

Russian Literature

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different
languages

Russia, the largest of the European countries, is the least European of them all. In fact, Russians have often spoken of a journey west as "going to Europe," as if they themselves were quite outside that continent. The great stretches of Siberia have tied Russia to the East as no other European nation has been, and the Oriental element is a force that must be reckoned with in understanding the Russian character. Complex indeed is the pattern of peoples designed to live under one government. It is said that there are one hundred and eighty nationalities in the present Soviet Union. When we add to the complexity the great problem of widespread illiteracy, against which such valiant struggles have been made in this century, we realize how different is the social background of Russian literature from that of other European nations. In fact, Russia was so far behind the others that she was just emerging from semi-barbarism during the eighteenth century when the Western nations were rising to a climax of elegance and polish after several centuries of increasing refinements of life. This retardation was largely because of the great Mongolian invasions of the thirteenth century which destroyed the budding civilization and crowded the Slavs westward. For the next four centuries church and state bent their efforts toward the expulsion of the Tartars from Europe. A great change began with Peter-the-Great (1672-1725) who not only laid a firm foundation for an expanding empire, but systematically established contacts with the rest of Europe and thus leavened his country with Western civilization.

Russian Literature a blend of Oriental and Occidental Traits.

We can feel in Russian life and character two great conflicting undercurrents -- that which draws toward Western ideas and standards, vigorous, progressive, and materialistic -- and that which draws toward the Oriental mood of inertia, contemplation, and resignation to things as they are. What with this basic inner conflict a natural tendency toward introspection, a frankness of self-revelation and undue sensitiveness to suffering, the Russians have produced a body of literature which tends toward the morbid, the pessimistic, and the tragic, but which in its very power derived from searching the depths of human experience, is one of the greatest literatures of Europe. Another marked characteristic of Russian writing is its realism, in contrast to the strong romantic quality of much Western literature. Russian books turn their searchlights on the daily lives of men and women. They throw no glamour over life, nor wrench it from its moorings to satisfy prescribed rules of plot and style. Hence the simple directness and formlessness of most Russian novels and dramas. It is evident too that most of the important fiction of this country is bound up either directly or indirectly with the political and social struggles which have racked the Russian people for two centuries. The reason for this is not only that these conflicts formed an integral part of living which could not be ignored, but also that with strict censorship stifling all freedom of speech on such matters, Russians have often been driven to make public their views through the thin disguise of fiction. The speeches of a nihilistic character in a great novel could convey what no pamphlet could get into print. These three characteristics then are distinctive to Russian literature: pessimism, realism, and social significance.

For the general Western reader Russian literature may be said to begin with the nineteenth century. This does not mean a total lack of writing in the language before that time. In fact, a detailed history of Russian

literature devotes a large volume to the works produced before 1800, and bristles with many-syllabled names of many authors. But these are of interest only to advanced scholars or native Russians and are seldom translated into foreign tongues.

* Pushkin the first great name of Russian literature.

With Pushkin (1799-1837) the modern literature of Russia really begins. In versatility, poetic insight, and real power of word picturing, he has not been excelled in the poetry of his land. He broke definitely with the followers of the French classic school, and in his first long poem, "Ruslan and Qudrila" he told a native fairy tale with so much charm that the stilted and artificial pseudo-classic style met permanent defeat in the public mind. This simple and honest style, to which Wordsworth offers the best parallel in English poetry, remained in all Pushkin's later writing. His masterpiece, "Eugene Oregin" tells the story of a society dandy who scorns the love of Tatiana, a poetically inclined young country girl, only to fall in love with her years later when he meets her in the court of St. Petersburg as the wife of an old general. Tatiana's pathetic speech of regret for the past when happiness would have been so possible and so near is one of the most famous passages among Russian classics. The story forms the basis of an opera by Tschaikovsky; in fact most of Pushkin's long poems have been used for opera by Russian composers. Pushkin's treatments of earlier history in Boris Gndonov and The Bronze Horseman further stamped him as the mouthpiece of the nation, and his limping of local scenery endeared him to a nature loving people. He is universally regarded as the foundation stone of Russian literature.

Lermontov (1814-1841)

Second to Pushkin among the early poets, Lermontov was a more extravagant romanticist than the great Pushkin, his writing somewhat comparable to Lord Byron's in his love of the exotic and the dramatically heroic.

Gogol the novelist who mimicked life.

Gogol (1809-1852) whose inventive gift for creating multitudes of vivid characters may be most nearly compared to Dickens. He was a born mimic, and so caught and held the colloquial mannerisms of his men and women as well as their physical peculiarities, that he is especially difficult to translate. His chief works are:

Dead Souls
The Government Inspector
The Overcoat

Three masters of the Russian novel remain preeminent.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, we come to the golden age of the Russian novel. There is no question as to the three names at the top of the list of novelists.

The birth dates of the three men --

Turgenev, 1818
Dostoevsky, 1821
Tolstoy, 1828

show how contemporaneous they were. Dostoevsky had a slight head start on the others in publication, for his Poor Folk was enthusiastically

received in 1846; but his nine years isolation in Siberia removed him from the scene temporarily, and it was Turgenev who laid the earliest reputation with his A Sportsman's Sketches of 1850.

Tolstoy's Childhood brought him some recognition in 1852, but it was not till his Sevastopol Stories of the Crimean War were published in 1855 that his name was as well known as Turgenev's. Turgenev was in love with the language of Russia and the painstaking care with which he managed its subtleties and rhythms cannot of course be fully appreciated in translation. He also crystallised more than the other two novelists the political unrest of the day and the desperation of human beings faced by social forces which they cannot change or control. His influence on reform policies was greater than he realized at the time of writing. A Sportsman's Sketches were not written with the direct intent to free the serfs nor Fathers and Sons to christen the "Nihilist" party, yet such results followed in their wake. Turgenev is the great reflector of his age.

Tolstoy: (1828-1910)

Tolstoy, too, paints on a large canvas but is more concerned with the psychological development of his characters. Our ability to look into the hidden mental processes of each person gives us a feeling of oneness with experience of each. His style is simpler, more transparent than Turgenev's. In Tolstoy's earlier works -- Sevastopol Stories, The Cossacks, and War and Peace -- the lives of the characters are enmeshed in the net of military life or of open warfare; in the later ones -- Anna Karenina, The Kreutzer Sonata, and Resurrection -- it is love and the expiation of sin which bring about the human struggle. A pronounced moral purpose is evident in most of Tolstoy's books, especially the later ones. Many of his short stories, in fact, are parables to mold human attitudes toward right and wrong.

Dostoevsky: (1821-1881)

Dostoevsky had a long struggle to win public acclaim which came so quickly to his two contemporaries. He returned to Petersburg in 1859. In the twenty years between then and his death, he produced about nine long books besides numerous miscellaneous writings, but he was constantly in financial straits, and far reaching popularity did not come to him until a few years before his death. In fact, it was not until the nineties that his fame abroad began to equal that of the other two men, then, in the minds of some critics at least, to overtop Turgenev. The names of Dostoevsky's great books are for the most part suggestive of the human derelicts from whose ranks he drew practically all his characters ---- Humiliated and Insulted (known in some translations as The Injured and the Insulted), The House of the Dead, Memoirs from the Underground, Crime and Punishment, The Gambler, The Idiot, The Devils (again, this book is often translated as The Possessed). Only in his last and greatest book does he choose the noncommittal title; The Brothers Karamazov. However, much Dostoevsky may be criticized for the formlessness and prolixity of his novels, for the fantastic quality of his plots, for the misery, disease or insanity with which all his characters are warped. The fact remains that he wrote with terrifying power, and invested his gruesome ^{some} ^{exome} situations with human sympathy and spiritual significance beyond that of any other writer.

Russian literature from the time of the Revolution until approximately the second World War may be said to have been split into two parts: that

produced by the exiled intelligentsia, and that produced within the Soviet Union. At present, Soviet literature is dominated by a group of young virile writers whose output of poetry, plays, and stories may be said to be following the modern trend in mass production. Most of these writings, especially the poems, seem to be in an experimental and emotionally chaotic stage. There is a tendency to introduce elements of modern science, industry, and political life as these young writers have experienced them.

Final Comment.

Dostoevsky was virtually outlawed in Russia during the Stalin Regime. All of his works were refused re-publication during this time. The reason for this, most probably, was because his writings were considered to be reactionary and in support of Czarism and Orthodoxy, therefore, a psychological, decadent, individualistic and introspective writer. The Stalinists may have been right in part -- in regarding Dostoevsky as their adversary, but in large part they were wrong. A wrong which has been actively rectified during recent years, and which may be clearly witnessed in the U.S.S.R. Ministry of Culture 1953 Outline for the Study of Dostoevsky in Soviet Universities.

For the last ninety years there has been a contest between Dostoevsky and Marx, within Russia. The first round was won by Dostoevsky since he wrote a masterpiece; the second was won by Marx since his theories produced a Revolution; yet the third seems now to have been won by Dostoevsky: the evil thrown out of the window by Marxism returned in torrents through the door of Stalinism, that is, through means adopted by the revolution to establish and maintain itself. And what is the evil? The evil in the U.S.S.R. was represented by the innumerable Lisavetas, the innumerable innocents tortured, imprisoned, murdered, in the name of the revolution, who are now being rehabilitated, ^{and} but to whom can never be given back what was taken from them. In short, the evil is the pain, the pain of the blow of Raskolnikov's axe, justified by the good of humanity. Unfortunately, the axe blow, at least in reality, weighs much more than the good of humanity and the balance may only be maintained through the awareness of evil, as evil, and the subsequent quantity of pain arising from it. Although containing psychological even psychopathological themes, Crime and Punishment is principally a social novel which places in the thick of action, and under dialectic fire, the large painful themes of the contemporary political moment in all the intensity of the battle of ideas and social forces.

From reading this book, we may learn, even to become more acutely aware of the enormity of political unrest and social injustice which runs rampant, everywhere, in our world today.