



A Portrait of Dostoevsky

Review of Henri Troyat

Firebrand: the Life of Dostoevsky

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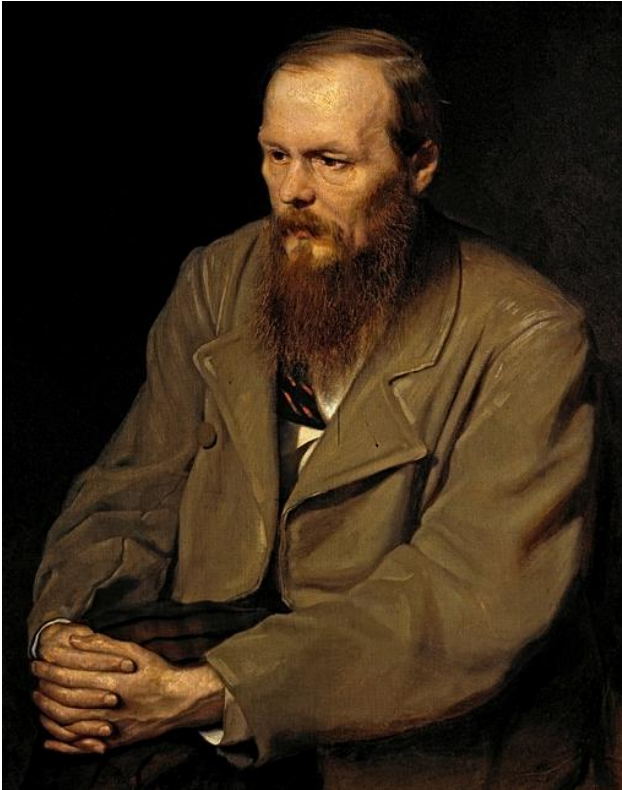
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Review of Henri Troyat, *Firebrand: The Life of Dostoevsky* (London, 1948: Heinemann), *The Listener* 40 (1948), 15 July, 102



Fedor Dostoevsky by Vasily Perov, 1872

THE COMPLEX of strange characteristics which forms the popular Western conception of the Russian national character largely owes its origin to the novels of Dostoevsky. The stereotyped picture of Russians as gloomy and introspective neurotics, who spend a large part of their nights in tormenting

themselves with painful self-questionings and self-accusations, victims of uncontrollable emotional crises, passing from extremes of spiritual exaltation and ecstatic contemplation and acceptance of life to chaotic and destructive violence, illuminated by sudden moments of insight and transfiguration – this dark, stifling and demented world, which has frightened, repelled and fascinated those Europeans who discovered it, was created almost entirely by Dostoevsky, his successors and his imitators.

It is a remarkable tribute to the power of a single writer that this should be so – that the luminous world of Pushkin's prose and poetry, the graceful and sensitive civilisation of Turgenev, and, above all, the enormous, clear, three-dimensional, indestructibly sane and coherent universe brought into existence by Tolstoy should have proved so unavailing against the spell cast by Dostoevsky upon the popular imagination. The grey tones of Chekhov alone have been added to the livid colours with which Dostoevsky has indelibly marked the composite image of the celebrated 'Slav soul': the rest has been supplied in our day, by a combination of opposites which no one has attempted to reconcile or explain, drawn from the works of the Russian decadents of this century plus Mr Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*.

It is clear that Dostoevsky's vision was violently affected by the harrowing course of his life. It is, M. Troyat observes, a story as terrifying as any of the author's own novels, and he gives a vivid and appropriately gruesome, but unexaggerated, account of the protracted nightmare.

There are a few curious omissions. Dostoevsky's conversion from his youthful radicalism to reactionary views is not adequately explained; the letters to Lubimov explaining the central purpose of *The Brothers Karamazov* are unaccountably passed over. Nor does M. Troyat anywhere draw together the strands of his isolated comments on Dostoevsky's novels into a final critical estimate of what Dostoevsky was and said and wanted. But this should not obscure the value of M. Troyat's scrupulous research and lucid and succinct exposition.

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The translation is, alas, of the familiar kind which bristles with such phrases as ‘Actually he was not fundamentally bad, indeed he was *not even* bad’, ‘Walks were patriarchal and approximately dull’, ‘The chief conspirer’, ‘Abstract elucubrations’ etc. Nor is there any obvious reason for omitting M. Troyat’s last chapter, which contains a fascinating account, not accessible elsewhere, of the fortunes of Dostoevsky’s wife and children after his death, and of their part in the posthumous publication of his works.

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