

A VIEW OF RUSSIAN LITERATURE

The author begins by inviting the reader to treat this, the first of a projected two-volume history of Russian literature, as being the first systematic treatment in English of this great subject, and promises to provide the relevant social and political background without which, he rightly observes, the story is not easily comprehensible. This is a large claim and not, *prima facie*, altogether plausible in the face of the justly celebrated volumes, recently reprinted, by Prince D. S. Mirsky, which between them cover most of the same ground. Mr Slonim's knowledge of his subject is solid and his treatment systematic – like any competent literary historian he works according to a strict chronological plan, advancing slowly from the earliest native and semi-Byzantine ballads, chronicles and folk songs, through the beginnings of imitation of Western literature in the eighteenth century, to the rising ground of the early nineteenth century mounting suddenly to great heights dominated by the mountain peaks of Pushkin and Tolstoy. His treatment is sober, clear and exceedingly orthodox. The minor writers are summed up in a few sentences of paragraphs; the major figures are accorded full scale essays. The author is throughout careful, serious, and painstakingly thoughtful.

No greater contrast with Mirsky's outlook and style could well be conceived. Mirsky wrote with confidence, spontaneity and a combination of fastidious taste and intellectual gaiety which communicated to his books the brilliance and freedom of the best and most illuminating kind of conversation about literature. His judgements were recklessly personal, and his facts and dates sometimes inaccurate. He lavished magnificent encomia upon authors, who, for reasons not always clear, delighted or excited him, and launched violent personal attacks on writers both great and small, men of genius and forgotten hacks, who happened to bore or annoy him. His use of English was very vivid and very original, his judgements were first-hand and derived from direct contemplation of the object. In everything he wrote there was a

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play of ideas which sprang from a wide if undisciplined knowledge of all the great European civilisations, assimilated without residue into the loose but rich texture of his own mental life, and expressed with that astonishing mixture of elegance, high spirits, and directness of vision which is the specific property of the best Russian liberal intelligentsia; of this unique society he was perhaps the most accomplished representative among the émigrés of the twentieth century. He was not a systematic critic, and there are large and capricious omissions in his work; but his confidence in his own literary insight was unbounded and, armed with it, he succeeded in rescuing various authors from undeserved oblivion, and in introducing figures hitherto little known outside Russia in a manner which arrested the attention of Western readers to their great and abiding profit.

There is an obvious sense in which Mr Slonim's book is a complement and useful antidote to Mirsky's glittering but uneven masterpiece. A balanced presentation of so immense and various a scene presupposes a certain degree of academic detachment, and Mirsky's warmest admirers would not wish to maintain that he took care not to obtrude his own spectacular personality over his subject; there is a virtue in being sober, and just, a transparent medium through which the subject itself is allowed to have its full impact on the reader: and Mr Slonim is a paragon of such heroic self effacement; yet the subject deserves something greater. Russian literature, apart from the individual achievement of men of genius, possesses properties which need special illumination if the Western reader is to understand its significance as an aspect – perhaps the most revealing, certainly the most arresting – of the development of Russian society as a whole since the beginning of its contact with the West. Indeed it was a commonplace among the Russian critics of the last century that no literature in the world was so inextricably bound up with the social, political and moral views prevalent in its time as their own Russian writers, whether or not they believed in the utilitarian value of literature – its 'social function' – saw themselves as conscious champions of a point of view, of a particular attitude toward life and society to the validity of which their art was first and foremost a testimony.

Mr Slonim is well aware of this: he deals faithfully with the early and medieval periods of Russian literature, and gives an adequate account of the sowing of foreign seeds, which though not devoid of moments of originality, is on the whole interesting mainly

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because of the astonishingly rich harvest which followed: upon all this Mr Slonim, being more thorough and conscientious, is a more dependable guide than Mirsky, who wrote magnificently about works of genius like the Lay of Igor's Host, or Avvakum's autobiography, or the Bylinas, and polished off the rest with conspicuous lack of interest. But then comes the great awakening which began in the late eighteenth century, one of the most astonishing developments in the history of European civilisation. It began in effect with Derzhavin, reached a height not attained before or since in the poetry and prose of Pushkin, and continued to put forth both fruit and flower for a century – a prodigious outpouring of genius scarcely equalled since the Greeks. Throughout, the characteristic which strikes the historian of culture most is the degree to which art remains united with life, and the artist remains an undivided personality not conscious of his art as a peculiar and separate activity, insulated from his activity as an individual or as a member of society, to be judged therefore by special criteria, living in a world governed by rules different from those of daily existence. Consequently the central artistic issue of the nineteenth century – the degree to which the artist has a right to be, or in some metaphysical sense is 'free' from the laws which govern society – the cause which led to those famous battles in which Stendhal, and Baudelaire, Flaubert and Ruskin, and to a certain degree Ibsen and Wilde became involved, the issue which raised at any rate the possibility of an ivory tower in which the artist was free to act as he pleased, liberated from the laws of even a private morality, even of commandments imposed upon him by his own self-generated ideals – that celebrated problem has relatively little relevance to the Russian scene. There was of course, a battle fought out in Russia too, a far more violent battle whose consequences have affected the lives of ordinary men and women today more deeply than the critical battles of the West; but it revolved not so much round the relation, or absence of relation, between art and life but the more fundamental problem of the nature of truth itself. The major preoccupation, almost the obsession of Russian writers, is the nature of truth in a very wide sense. The upholders of the 'social' theory of art whether they were aesthetically sensitive liberal humanists like Belinsky and Herzen, or fanatical utilitarian materialists like Dobrolyubov and Pisarev, believed that truth in art and life alike consisted in the discovery, and clearest and most uncompromising formulation of

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those intractable facts upon which everything else in human experience was held to depend; the business of art – as of all expression – was to tell the truth; and this implied the painful but unavoidable obligation to conform to a reality not made by, but given to the artist; and entailed a capacity for distinguishing in this unalterable ‘given,’ between the central and the peripheral, the essential and the trivial; and again, the root and the branch, the wood and the trees; but above all between the true and the specious, the suppositious, the illusory, the ‘made up,’ the false. Upon the validity of the analysis, conscious or unconscious, of where this distinction lies depends the depth of a man’s insight, his capacity for discovering and telling the truth. Nor was the importance attached to the social factor due merely to its supposed efficacy as the major cause of historical change. The domination of social over individual categories in the interpretation both of life and literature by a teacher who bound his spell on a generation like Chernyshevsky was not simply the expansion of the bald formula that social factors condition the behaviour and thought of individuals and not *vice versa*; it sprang from the view that to understand the universe correctly was to distinguish between what does and what does not matter a great deal; and the concept of ‘what matters’ was not tantamount to the notion of causal efficiency, unless causality accounted for the behaviour of everything that constituted the universe; but even the most crass materialists did not suppose that the world was explicable solely in terms of physics, but saw it as a single inter-connected universe, containing experiences of every type, intellectual and mental, perceptual and volitional; only an accurate understanding of its nature whether in terms of some mechanical model or some other pattern could preserve one from confounding important questions with trivial ones, from looking for solutions in regions which could not provide them.

Chernyshevsky accepted this primacy of the metaphysical over all other questions, and differed from his opponents only in believing that the most essential thing to grasp was one’s own position in the economic scheme in relation to that of everyone and everything else, for that alone could endow the questioner with that understanding which the Greek philosophers and Christian mystics, nationalists and empiricists, German romantics and French ideologues, Oriental wisdom and western science, were all equally trying to provide. The opposition – anti-utilitarians,

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metaphysical writers like Odoevsky, Chaadaev and Tyutchev, 'pure artists' like Pushkin, Lermontov, Turgenev, Fet, moralists and prophets like Gogol, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Solovev, even Symbolists who pictured art as a supernatural relationship to unutterable essences to which the visual world is mysteriously related – all these accepted this common premise, namely that it was an obligation to see as deeply as one could, and describe what one saw; the artist was merely a seer of a specific kind whose vision differed from, and perhaps was superior to, but was vision literally in the same sense as that of the scholar, or the man of action, or the priest. Consequently, because the function of art was not merely to give pleasure or to create patterns for their own sakes (or indeed to do anything which could not be metaphysically justified) theories, ideals and everything connected with them became of paramount importance. This philosophical preoccupation with general ideas became the distinguishing mark of the Russian intelligentsia; whatever the sociological explanation of this phenomenon, whether it was due to the influence of the doctrines of the Orthodox Church; or to the suppression by the government of open political and social discussion which forced it to seek refuge in what Herzen called the 'safe inland lake of aesthetic speculation'; or to the social structure of Russia which caused a curious symbiosis between bored aristocratic dilettanti in search of novelty and literary intellectuals cut adrift from the bourgeoisie; whatever the reason, the course of Russian literature is intelligible only if the nature of this pervasive metaphysical preoccupation – stronger than ever in contemporary Russia, and adopting progressively more fantastic shapes – is understood and discounted.

Mr Slonim is well aware of the necessity of providing some such framework of interpretation – indeed he insists upon it with much emphasis – but his performance is somewhat timorous and at times almost mechanical. His pages on Belinsky, whose influence was probably the most powerful single factor in causing the astonishing ferment of ideas which continued for almost a century after his death, are pallid and conventional; the great critic's relationships to his predecessors are sketched too cursorily. The astonishingly swift development of literary and intellectual life from the elegant literary salons of Zhukovsky's youth, to the Hegelian storms of the late thirties and forties is not adequately told. The names of Schelling, Kant and Hegel duly occur, but

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without any clear indication of how they came to transform the literary scene in Petersburg and Moscow. The later scarcely less crucial influence of Feuerbach, the French socialists and the German materialists is conscientiously alluded to, but the reader will seek in vain for their precise role in the story. It may be argued that Mr Slonim is engaged upon a history of literature and not of ideas; but if his own thesis of the interrelation of the two is valid, as it plainly is, a choice must be made between either, ignoring 'impure' non-literary philosophical, social etc. factors as far as possible, and concentrating (as Mirsky on the whole tended to do) on the purely aesthetic aspects of the subject, or else acquiring sufficient equipment to enter this none too clear world of speculative theory without losing all sense of direction; as for example was done by such eminent literary historians as Gershenzon and Ivanov-Razumnik, by whose classical treatises the author appears little affected. In fact Mr Slonim has chosen that time-honoured middle way with which all readers of academic literary history are all too familiar – in which knowing allusions are from time to time made to regions beyond the confines of pure literature, shedding little light and serving only to tantalise the reader and probably the author too.

But if Mr Slonim's treatment of *Ideengeschichte* is somewhat thin, his treatment of individual writers is often interesting and at times illuminating. He is a genuinely sensitive critic of literature and writes well about the great classical masters. Thus he conveys vividly and at moments imaginatively the horror of empty places, the paranoiac flight from gaps in reality – the lifeless, the trivial, the hair-raising abyss of daily life which obsessed Gogol; like Belly and Vengerov he stresses Gogol's sense of the perpetual presence of the Devil, of hideous grimaces and grinning fiends in every nook and cranny; and relates this to Gogol's 'realism' with skill, and at times, insight. He is no less enlightening about the inner crack in the life of Nekrasov.

Mr Slonim's essay on Turgenev is less interesting than that on Dostoevsky, about whose novels, without saying anything arrestingly new or profound, he writes with subtlety, judgement and balance. This, in dealing with an author who too often hypnotises his critics into his own condition of fever and violence, is a remarkable achievement in itself, and says much for Slonim's sanity and judgement. While his strictures upon Goncharov who is accused of an excessive tendency to moralise are open to question,

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Mr Slonim's portrait of Tolstoy is a solid piece of literary draughtsmanship. Mr Slonim is even here too fond of walks through open doors, but he does so with modesty, simplicity and lack of pretentiousness, and tacitly rejects *en passant* the mountain of fanciful and arid interpretation with which Russian criticism all but concealed the greatest European novelist.

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