Conference Paper

"TOLSTOY OR DOSTOEVSKY" AND THE MODERNISTS: POLEMICS WITH JOSEPH BRODSKY

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It is no secret that many influential Russian intellectuals have been partial to stark and dramatic oppositions resulting in antagonistically dichotomous paradigms. One of the more famous of these is the model which pits Tolstoy against Dostoevsky as writers who, to use Berdyaev's description, appealed to two distinct "types among men's souls, the one inclined toward the spirit of Tolstoy, the other toward that of Dostoevsky" (quoted in Steiner, 10). Following the lead of the Russians, George Steiner even went as far as to signify by the very title of his 1959 book--Tolstoy or Dostoevsky--the absolute necessity for making a choice between the two authors. Recently Joseph Brodsky took the case of Tolstoy vs. Dostoevsky one step further by using the paradigm as a symbol of a "fork" or crossroads faced by twentieth century Russian literature. "Russian prose went with Tolstoy only too glad to spare itself climbing the heights of Dostoevsky's spiritual pitch," writes Brodsky in "Catastrophes in the Air." "...[T]he road not taken was the road that led to modernism, as is evidenced by the influence of Dostoevsky on every major writer in this century, from Kafka on. The road taken led to the literature of socialist realism" (Brodsky, 277, 280). Brodsky's statement, which, judging by recent conference papers, appears to be shared by some Slavists,[1] is immensely arguable, if not downright erroneous. Many of the leading European modernists, among them James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, D. H. Lawrence, Vladimir Nabokov and even Franz Kafka, whom the poet mentions, would have strongly disagreed with Brodsky's bold assessment as to who was their direct precursor.

At the very least, many writers in the twenties considered both Tolstoy and Dostoevsky as equally worthy of study and consideration. Thus Franz Kafka, while obviously drawn to Dostoevsky and inclined to defend him against Max Brod's attacks (see Kafka, Diaries, 104), repeatedly admitted to having been profoundly moved and even influenced by Tolstoy and especially "The Death of Ivan Ilyich" (see Kafka, Diaries 11, 201; Letters 189, 319). E. M. Forster summed up this feeling of awe for both

[1]For example, at the 1989 AAASS convention in Chicago, Irina Gutkin used Brodsky's article as the backbone for her paper "In Search of a New Tolstoy: The Soviet Novel in the 1930s."

writers among his contemporaries when he noted in Aspects of the Novel that "No English novelist is as great as Tolstoy--that is to say has given so complete a picture of man's life, both on its domestic and heroic side. No English novelist has explored man's soul as deeply as Dostoevsky" (Forster, 7). Echoing her friend, Virginia Woolf also characterized the difference between Tolstoy and Dostoevsky not in terms of stature or importance but along the lines of "Life" and "Soul": "Life dominates Tolstoi as the soul dominates Dostoevsky" (Woolf, Common Reader, 186).

Early on, as becomes obvious in her 1912 letter to Lytton Strachey, Woolf did believe that the future of English prose was inseparable from the influence of Dostoevsky: "It is directly obvious that he is the greatest writer ever born: and if he chooses to become horrible what will happen to us?" (Woolf, Letters, II, 5). But even in this statement one can already feel the writer's apprehension as to the nature of Dostoevsky's impact. She knows that English literature cannot possibly remain the same having come under Dostoevsky's spell--"The novels of Dostoevsky," she wrote in "The Russian Point of View," "are seething whirlpools, gyrating sandstorms, waterspouts which hiss and boil and suck us in. ...Against our wills we are drawn in, whirled round, blinded, suffocated, and at the same time filled with a giddy rapture" (Woolf, Common Reader, 182). But she also knows that the union between the Russian and English sensibilities will be far from harmonious: "Dostoevsky--the ruin of English literature," she recorded in her diary in 1922 (Woolf, Diary, II, 203). She both desired such an apocalyptic outcome and feared it. She wanted Dostoevsky to shake up the conventional readers' comfort--"Dashed to the crest of the waves, bumped and battered on the stones at the bottom, it is difficult for an English reader to feel at ease" (Woolf, Common Reader, 184)--yet the deadly-serious quality of Dostoevsky's "soul" was rather alien to her--"It has little sense of humour and no sense of comedy. It is formless" (Woolf, Common Reader, 182). Interestingly enough, even D. H. Lawrence, who himself is often accused of being rather humorless, had little tolerance for that quality of Dostoevsky's soul. "The more Dostoievsky gets worked up about the tragic nature of the human soul," he wrote in a 1930 review, "the more I lose interest" (Lawrence, 245-246). Ironically, it is this very ability of Dostoevsky to "push...his soul beyond the confines of his creed" (Brodsky, 161) that Brodsky sees as one of the writer's main contributions to European modernism.

Woolf's critical responses to Tolstoy are much less ambivalent. By the early twenties it is no longer Dostoevsky but Tolstoy who, in Woolf's revised estimate, is "the greatest of all novelists." "Nothing seems to escape him," she writes in Common Reader. "Nothing glances off him unrecorded....He notices the blue or red of a child's frock; the way a horse shifts its tail; the sound of a cough; the action of a man trying to put his hands into pockets that have been sewn up....There is always at the centre of the book some Olenin, or Pierre, or Levin who gathers into himself all experience, turns the world round between his fingers, and never ceases to ask even as he enjoys it what is the meaning of it, and what should be our aims" (Woolf, Common Reader, 185, 186). He was to her "the most...inspiring, rousing genius in the raw" (Woolf, Diary V,

273) and, unlike Brodsky, who thinks that Tolstoy "took the idea of art reflecting reality a bit too literally" (Brodsky, 275), Woolf felt that the author of Anna Karenina never confused reflecting life with "photographic realism" (Woolf, Diary, V, 273).

Despite all her admiration, Woolf did come to a realization, not unsimilar to Brodsky's, that it was a response against Tolstoy, not an attraction to him, that eventually led to the rise of modernism. "I've been reading...Tolstoy," she wrote in one of her letters in 1929.

> Practically every scene in Anna Karenina is branded on me, though I've not read it for 15 years. That is the origin of all our discontent. After that of course we had to break away. It wasn't Wells, or Galsworthy or any of our mediocre wishy washy realists: it was Tolstoy. How could we go on with sex and realism after that...? It is one brain, after all, literature; and it wants change and relief... (Woolf, Diary, IV, 4).

Yet her conclusion is qualitatively different from Brodsky's. According to Woolf, it was because of Tolstoy's very greatness that he had to be abandoned: Tolstoy had perfected the art of realistic presentation to such an extent that he simply left no further avenues to explore. This is a far cry from Brodsky's easy dismissal of Tolstoy's value altogether, as when he laments the unfortunate fate of his native literature:

> The proximity of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy in time was the unhappiest coincidence in the history of Russian literature. The consequences of it were such that perhaps the only way Providence can defend itself against charges of playing tricks with the spiritual makeup of a great nation is by saying that this way it prevented the Russians from getting too close to its secrets....Dostoevsky went perhaps too high for Providence's liking. So it sends in a Tolstoy as if to ensure that Dostoevsky in Russia gets no continuum" (Brodsky, 276).

Brodsky's statement about the opposite directions of Dostoevsky's and Tolstoy's roads does not at all reflect the experiences of two other important European modernists--Joyce and Nabokov. For while Woolf, at least, appears to vacillate between the importance of the two Russians, neither Joyce nor Nabokov held Dostoevsky in any great esteem, turning instead to Tolstoy for guidance and even inspiration. The case of Joyce's affinity for Tolstoy has been widely commented on by a number of scholars,

among them Richard Ellmann and John Henry Raleigh.[2] Joyce's interest in Tolstoy could be traced to his early youth and could, back then, be rivaled only by his love for Ibsen. As early as 1901, when Joyce was merely nineteen, he suggested in "The Day of the Rabblement" that the Irish Literary Theatre should produce both Ibsen and Tolstoy ("The Dominion of Darkness") to upgrade its unimpressive repertoire (Joyce, Critical Writings, 70), and, as his brother Stanislaus tells us, spent countless hours reading Tolstoy's works at the National Library (Stanislaus Joyce, 98).

"Tolstoy is a magnificent writer," Joyce wrote in 1905. "He is never dull, never stupid, never pedantic, never theatrical. He is head and shoulders over the others." "A writer in the Illustrated London News," continues Joyce in the same letter, "sneers at Tolstoy for not understanding WAR....Do they think the author of Resurrection and Anna Karenin is a fool? Does this impudent, dishonourable journalist think he is the equal of Tolstoy, physically, intellectually, artistically or morally?" (Joyce, Letters, II, 106, 107). Dostoevsky, on the other hand, is conspicuously absent from Joyce's letters or other autobiographical writings. Even what we know of Joyce's library reveals a clear-cut preference for Tolstoy's works: by 1920 Joyce apparently had ten different volumes by Tolstoy (including Anna Karenina and Resurrection) and only two by Dostoevsky (Crime and Punishment and Idiot) (Ellmann, Consciousness of Joyce, 107, 130-131).[3] Joyce credited Tolstoy with giving him ideas for interior monologue[4] but what appealed to him most--and what he could not have learnt from Dostoevsky--was that Tolstoy, like Homer, could gratify his reader with presenting a "complete man," a man

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[2]See Ellmann's James Joyce, where Ellmann supports his statement that Tolstoy was "the novelist [Joyce] liked best" (Ellmann, James Joyce, 4-5), and John Henry Raleigh's "Joyce and Tolstoy."

[3]In Conversations with James Joyce, Arthur Power tells us that Joyce praised Dostoevsky as being "the man more than any other who has created modern prose, and intensified it to its present-day pitch." He also attributes to Joyce the statement that Dostoevsky "was always enamoured of violence, which makes him so modern" (Power, 58, 59). Yet the wording of both statements is so unlike Joyce, who was much more apt to make fun of such pretentious pronouncements than to make them, that one tends not to trust Power's memory altogether. I am more inclined to believe Samuel Beckett's account of Joyce's dispute with his son on the value of Dostoevsky: "Giorgio liked to display in argument an obstinacy of the same weave as his father's, informing him for example that the greatest novelist was Dostoevski, the greatest novel Crime and Punishment. His father said only that it was a queer title for a book which contained neither crime nor punishment" (quoted in Ellmann, James Joyce, 485).

[4]Shklovsky's remark on Tolstoy's unfinished work, "Tale of Yesterday," is quite interesting in this respect: "The interior monologue contradicts the exterior monologue. If Tolstoy had finished his thing, we would have [had] before us a book similar to the one Joyce was going to write many decades later" (quoted in English in Flaker, 198).

in his happiness as well as in his sorrow; in his coming into the world as well as in his leaving it. A man as a son and as a father, as a husband and as a lover, as a hero and as a cuckold. For Joyce there was nothing "too literal" in Tolstoy's reflecting life this way.

Nabokov also considered Tolstoy the greatest of all prose writers, and were he alive today, he would undoubtedly argue with his compatriot that it was Tolstoy and not Dostoevsky who was spiritually and artistically close to modern sensibilities. In all of Dostoevsky's oeuvres Nabokov singled out his early and Gogolesque "The Double" as worthy of admiration, dismissing the rest as reading for "schoolboys and schoolgirls" and complaining that Dostoevsky's "devices appear to me, when compared to Tolstoy's methods, like blows of a club instead of the light touch of an artist's fingers" (Nabokov, Lectures on Russian Literature, 109, 128). "Bedlam turned back into Bethlehem - that's Dostoevski for you," is Fyodor's famous verdict in The Gift (Gift, 84).

Usually wary of political, religious or ideological messages in literature, Nabokov, on the one hand, condemned Dostoevsky for "blood and tears and hysterical and topical politics" (Nabokov, Lectures, 141), while, on the other, he found it easy to forgive Tolstoy's brand of moralizing. In Tolstoy, he thought, the artist simply overpowered the preacher: "[H]is ideology was so tame and so vague and so far from politics, and...his art was so powerful, so tiger bright, so original and universal that it easily transcends the sermon" (Nabokov, Lectures, 137, 138). Whereas Brodsky accuses Tolstoy of begetting socialist realism, Nabokov on the contrary thinks of the author of "The Death of Ivan Ilyich" as an actual "forerunner of Russian modernism just before the dull and conventional Soviet era" (Nabokov, Lectures, 238).

The truth, of course, lies somewhere between Brodsky's and Nabokov's equally partisan pronouncements about the value to European modernism of the authors they champion. When Dostoevsky's "Double," "Notes from the Underground," The Possessed and The Brothers Karamazov were unleashed on the Western world, the works obviously fueled the modernist preoccupation with consciousness. But Tolstoy's prose, as this paper has tried to show, was at least equally instrumental in shaping modernist sensibilities, from the writers' awareness of craft and artistry[5] to their heightened interest in all aspects of human life. Fortunately for its readers much of enduring literature rises above critical attempts at easy dismissals and stark categorizing. One can only hope that the simplistic and overworked issue of "Dostoevsky or Tolstoy" will one day be finally put to rest and people like Brodsky will stop wasting their time on discussions unworthy even of much lesser talents.

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[5]Characteristically, Percy Lubbock's 1921 critical study on The Craft of Fiction draws more examples out of Tolstoy than of any other prose writer, including Henry James, whom the critic follows as his mentor.

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