly illustrated than in Dostoevsky, whose spiritual imago is Alyosha Karamazov, but whose life is tainted by the lust of Dmitri, the skepticism of Ivan, the emotional torpor of Stavrogin.

At least in part, Dostoevsky's politics is a function of his psychology, that is, of his struggle to heal his moral fissure and of his horrified recoil from the sickness he finds in all men. Dostoevsky dreaded the autonomous intellect, the faithless drifting he had himself experienced and was later to portray in Ivan Karamazov; he feared that the intellectual, loosed from the controls of Christianity and alienated from the heart-warmth of the Russian people, would feel free to commit the most monstrous acts to quench his vanity. Once man is free from responsibility to God, what limit can there be to his presumption?—an argument that might be more convincing if there were evidence that believers as a group have been less arrogant than skeptics. Together, it should be noticed, with the messianic strain in his religion, there is an element of coarse "pragmatism": God as celestial overseer.

Though a tendentious moralist, Dostoevsky was an entirely honest novelist, and in his novels he could not but show that while the will to faith is strong in some modern intellectuals, that will seldom leads them to the peace of faith. His God-seekers, like Shatov in *The Possessed*, are men peculiarly driven by anguish: the more serious their desire for God, the more must they acknowledge the distance separating them from Him—and the more they are tempted, in the manner of the radical Slavophiles, to assimilate God to the people. Since the quest of such characters is partly motivated by an intense dislike for commercial civilization, they often find themselves in unexpected conflict with society. Their ideas, it is true, have nothing in common with socialist doctrine, but their values lead them to an uneasy kinship

with socialism as a critical activity.

Yet they cannot accept socialism. Dostoevsky despised it as "scientific," a bastard of the Enlightenment and the twin of rationalist atheism; he rejected it, also, because he feared that man might barter freedom for bread. No political system which located salvation in the secular world could have been acceptable to him, and in a sense R. P. Blackmur is right when he says that Dostoevsky's politics were those of a man "whose way of dealing with life rested on a fundamental belief that a true rebirth, a great conversion, can come only after a great sin." It is even profitable to think of Dostoevsky's novels as rituals of rebirth, with a series of plebeian heroes (in *The Possessed*, it is Shatov) re-enacting the drama of the Resurrection. But Blackmur's observation is not complete, a counter-term is needed.

Dostoevsky's politics were indeed, as Blackmur says, "non-social" and hence apocalyptic, but they were also colored by an intense fascination for the social politics of his time. Though he despised the ideas of the revolutionary intellectuals, he had been soaked in the atmosphere that nourished them, and as a result, his intellectual divergence signified less than his temperamental affinities. He "translated" the political radicalism of the 1840's, the radicalism of fraternity and utopia, into Christian terms—highly unorthodox and closer in spirit to primitive Christianity than to any church of his or our day. At times he verged on the heresy—I am not enough of a theologian to identify it—that every man is or can be Christ. This heresy, which may involve a rejection of the Last Judgment except insofar as it occurs every day, is in radical opposition to Catholicism, since it denies the Church, and in milder opposition to Protestantism, since it depreciates the Word; it is closer to Rousseau than to Paul. In his brilliant study of *The Possessed*, Philip Rahv is entirely right in saying that Dostoevsky's idea of salvation comes to "little more than an anarcho-Christian version of that 'religion of humanity' which continued to inspire the intelligentsia throughout the 19th

Century and by which Dostoevsky himself was inspired in his youth, when . . . he took for his guides and mentors such heretical lovers of mankind as Rousseau, Fourier, Saint-Simon and Georges Sand."

Repelled by the present, distrustful of those who claimed the future, Dostoevsky had but one recourse—to construct an ideal society based on an idyllic version of the Russian past. (In *A Raw Youth* the major character Versillov has a dream of "A Golden Age," which is to be "the earthly paradise of man. . . . The Golden Age is the most unlikely of all the dreams that have been, but for it men have given up their life and all their strength, for the sake of it prophets have died and been slain, without it the peoples will not live and cannot die".) The idyllic past was the communal life of the Russian peasant, whose greatness of soul, wrote Dostoevsky, was revealed in a "craving for suffering, perpetual and unquenchable suffering." Ignorant and debased though the peasant may be, he is superior to the intellectual in that he knows, at least, from whom to beg forgiveness. That Dostoevsky himself was entirely urban in habit and psychology, merely widened the gap between his experience and his ideas. Everything in his work implies an exalted vision of the peasants yet he is one of the few Russian masters who does not portray their life.

Now it should be recognized that Dostoevsky's peasant was as much an idealized figure as the proletarian of the cruder Marxists, that his ideal Russia had about the same relation to the actual Russia as T. S. Eliot's "idea of a Christian society" to the existing Christian states. And his celebration of the peasant's desire for suffering, apart from its dubious accuracy, must be related to the fact that in his own life he could not always distinguish between ecstasy and humiliation. Dostoevsky's ideal Russia was a "projection backwards," in which the bureaucracy of the Orthodox Church was made to enclose the utopian dreams of his youth. For the novelist such a "projection backwards" is



both advantage and danger: it stimulates the most powerful criticism of the present but also tempts him into confusing reality and desire.

## II

*The Possessed* is drenched in buffoonery. This itself is a major reason for the atmosphere of violent negation which hangs over the book. Dostoevsky's buffoonery means that while he takes seriously the problems raised in his novel he cannot do as much for the people who must face them; unwittingly, his book becomes a vote of no-confidence in society, both the seething Russian underworld and the stiffening overworld. Not one character is spared his ridicule, which seems more corrosive than Swift's because more local, intimate and viciously jolly. A novelist who proclaims himself the partisan of order and then mocks and lacerates everyone within his reach, is entirely subversive in effect. By the time he came to write *The Possessed*, at the age of 50, Dostoevsky's opinions had turned reactionary but his temperament remained thoroughly revolutionary.

Buffoonery is appropriate to *The Possessed* because the characters are mainly pretenders. Stepan Trofimovitch is a liberal pretending to heroism, a liberal who trembles before his shadow and is so lost in rhetoric that he cannot separate what he says from what he thinks. Stavrogin is called Ivan the Tsarevitch, the false Tsar who will reign once the nihilists have triumphed. This description is provided by Pyotr Verhovensky, himself a pretender who speaks in the name of socialism yet admits he is a fraud with no call to speak in the name of anything. The upper strata of the novel—Lembke, the brackish Governor; his wife Yulia, a prototype of the wealthy woman who dabbles in the causes of interesting young men; Karmazinov, the famous writer who toadies before the revolutionaries because he wishes to be praised by everyone—these too are pretenders. And so are Shatov and Kirillov, the most serious people in the book, for they pretend

to a clarity and resoluteness they seldom enjoy, and must therefore struggle with the unrealizable images they have constructed of themselves. Every character is a mockery of his own claims, a refutation of his own ideas; all are self-alienated in conduct and feverishly erratic in thought: even the saintly Father Tihon suffers, suggestively, from a nervous tic.

A tone of buffoonery, a cast of pretenders—and a setting of provincial meanness. Though Dostoevsky despised Turgeniev and in the character of Karmazinov assaulted him with the utmost ferocity, his view of Russian manners is quite similar to that which Turgeniev will express a few years later in his most Westernized novel, *Smoke*. Dostoevsky's provincial town becomes emblematic of the smugness and ignorance, the moral coarseness which Turgeniev's Potugin charges against all Russia. The society of *The Possessed* is a society gone stale from lack of freedom, seedy from lack of cultivation. Dostoevsky hammers at this theme throughout the book, scoffing, for example, at the Russian "men of science" who have "done nothing at all"—though, he wryly adds, "that's very often the case . . . with men of science among us in Russia." When Pyotr Verhovensky, in the midst of preparing to murder Shatov, stops at a cafe and calmly devours a raw beefsteak, his grossness seems completely typical of the Russian milieu. And still more revealing is the passage in which the clerk Lyamshin, who plays the jester to Stepan Trofimovitch's enlightened circle, improvises on the piano a musical duel between *The Marseillaise* and *Mein Lieber Augustin*, with the "vulgar waltz" obliterating the French hymn. Lyamshin intends this as a parody of the Franco-Prussian war but one feels that it is also a parody of all the Lyamshins, that Dostoevsky means to say: this is what happens to our provincial Russia, we start with the pretensions of *The Marseillaise* and end with the sloth of *Mein Lieber Augustin*.

Tone, character, setting—all depend on Dostoevsky's conception of the book. "I mean to utter certain thoughts," he wrote,

“whether all the artistic side of it goes to the dogs or not. . . . Even if it turns into a mere pamphlet, I shall say all that I have in my heart.” Fortunately the “artistic side of it” could not be suppressed and the book takes us through areas of experience never available to pamphleteers. Dostoevsky begins by wishing to sound a warning, he will rouse the educated public to the dangers stirring beneath the surface of society. But this wish so disturbs him, it raises such ambiguous memories and feelings that he can never decide what—other than a fiery incarnation of the anti-Christ—the enemy really is. On one level of action radicalism seems a poison rushing through the veins of society, on another level a mere schoolboy prank, a rude fabrication without social basis or intellectual content. This uncertainty of response is typical of Dostoevsky, himself split between God-seeking and God-denying, pan-Slavic reaction and Western radicalism; and it is responsible, as well, for the violent changes which his central idea—the idea of salvation—undergoes in *The Possessed*. Even as he warns against radicalism and scorns liberalism, they repeatedly penetrate his thought; the problem of ideology which other writers objectify in an imaginary action is for him a personal torment.

Some critics have used the politics of *The Possessed* to point lessons and draw analogies; to these I shall return shortly; but here I would remark that to read Dostoevsky primarily as a religious or political prophet—and one with a formulated prophecy—is invariably to rob him of those tensions which are the bone and blood of his art. Other critics complain that his treatment of radicals is malicious, a caricature of the facts. This is quite correct, and Dostoevsky brought such complaints upon himself by writing Alexander III that *The Possessed* was an historical study of Russian radicalism. But even when correct, such criticism is of secondary interest; a caricature of the facts may reveal truth, and it is precisely as caricature—what I have called buffoonery—that the book must be read.

Revolutionists cannot help being tainted by the societies they would overthrow. The followers of Pyotr Verhovensky are exactly what one might expect to find in the airless depths of autocratic Russia: they are petty bureaucrats turned inside out, provincial louts in need of fresh ideas and clean linen. And even at his most malicious Dostoevsky knows this; knows that the Stavrogins, Shigalovs and Verhovenskys are an integral part of the Russia he exalts. The sores are on *his* back.

Dostoevsky's conception of the Russian radicals is clearly limited: he knows next to nothing about the populist-terrorists of the *Narodnaya Volya* or about the incipient Marxists just beginning to appear in Russia at the time he wrote his book. But in however distorted a way, he does draw upon Russian history and his personal experience for the plotters in *The Possessed*.

In his youth Dostoevsky had belonged to a St. Petersburg discussion group, called after its leader the Petrashevsky Circle, which met to consider utopian schemes for the regeneration of society. Dostoevsky was more deeply involved in these conversations than is generally supposed, and when several members of the Circle formed a secret revolutionary society he joined it. Everyone knows the sequel: police arrests, humiliating sham executions, years in Siberia. Upon his return to St. Petersburg ten years later Dostoevsky, his spiritual features lacerated and transformed, was no longer a radical, though neither was he the vitriolic reactionary of his last years. From his acquaintance with the "Petrashevskyists" he drew first an acute sense of the distance between grand talk and social impotence: in *The Possessed* he is always teasing the radicals with this; and secondly an insight into the monomania which afflicts or fringes every political movement: few things in the novel are funnier or more pathetic than the rosy-checked girl forever ready, whether at a radical meeting or the Governor's fete, with her set speech: "Ladies and gentlemen, I've come to call attention to the sufferings of the poor students. . . ."

After the Petrashevski affair Russia became an intellectual graveyard, and not until the 1860's did political opposition again appear. Inevitably, part of this opposition, weighed down by a sense of its futility, turned to terror. The most extraordinary figure of this period is Sergei Nechayev, a déclassé intellectual of plebian descent. Insignificant as a socialist or anarchist theoretician, Nechayev made his mark by taking for his own the ethics of the Tsarist police, together with a few flourishes from Machiavelli and Loyola; his famous *Catechism of the Revolutionist* is a classical exposition of amorality as a method of politics. It begins with the striking sentence, "The revolutionist is a doomed man," and continues with a list of tactics he must employ: terror, arson, duplicity, spying on comrades. A belated Jacobin who has neither roots nor confidence in the people and is utterly scornful of "the gentlemen playing at liberalism," Nechayev elevates despair into an ideology. But he is also a man of great courage, and his life is filled with remarkable escapes, frauds and sacrifices, climaxed by ten years of solitary imprisonment during which he never once breaks down.

In 1869, while forming some revolutionary groups, Nechayev found that one of his disciples, Ivanov, doubted his claim to be the Russian representative of a revolutionary Secret Committee. Ivanov was right, Nechayev was shamming in order to give himself an air of authority; but it cost the doubter his life. To dispose of Ivanov and bind the other followers with a chain of guilt, Nechayev arranged for his murder. This is the incident which stirred Dostoevsky to compose the political part of *The Possessed*. Pyotr Verhovensky is Nechayev's double, a double in whom monstrous courage has been deflated into farce.

And indeed, as long as Russia remained both autocratic and isolated, what could it produce but Nechayevs? Russian rebellion had always been cut from the cloth of despair. Even in the Decembrist revolt of 1825, a movement among officers and nobles to prod the Tsar into granting a constitution, there had appeared

an extreme wing called the Southern Society which in some respects anticipated Nechayev. Its leader Pestel had developed a program calling for a military dictatorship to replace the Tsar, and had planned his organization as a strict hierarchy with three classes of members, ranging from top conspirators to obedient drones.

These incidents of Russian history became particularly important for Dostoevsky by the time he wrote *The Possessed*, for he believed that they illustrated that fatal isolation from the people which drove intellectuals to the error of socialism. Yet it would be false to say that his early radicalism was *replaced* by reaction. He did not change his ideas as much as add onto them; the radicalism did not disappear, it became encrusted with layers of reaction. Entirely plebeian in outlook, instinctively sympathetic to the complaints of the *lumpen* intelligentsia, Dostoevsky could never become a dull conservative. He still knew what it meant to be hungry and homeless, miserable and lonely; and if he could not always distinguish between alienation from other men and alienation from God, he never forgot that in whatever form alienation is a curse. He was the political opposite of Stendhal, for where Stendhal was a liberal but not a democrat, he was a democrat but not a liberal. Behind his radical Christianity and his mystic populism there is always a sense of being one with the insulted and the injured. The whole of *The Possessed* seems evidence of this, but perhaps it will be more useful to look at an incidental passage:—

Stavrogin stands with Captain Lebyadkin, his brother-in-law and the most buffoonish of Dostoevsky's buffoons. It is raining. Stavrogin offers Lebyadkin an umbrella. In an over-sweet voice Lebyadkin asks, "Am I worth it?" Stavrogin replies, "Anyone is worthy of an umbrella." And then Lebyadkin suddenly pours out: "At one stroke you define the minimum of human rights. . . ." Such a passage, deepening buffoonery into tragic statement, is the unique mark of Dostoevsky, possible only to

the writer who had once said, "Man is a crook—and a crook is he who says so."

### III

Stavrogin is the source of the chaos that streams through the characters; he possesses them but is not himself possessed. In the first part of the novel, where Dostoevsky plants several clues to his meaning, Stavrogin is likened to Petchorin, the Byronic protagonist of Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time* who has lost the capacity for identifying or acting upon his emotions. Like Petchorin, Stavrogin seeks excitement because nothing excites him, experiments in sensuality because he wishes to *become* sensual. His tragedy is that he can replace the sense of cosmic fear only with the sense of cosmic void: the awareness of human limits which Dostoevsky regards as essential to life he entirely lacks. A "subtle serpent" who is one of the Devil's party, though from metaphysical despair rather than a Faustian bargain, and a typically modern personality haunted by the "demon of irony," Stavrogin suffers from *acedia*, that torpor of the spirit which provides the greatest resistance to God because it lacks the power to resist anything. Repeatedly Dostoevsky declares the atheist only a step from the perfect believer: the atheist, unlike Stavrogin, exercises moral choice and thereby demonstrates, whether he means to or not, the freedom of his will.

Stavrogin lives below, not beyond, good and evil; naturally so, for in the absence of desire, morality can hardly matter. The Nietzschean vision of "beyond good and evil" implies a harmonious resolution of desire to the point where moral regulation becomes superfluous; Stavrogin, by contrast, is on *this* side of morality. Yet it is no mere perversity on the part of his friends that they look upon him with awe, for in his wasted energies they see the potential of a Russia equally disordered and distraught. People expect Stavrogin to lead, he himself "seeks a burden." Though he never attends the Fete, it becomes an occa-

sion for the full display of his chaos; the intellectual saturnalia that occurs there, from “the women who were the embodiment of the women question” to Lebyadkin’s vulgar verses and the rumor that Karmazinov will recite in the costume of a governess, is a public release of all that Stavrogin represents. Yet he is never so far gone as Pyotr Verhovensky, for there are a few moments when he judges himself by standards implicitly Christian. Because he still thinks of his fate in “ultimate” terms, he moves within the orbit of Christian metaphysics. But even from a secular standpoint the distance between the two men is very large: Stavrogin cannot tolerate his condition while Verhovensky relishes his; Verhovensky is a *reductio ad absurdum* of rootless individualism, while Stavrogin would immediately understand Bakunin’s typically Russian cry, “I do not want to be I, I want to be We.”

In a sense he is We: all but one of the major characters are his doubles. Pyotr is his social double, Liza the Byrness his emotional double, and Marya, the cripple he has married, his double in derangement. Fedka the peasant murderer is a double through the link of the intellectual Kirillov, while Lebyadkin and Liputin are doubles in the dress of burlesque. The most important doubles are Kirillov and Shatov, who act out the two sides of Stavrogin’s metaphysical problem. There is an important political reason, though Dostoevsky would not accept it as a basic one, for the impasse in which these two find themselves. They have tried radicalism and recoiled, Shatov into hostility and Kirillov into indifference. Together they have journeyed to America, symbol of the new capitalism, and have left it in hatred. Now they return to what Dostoevsky regards as philosophical bed-rock: Shatov to the problem of God, Kirillov to the problem of man. But this very turn may itself be seen as a token of political despair: when the problems of the social world seem insoluble, as they did in Dostoevsky’s Russia, men feel an insidious temptation to “transcend” them.

Though at opposite poles ideologically, Shatov and Kirillov



are in close emotional dependence, functioning as the split halves of an hypothetical self. Living in the same house yet tacitly avoiding each other, they represent in extreme form the issues thrown up by Stavrogin and debased by Verhovensky. Both are appalled by their intellectual isolation, Shatov developing a Christian heresy to overcome his and Kirillov lapsing into a gentle indifference to escape from his. Shatov believes in a God who is a man, Kirillov in a man who will be God. Both revere Christ, but Shatov is not sure he believes in God and Kirillov thinks it unworthy to believe in God. Shatov hungrily pursues God, Kirillov admits that "God has pursued me all my life." A man of pride, Shatov worships humility; a man of humility, Kirillov develops an ethic of pride. Both yearn for sacrifice, Shatov through immersion in the Russian people, Kirillov through immersion in a neutral universe. Neither can tolerate the conditions of existence, Shatov despairing over his distance from God, Kirillov protesting against the edict of Nature which keeps men in the certainty of death. Shatov desires a second reformation to cleanse Christianity of its bourgeois defilement, Kirillov yearns to become the Christ of atheism, sacrificing himself to assert man's freedom and to destroy a God who is nothing but "the pain of the fear of death." To Shatov is assigned Dostoevsky's most cherished ideas, to Kirillov his most intimate sickness. Shatov suffers from an excess of self, Kirillov from ideas that can only destroy the self. The two are bound together by a thousand dialectical ties, neither has meaning without the other; Dostoevsky's image of the ideal man implies a unity of Shatov and Kirillov, followed by an act of heroic self-transcendence.

For a moment—it is one of the most exalted in all literature—this unity is almost realized. When Shatov's wife returns to have her baby, he begins to glow with a beautiful, a holy excitement, to which even Kirillov responds. The two men are quickly reconciled, Shatov telling Kirillov that if only he were rid of his atheistic ravings "what a man you'd be," and Kirillov

replying with his native sweetness, "Go to your wife, I'll stay here and think about you and your wife." Under the stress of a great experience, ideology is brushed aside and the two men stand together, merely and completely two men—though it is a mark of Dostoevsky's greatness that the purer response is not assigned to his *alter ego* Shatov.

Kirillov is one of Dostoevsky's most brilliant ideological projections but not, I think, an entirely satisfactory one. Is it really true, as Dostoevsky seems to assert, that the highest expression of the will is suicide? One would suppose that a higher heroism of the will might be a choice to live, a choice made with full awareness of the knowledge Kirillov has reached. In any case, Kirillov, having spontaneously helped Shatov, has lost his "right" to commit suicide, for by his act of help he has recognized a human obligation: he is no longer alone, he has acknowledged a "Thou," he has granted the world a claim upon his life. And surely a man with his intellectual acuteness would recognize this. Still more troublesome is his readiness to take responsibility for the murder of Shatov. No doubt, Dostoevsky meant to suggest here that Kirillov's ideas make him indifferent to the fate of his friends and indeed of all men, but Dostoevsky himself has shown us otherwise: he could not help presenting Kirillov as a good man. For once—it does not happen very often—Dostoevsky the novelist has been tripped up by Dostoevsky the ideologue.

Shatov is conceived with greater consistency and depth. As he tells his wife, he is a Slavophile because he cannot be a Russian—which is another of Dostoevsky's marvellous intuitions, this one lighting up the whole problem of the intellectual's estrangement and the strategies of compensation by which he tries to overcome it. When Stavrogin presses him, Shatov stammers his faith in Russia, in her orthodoxy, in the body of Christ—and in God? "I . . . I will believe in God," which is to say: I do not yet believe. Shatov defines God as "the synthetic personality of the whole people," and when Stavrogin justly charges him with

reducing deity "to a simple attribute of nationality," he replies with still another heresy: "On the contrary I raise the people to God. . . . The people is the body of God." Whichever it may be, Shatov cannot accept—he cannot even face—man's distance from God; in Kierkegaard's dictum that "between God and man there is an infinite, yawning, qualitative difference," he would have found a dreadful confirmation of the lovelessness, the "Christlessness" of Protestantism.

In Shatov's mind, as in Dostoevsky's, God figures as a national protector rather than a universal mover, Christianity is seen as a radical morality committed equally to the extremes of ecstasy and suffering, and paradise, being realizable on earth, approaches the prescription Nietzsche offered for the good life. Before Nietzsche wrote, "What is done out of love always takes place beyond good and evil," Dostoevsky had written, "There is no good and bad." When Shatov declares the people to be the body of God, he offers a refracted version of 19th Century utopianism with its dream of a human fraternity that will dispense with the yardsticks of moral measurement. Together with this utopian faith, which cannot easily be reconciled with most versions of Christianity, Dostoevsky had a strong sense of the conservative and authoritarian uses of organized religion. (Pyotr Verhovensky tells an anecdote which slyly reinforces the story of the Grand Inquisitor: A group of liberal army officers "were discussing atheism and I need hardly say they made short work of God. . . . One grizzled old stager of a captain sat mum, not saying a word. All at once he stands up in the middle of the room and says aloud, as though speaking to himself: 'If there's no God, how can I be a captain then?'" ) In only one respect is the anarcho-Christian vision of Dostoevsky incomplete: like most primitive Christians he cannot find a means of translating his radical impulses into a concrete politics.

Politics is left to Pyotr Verhovensky, whose role in the book, as a Nechayev turned buffoon, is to bring the fantasies and

fanaticisms of the Russian intelligentsia into visible motion. He reduces Kirillov's metaphysical speculations to petty problems of power, acts upon Stavrogin's nihilism by spreading confusion through all levels of society, and deflates the liberal rhetoric of his father, Stepan Trofimovitch, to mere political manoeuvre. Under Verhovensky's grotesque guidance, politics becomes a catalyst speeding the moral break-up of Russia; it is a sign of the national derangement, chaos made manifest, the force which sets into motion those latent energies of destruction which Dostoevsky finds beneath the surface of Russian life ("every Russian," he bitterly remarks, "is inordinately delighted at any public scandal and disorder").

Simply as a character in a novel, Verhovensky is somewhat nebulous. What does he believe? Does he believe anything at all? Which of the many motives suggested for him are we to credit? How much sincerity, how much guile, can we allow him? Is he a revolutionist, a police spy or both? Twice he describes himself as "a scoundrel of course and not a socialist"—which is to imply that a socialist is something other than he, something other than a scoundrel. One would suppose that Verhovensky has begun as a vague, muddled revolutionist, become entangled with the police and now continues on his own, deceiving the secret service, his comrades and himself. Though Dostoevsky is often most remarkable for the life-like fluidity of his characterization, Verhovensky is allowed to become too fluid, perhaps because Dostoevsky was never quite sure what to make of him. Certainly as a thinker Verhovensky is absurd, and the implication that he "represents" Russian radicalism is vicious.

Yet once noted, these strictures may be put somewhat to the side. For we have learned to know political types at least as ambiguous as Verhovensky, men so confused in belief, so devious in affiliation, so infatuated with intrigue that they themselves could hardly say which cause, if any at all, they served. Verhovensky is not merely the *agent provocateur* to the provocation

born, he also foreshadows the adventurers who will soon spring up in the unswept corners of all political movements, ready to capitalize on victories and betray in defeat.

Toward the wretched little circle of plotters which revolves about Pyotr Verhovensky, Dostoevsky shows no sympathy: *he does not need to*, he is their spiritual brother, his is the revilement of intimacy. Mocking and tormenting them with fraternal violence, Dostoevsky places each of the radicals exactly: Liputin, a cesspool of a man, frothing with gossip and slander yet sincere in his reforming zeal; Virginsky, a pure enthusiast whose wife and the latest apostle of the most advanced ideas will always be able to lead him by the nose; Erkel, a fanatical youth searching for a master to worship and finding him in Verhovensky; and Shigalov, a superb caricature of the doctrinaire. As portraits of radical personality, all of these are malicious, slanderous, unjust—and rich with truth about human beings, particularly human beings in politics. The “old Nechayevist” Dostoevsky—so he called himself and he did not lie—knew them all like the fingers of his own hand: they *were* the fingers of his own hand. Dostoevsky could have said, to paraphrase a remark of Henry James: “Where extremism is, there am I.”<sup>1</sup>

Still, we should be wary of those critics who claim a neat correspondence between Verhovensky’s followers and recent political movements, if only because all efforts to find real-life models for characters in a work of art are inherently dubious. To identify Verhovensky with, say, the Leninist personality is to shed the most uncertain light on either *The Possessed* or the Rus-

1. Dostoevsky has never received the critical attention from Russian Marxists that Tolstoy has, but in the early years of the revolution, before it was strangled by Stalinism, his genius was often appreciated. Lenin is said to have called *The Possessed* “repulsive but great,” and Lunarcharsky, the first Commissar of Culture, praised him as “the most enthralling” of Russian writers. In a memorial published in 1920 for the hundredth anniversary of Dostoevsky’s birth there appears this generous tribute: “Today we read *The Possessed*, which has become reality, living it and suffering with it; we create the novel afresh in union with the author. We see a dream realized, and we marvel at the visionary clairvoyance of the dreamer who cast the spell of Revolution on Russia. . . .”

sian Revolution. Between Verhovensky and the Leninist type there is the difference between intellectual chaos and a rigorous, perhaps too rigorous ideology; conscious cynicism and an idealism that frequently spills over into fanaticism; contempt for the plebes and an almost mystical faith in them. (With the fashionable, if illiterate, opinion that Nechayev-Verhovensky and Lenin are linked by a common belief that "the end justifies the means" I shall not deal except to say that all of us, no matter what our politics, act according to this maxim.)<sup>2</sup> Given the continuities of Russian history from Alexander II to Nicholas II, there are of course bound to be certain similarities: Verhovensky, for example, anticipates the dangerous Leninist notion of a "transitional generation," one which molds its conduct from a belief that it is certain to be sacrificed in a revolutionary maelstrom. And Shigalov personifies those traits of dogmatism to be found among the Russian radicals, indeed, among most Russian intellectuals, who were forced by their intolerable position to drive all opinions to extremes. But even these similarities, while real enough, should not be pressed too hard.

Somewhat more plausible, though also limited, is the comparison frequently made with the Stalinists. Verhovensky's vision of a society in which all men spy on one another and "only the necessary is necessary" has largely been realized in present-day Russia, but his "movement," in both its political bewilderment and intellectual flux, bears little resemblance to Stalinism. Dostoevsky's characters are profoundly related to reality, but they exist only in Dostoevsky's novels. His radicals are men of wildness, creatures of extreme individuality, largely cut off from social intercourse; the Stalinist functionary, by contrast, is a machine-man, trained to servility, and rooted in a powerful state. Verhovensky himself would not last a week in a Stalinist party, he

2. For a discussion of the problem raised in this perhaps cryptic parenthesis, I would refer the reader to an essay, "On Ends Justifying Means," by David Sachs in *Dissent*, Spring 1954.

would immediately prove too erratic and unreliable.

“Starting from unlimited freedom,” says Shigalov, “I arrive at unlimited despotism. I will add, however, that there can be no solution of the social problem but mine.” Familiar as this sounds, it is not quite the blinding anticipation of totalitarian psychology some critics suppose. For Dostoevsky has failed to recognize that side of ideology, in our time the most important one, which consists of unwitting self-deception, sincere masquerade; his scoundrels not only know they are scoundrels, they take pleasure in announcing it to anyone who will listen. In his eagerness to get at the root of things, Dostoevsky has confused the objective meaning of “Shigalovism” with Shigalov’s subjective mode of thought. For surely a Shigalov would insist, in accents of utmost earnestness, that he starts with unlimited freedom and, no matter how bumpy the road, ends with a still higher conception of freedom. Between Shigalov’s naive frankness and the torturous workings of the totalitarian mind there has intervened a whole epoch of political complication.

Dostoevsky’s truly profound insight into politics appears elsewhere, and cannot be appropriated by any political group, for it has to do with ideology in general. From *any* coherent point of view, Dostoevsky’s politics are a web of confusion—few fears now seem more absurd than his fear that Rome and socialism would band together against the Orthodox Church; yet he is unequalled in modern literature for showing the muddle that may lie beneath the order and precision of ideology. Himself the most ideological of novelists, which may be half of his secret, he also fears and resists ideology, which is surely the other half. In our time ideology cannot be avoided: there is hardly a choice: even the most airy-minded liberal must live with it. Dostoevsky knew this, and would have mocked those cultivated souls who yearn for a life “above mere ideas.” But ideology is also a great sickness of our time—and this is true despite one’s suspicion of most of the people who say so. In all of his novels Dostoevsky

shows how ideology can cripple human impulses, blind men to simple facts, make them monsters by tempting them into that fatal habit which anthropologists call "reifying" ideas. No other novelist has dramatized so powerfully the values and dangers, the uses and corruptions of systematic thought. And few passages are as remarkable in this respect as the one toward the end of *The Possessed* in which Shigalov refuses to participate in the murder of Shatov. Here, one hopes, here at last is one man who will not lend himself to this shameful act. But in a moment it becomes clear that Shigalov has left, not because he is revolted by the act itself but because the murder is not required by his scheme. In a sense, he is worse than Pyotr Verhovensky, for he is neither hot nor cold; for him the man Shatov does not exist; the only reality he acknowledges is the reality of his doctrine. He has become the ideological man in his ultimate, most terrible form.

#### IV

I have said that all but one of the major characters is a double of Stavrogin, and that exception is, of course, Stepan Trofimovitch, the liberal with heroic memories. Toward him Dostoevsky is least merciful of all; he stalks him with a deadly aim; he humiliates him, badgers him, taunts him, and finally shatters him—and yet: he loves him.

For all that Stepan Trofimovitch fancies himself a "progressive patriot," a "picturesque public character" living in "exile," he depends upon the patronage of Varvara Petrovna, an eccentric landowner. In the relationship between these two quarrelsome yet loving creatures—I am aware of the dangers of allegorizing—Dostoevsky intends to suggest the relationship between matriarchal Russia and her errant liberalism. Stepan Trofimovitch is Varvara Petrovna's "invention," her "day-dream," but Dostoevsky is too honest not to add that "in turn she exacted a great deal from him, sometimes even slavishness." And in one



of his moments of sudden self-awareness, Stepan Trofimovitch acknowledges, though not without an edge of bravado, the condition of liberalism: "*Je suis un simple dépendant et rien de plus. Mais r-r-rien de plus.*"

Though he preens himself on being advanced, he has only a childish notion of social realities: the liberal has been protected too long, he does not realize how much his comfort depends on the indulgence of authority. Stepan Trofimovitch really believes he will be arrested for his imaginary political heresies, and each night he hides under his mattress a letter of self-defense with regard to a poem several decades old and read by no one at all. In the presence of his friends he becomes boastful and eloquent when recalling his youth, but the thought of the police sets him trembling. When a peasant riot breaks out in the province, he is among the first to call for stern measures: "He cried out at the club that more troops were needed." And indeed, precisely its half-heartedness and cowardice is one of Dostoevsky's major complaints against liberalism.

By making Stepan Trofimovitch the protégé of Varvara Petrovna, Dostoevsky destroys the liberal's claim to intellectual independence; by making him the parent of Pyotr, he implies that nihilism is the necessary outcome of liberalism. Yet in both relationships Stepan Trofimovitch shows considerable resources. He gratifies Varvara Petrovna's hunger for new ideas, for scraps of Western thought with which to relieve the dullness of Russia, and not least of all, for a persistent if erratic display of affection. Toward Pyotr he behaves with impressive and unexpected dignity. "She [Varvara Petrovna] was a capitalist," sneers the son, "and you were a sentimental buffoon in her service." It is true, it strikes to the heart of the old man's situation, and yet it is not the whole truth, just as the generalized form of Pyotr's indictment is not the whole truth about liberalism.

In his portrait of Stepan Trofimovitch, Dostoevsky incorporated every criticism Marx or Nietzsche or Carlyle would make

of classical liberalism; and then he transcended them all, for Stepan Trofimovitch in his ridiculous and hysterical way is a sentient human being whom one grows to love and long for, so that the actual man seems more important than anything that may be said about him. As the book progresses, Stepan Trofimovitch moves through a number of mutations: the liberal dependent, the liberal as infant, the liberal as fool (in both senses), the liberal as dandy, the liberal who tries to assert his independence, the liberal as spoiled darling of the radicals, as agent provocateur, as provincial, as bohemian, as bootlicker of authority, and the liberal as philosopher. (Which are more important, he asks the young radicals, Shakespeare or boots, Raphael or petroleum?) In each of these roles or phases, Stepan Trofimovitch demonstrates the truth of Dostoevsky's remark that "The higher liberalism and the higher liberal, that is a liberal without any definite aim, is possible only in Russia."

Yet it is Stepan Trofimovitch who is allowed the most honorable and heroic end. Driven to hysteria by the behavior of his son, his patroness and himself, he sets out in his old age on a mad pilgrimage, taking to the road, he knows not where, "to seek for Russia." (It is strange, by the way, that no critic has noticed the similarity between Stepan Trofimovitch's death and Tolstoy's.) Since for Dostoevsky salvation comes only from extreme suffering, Stepan Trofimovitch begins to rise, to gather to himself the scattered energies of the book, after having been completely broken at the fete. Some two hundred pages earlier, this ending has already been anticipated: "I will end like a knight," says Stepan Trofimovitch, "faithful to my lady." His phantasmagorical wanderings inevitably recall Don Quixote, and indeed he becomes a Russian Quixote seeking Russia, truth, love and reality. These are troublesome words, perhaps it would be best to turn once more to a small passage. On the road Stepan Trofimovitch meets Lise; he rants in his most melodramatic fashion, falls to his knees, weeps, pities himself extravagantly—

and then, as the rain continues to fall, he rises "feeling that his knees too were soaked by the wet earth." The "wet earth" is reality, the reality he has begun to find in his Quixotic way; his talk is fantastic but his knees are soaked by the wet Russian earth. It is the reward he wins for having remained beyond Stavrogin's grasp, for clinging to a faith, even if it be the hollow faith of old-fashioned liberalism rather than the faith of Christianity. Together, the earth and the faith make possible his redemption.

But another character has also found his redemption: Shatov, in the Christ-like love that has flooded him upon the return of his wife and the birth of her child. Is this not suggestive of the political ambivalence of the book: that the character with whom Dostoevsky identifies most closely and the character he attacks most violently should both come to a kind of apotheosis? And does this not imply the possibility of some ultimate reconciliation? It has not yet occurred, Dostoevsky will not falsify, the two characters stand apart—but Shatov and Stepan Trofimovitch, symbolically placed at opposite poles, are now, for the first time, ready for each other.

If we ask ourselves, what is the source of Dostoevsky's greatness, there can of course be no single answer. But surely part of the answer is that no character is allowed undisputed domination over the novel, all are checked and broken when they become too eager in the assertion of their truths. Once Stavrogin has asked Shatov the terrible question, "And in God?", Shatov can never control the book, and even after Stepan Trofimovitch has soared to a Quixotic grandeur he is pulled down to reality by his old patroness when she tells a priest: "You will have to confess him again in another hour! That's the sort of man he is."

Dostoevsky is the greatest of ideological novelists because he always distributes his feelings of identification among all his characters—though putting it this way makes it seem too much an act of the will, while in reality it far transcends the will. "What

decides the world view of a writer," says Arnold Hauser, "is not so much whose side he supports, as through whose eyes he looks at the world." And Dostoevsky looks at the world through the eyes of them all: Stavrogin and Father Tihon, Stepan Trofimovitch and Shatov, even Lebyadkin and Pyotr Verhovensky. He *exhausts* his characters. He scours all the possibilities of their being. None escapes humiliation and shame, none is left free from attack. In the world of Dostoevsky no one is spared, but there is a supreme consolation: no one is excluded.