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RUSSIAN LITERATURE

By JANKO LAVRIN

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By JANKO LAVRIN

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RUSSIAN LITERATURE

CHAPTER I

THE OLD LITERATURE

I

THE first link between Russia and Europe was made by those Norsemen who penetrated into the country in the second half of the ninth century in order to secure a convenient commercial route between Byzantium and the north of Europe. Their centres were Nóvgorod and Kiev. Olég (879-912) made Kiev the general capital and at the same time an important fortress against the nomadic Mongolian tribes of the steppes. Prince Vladímir (980-1015) married the Byzantine Princess Anna, and Christianity followed her into Russia almost as a part of her dowry. The Prince and his subjects were baptized in 988. This second and stronger link brought Russia under Byzantine influence, as distinct from that of the Germano-Latin West. Owing to an influx of Greek monks, artists, and artisans, Kiev soon became a city with fine architecture, frescoes, monasteries, and even with literature.

The earliest products of this literature consisted chiefly of translations from the Greek, of compilations, and of Slavonic liturgical books imported from the Balkans and written in that South Macedonian dialect which is the common liturgical language of all Orthodox Slavs. Prayers, gospels, sermons, lives of various saints—such was the first spiritual food of the converted Russians. Their oldest literary documents go as far back as the eleventh century. A notable work of that period is the *Instruction,* written by Prince Vladímir Monomákh (1053-1125) for the benefit of his children. It is full of practical and moral rules, mingled with details about the author's past. Another

interesting document is *The Supplication* of a certain Daniel the Exile, who boasts of his knowledge and experience in order to persuade Prince Yaroslávˊ to take him into his service. More important than all the rest are, however, *The Chronicle of Nestor* and *The Song of Igor's Raid.*

The first is among the finest medieval chronicles. The bulk of it is supposed to have been written, or compiled from older annals, by the Kiev monk Nestor (1057-1117). He begins with Noah's sons, then passes to the Slavs and brings the early Russian history up to the year 1110. The chronicle breathes a patriotic spirit, and its pages abound in delightful anecdotes. The oldest preserved copy of it (the Lavrentyev Manuscript) dates from 1377. The second masterpiece, *The Song of Igor's Raid* (*Slóvo O Polḳú Igorevye*), must have been written by a professional bard. It describes, in ornate, rhythmical prose, a real event: the raid of the Nóvgorod Prince Igor against the nomadic Pólovtsy (in 1185), his defeat, his captivity, and his escape. The poem abounds in great lyrical beauties, as well as in original similes and symbols. The tie between man and Nature is particularly profound. Thus Igor is helped in his flight by birds and trees. Rivers, plains, winds, and forests seem to live one life with men. Certain passages, such as the laments of Igor's wife, are poignant in their dynamic simplicity. The poem appeared in print in 1800. There were some doubts as to its authenticity. Subsequent investigations proved, however, that it dates from the end of the twelfth century. Borodín used it for the libretto of his famous opera, *Prince Igor.*

Besides the Annals of Nestor, the Kiev period produced several other chronicles of lesser value. A very fine achievement is *The Pilgrimage of the Prior Daniel*—the description of a journey to the Holy Land, written in the first half of the twelfth century. Meanwhile, there came from Byzantium—chiefly

through Bulgaria and Serbia—a host of Apocrypha, many of which merged with the Russian folk-lore. Among their best examples are *The Pilgrimage of the Holy Virgin to Hell* and the rhythmical prose poem, *The Appeal of Adam to Lazarus in Hell.* The latter is probably from the thirteenth century, and, for all one knows, it may be of purely Russian origin.

II

Kiev had every chance of developing into a solid centre of art and learning. History and geography were, however, against it. The dissensions among princes after the death of Vladímir Monomákh were turned by the neighbouring Mongols to their own advantage. The Tartars advanced until they became (in the first half of the thirteenth century) masters of the whole of Russia, excepting Nóvgorod and the extreme North. Kiev was sacked and burned. Tyranny, cruelty, corruption, and the Tartar whip now left little room for creative inspiration—except in architecture, in religious paintings, and in the wonderful folk-lore. Russian folk-songs, fairy tales, legends, and proverbs continued to grow even during the time of the Tartar yoke. And they gave their best products in the so-called *byliny,* or epic rhapsodies, singing above all the past glories of Kiev, its ruler Vladímir, and his " round table " of heroes.* Otherwise, Russia had a relapse into the Dark Ages.

The literary output during the Tartar period was small and casual. Some fragments of a fine poem, *The Song about the Ruin of the Russian Land,* are from the first half of the thirteenth century. A much later and rather confused poem, *Zadónshchina* (Trans-Doniad) describes the battle on the Kulikovo field,

* There are heroic, legendary, historic, and anecdotic *byliny.* First examples of these were written down by Richard James, an Oxonian, who was in Moscow in 1619.

where Dmitry Donskóy dealt—in 1380—the first blow to the Tartar power. Of more importance is the earlier *Poem of the Rout of Mamaï*. All three are slightly reminiscent of *Igor's Raid*.

The Tartars were, in essence, only nomadic exploiters: what they wanted was tribute. The Moscow Prince, Iván Kalitá (1328-40), obtained the right to collect the tribute for the Golden Horde from the entire Russian territory. This led to a gradual consolidation of the exploited provinces around Moscow, until at last Iván III. (1462-1505) liberated the country from the Tartars in 1480 and made the Kazan Khanat itself dependent on Moscow. After the fall of Constantinople (1453) Sophia Paleolog, the niece of the last Greek Emperor, was married to Iván III., who thus regarded himself as the heir to Byzantine traditions and Moscow as the "third Rome." Under his grandson, Iván the Terrible (1533-84), one can see already a rapid expansion of Russia on the one hand, and a groping after a cultural orientation on the other. This last task was difficult for two reasons: first, Russia had remained cut off from the two mightiest currents in Europe—the Renaissance and the Reformation; and, secondly, both clergy and rulers were too conservative. Various political and religious troubles completed the difficulties under which this "Moscow period" of literature was developing. Most authors were priests, and their literary medium was the traditional Church-Slavonic language.

One of the typical reactionaries of the time is the Abbot Joseph of Vólok (d. 1515), whose *Illuminator* is a collection of intolerant religious polemics. Of a different stamp is the hermit Nil Sorsky (d. 1508). He lived for a time in Mount Athos. From there he returned a great mystic and undertook the campaign for a complete spiritualization of the Church. Another sympathetic figure is Maxím Grek (*i.e.*, the Greek). Born in Albania, he studied in Greece and Italy, and became a monk in Mount Athos, whence he was

summoned to Russia in order to revise the translations of various liturgical books. The conservative clergy looked, however, with suspicion upon his work, and so he spent the remainder of his life in prison. He was, above all, a polemic writer. His epistles and sermons bear the stamp of a man who has the courage of his convictions. His lack of spiritual or any other servility is a rare feature in the post-Tartar Moscow.

The Tsar Iván the Terrible himself belongs, in a way, to literature. His sarcastic epistles to the renegade Prince Kurbsky are interesting psychological and literary documents. Of considerable importance for that period is the *Chetyi-Minéi,* or the *Saints' Calendar.* Compiled in twelve big volumes, by Macáry, the Metropolitan of Moscow, it contains lives of the saints, didactic treatises, legends, sermons, and the like. *The Domostróy* (*The House Orderer*), on the other hand, is a mirror of the Moscow spirit as a whole. Much of its advice is "patriarchal" in the worst sense of this word. As an example of the Moscow conservatism may serve the fact that the first printing press (introduced by Iván the Terrible) was destroyed, and the printers had to flee for their lives like black magicians. The "troubled times" which were brought upon Russia—at the beginning of the seventeenth century—by the Polish invasion, the False Demetrius, famine, and anarchy, produced some good chroniclers—Prince Iván Kátyrev, A. Pálitsyn, and I. Timoféyev. But soon after the election of the first Románov to the throne a split (*raskól*) took place in the Russian Church, and this, too, had a certain influence upon literature.

The split itself was caused by the reforms of the Patriarch Níkon. He revised certain obscure passages in the liturgical books and introduced some minor innovations into the ritual. Yet his endeavours met with resistance on the part of the "old believers," who ranged themselves against him. One of their leaders was the archpriest Avvakúm. He was a man

of unshakable faith and will-power. After having been dragged from one prison to the other, he was exiled to Siberia, then to the Arctic North; yet amidst all his trials he remained firm, even cheerful. At last he was burnt at the stake in 1681. He left a unique autobiography, *The Life of the Archpriest Avvakúm, Written by Himself* (1672-73). Apart from its biographical interest, this book reveals the manners of that time better than hundreds of "learned" treatises. Moreover, its rugged and powerful language comes nearer to the spoken Russian than any work written before. The same applies to his polemical *Epistles*.

III

The impenetrable conservatism of Muscovy began to give way under the rule of Alexis Mikháilovitch. Schools of a fairly advanced type sprang up. Among the teachers at the Theological College in Moscow were several monks from the more "European" Kiev. The best among them was Simeon Pólotsky (1629-80). He wrote Biblical plays, religious and even secular poetry in rhymed syllabic metre—after the Polish pattern. He, too, brought the literary language quite near to the spoken tongue, anticipating in this respect the work of Lomonósov. About the same time we see the activities of the first "Westerner" in the person of Grigóry Kotoshíkhin, and the first Pan-Slavist in that of Yury Krízhanitch.

Kotoshíkhin lived in Sweden. While comparing Europe with Russia, he attacked his native country in *Russia During the Reign of Alexis Mikháilovitch*, a book which points out the contrast between Russia and Europe for the first time in all its intensity. This eulogist of European progress was, however, executed at Stockholm—for manslaughter. As to Krízhanitch (1618-83?), he was a Croat by birth and a Catholic priest by profession. One of his aims was to bring Russians back to Catholicism, and the other to preach the idea of future Slav unity under the leadership of

Moscow. With this mission he went to Russia. For some reason or other he was soon offered official hospitality—in Siberia. He remained an exile for fifteen years, during which time he wrote his Pan-Slavonic grammar (a linguistic concoction which should be equally understood by all Slavs), and several treatises, including his *Politika,* a work full of valuable suggestions and anticipations.

The theatre, in a European sense, also began during the reign of Alexis Mikhailovitch. The so-called school drama (a kind of belated mystery and miracle play) came through Poland, first to the Kiev Theological College, and thence to Moscow. The real father of the Russian theatre proper was, however, a German pastor, a certain Dr. Gregori. His first productions—chiefly on Biblical themes—took place in Moscow in 1672. This venture was, of course, short-lived. The theatre died a natural death, and was again galvanized into life only later—in the eighteenth century. Meanwhile Russia was becoming more familiar with late echoes (via Poland and Kiev) of the Western medieval and Renaissance themes: of the *Gesta Romanorum,* of "romances," of the Italian *novella,* even of the French *fabliaux.* These importations were responsible for various chap-books, written for the simple folk, and in a language which was more understandable to the readers than the habitual Church-Slavonic. *The Story of Savva Grutsyn* (the Russian Faust legend), *Eruslán Lazárevitch, Bóva Korolévitch, Frol Skobéyev,* and many others could be quoted among them.

Such were the results of Russia's literary activities from the eleventh to the end of the seventeenth century. They are poor when compared with those of England, France, and Italy during that period. Russia was still slumbering. True, politically she expanded after the liberation from the Tartars. The vast spaces of Kazan, Siberia (1581), Astrakhan, Ukrainia (1654) were added to her. Yet the whole country was

still fallow land, waiting for a mighty ploughman. Such a ploughman came in the person of Peter the Great (1689-1725), with whom the "Petersburg Period" begins.

CHAPTER II

FROM LOMONÓSOV TO PÚSHKIN

I

THE reforms of Peter the Great were extended even to language and spelling. He simplified the involved Church-Slavonic characters and made broad use of the spoken tongue. He founded, in 1703, the first Russian newspaper, *Vyédomosti* (*The News*), and became himself one of its chief contributors. Foreign works were being hastily translated — above all various technical and other manuals. In order to make his own task independent of the Church, Peter abolished the Patriarchate. Yet his zeal found a few supporters even among the clergy. One of them, Theophán Prokopóvitch (from the Kiev Theol. College), was quite a prolific writer. Apart from his polemics, he tried his strength in plays and in poetry. He wrote in the manner of Simeon Pólotsky, but with more talent. To this period belongs also the self-educated Iván Pososhkóv (1652-1726), author of pamphlets on economic and social themes. His best known work is *On Poverty and Riches*. Vasíly Tatíshchev (1685-1750), on the other hand, made the first attempt at scientific historiography. His *Russian History* is far from being a negligible achievement— time and circumstances considered. Activities such as these were enhanced by the foundation of the Russian Academy of Sciences (1726) and the University of Moscow (1757). Both institutions sprang up after Peter's death, but they were the fruit of his work. It was after his death that literature proper also began to develop. Its pioneers were Prince A. D. Kantemír and Michael Lomonósov.

Kantemír (1709-44) was of Rumanian origin. As Ambassador in London and Paris, he came in touch with Western literatures. Under the influence of French pseudo-classicism he wrote—in colloquial Russian and in syllabic metre—satires upon Russian conditions. All kinds of public and private vices became the target of his somewhat angular Muse. By his attacks on the one hand, and by occasional bits of fine realism on the other, he anticipated, as it were, the two salient features of subsequent Russian literature.

We find a greater range and sweep in Lomonósov (1711-65). A peasant by birth, he came to Moscow, where he studied under great privations, but he completed his education abroad. On his return he was appointed professor in the Academy, and became very active in sciences and in *belles-lettres*. In his *Russian Grammar* (1755) he standardized the new literary language, relegating the Church-Slavonic only to the rhetorical "grand style." He also reformed Russian prosody by substituting regular accentual feet for the unsuitable syllabic metre—in which efforts he had been partly preceded by the giftless poetaster, V. Tredyakóvsky. Lomonósov combined scientific insight and much common sense with true literary gifts. He had a fine feeling for the language, and at his best—in his religious odes, for example—he could be sublime, in spite of his rhetoric.

The outstanding dramatist of that period was Alexander Sumarókov (1717-74)—the "Russian Racine," as he was called rather hastily. He became director of the first permanent Russian theatre, founded by the Empress Elisabeth Petróvna in 1756. His nine tragedies were by no means free from the drawbacks of stereotyped pseudo-classic plays, yet he showed real artistic economy and avoided, as far as he could, cheap effects. He also wrote comedies, a few satires, and fables. With all its faults his was a greater talent than that of his follower, I. Knyazhnín (1742-91), whose tragedies and comedies were useful

chiefly as vehicles of the progressive eighteenth-century tendencies. Another playwright, V. Ózerov (1770-1816), followed Sumarókov and the French tragedy, but he introduced to a certain extent sentimental-romantic or "Ossianic" elements (in his *Fingal,* for instance). His *Polixene* is considered the best pseudo-classic tragedy in Russian.

French influences reached their height under Catherine the Second (1762-96). Flirting with all the intellectual fashions of the day, this shrewd Empress was in lively correspondence with Voltaire and Diderot. Although German by birth, she wrote several didactic comedies and made Russian literature one of the chief concerns of her court. Imitations of French tragedies, odes and epics, were multiplying. Michael Kheráskov (1773-1807) ground out—in imitation of Voltaire's *Henriade*—his rhetorical *Rossiada,* dealing with the conquest of Kazan by Ivan the Terrible. The graceful T. F. Bogdanóvitch, on the other hand, made a fine adaptation of La Fontaine's *Les Amours de Psyché et de Cupidon* to the style and spirit of the Russian language in his *Dúshenka.* The pseudo-classic fable was also taken up, and with success, by Iván Khémnitzer (1745-84), the predecessor of Kryló́v. A real poet by God's grace was, however, Gavriíl R. Derzhávin (1743-1816). His chief title to glory is in his odes and his anacreontic lyrics. He combines a rhetorical sweep with true poetry, which is both great and "grand." Whether he pays poetic homage to Catherine and to the events of her reign, or to Nature and to various circumstances of life, he is always brimming with a buoyant and generous élan. Pseudo-classic in form, he nevertheless got rid of rigid formalism—owing largely to his innate sense of rhythm and music. His work may be unequal, yet the breath of a soaring genius is felt in it.

If Derzhávin is the first significant poet, his contemporary, Denís Fonvízin (1744-92) is the first significant comedy writer. His two social satires, *The*

Brigadier (1766) and *The Minor* (1782), are bold, realistic pictures of actual Russian life. Fonvízin neglects the plot and concentrates upon characters. His realism is crude at times, but his portraits are always alive, and his blows always to the point. His dialogue is based upon conversational speech. Vasíly Kapníst's *Chicane* (*Yábeda*) is similar in kind, but weaker in art. Fonvízin found a worthy follower only in Griboyédov.

Fonvízin and Kapníst enlarged the scope of literature by introducing new themes. Their appeal went far beyond the glittering court circles. During Catherine's reign we see also the first independent journalists and publicists. The most remarkable among them was the witty Nikoláï Nóvikov (1744-1818): a great humanitarian and Freemason, an able editor and publisher, an enlightened European, and at the same time a Russian from top to toe. Catherine, whose superficial liberalism was blown out of her head by the very first echoes of the French revolution, rewarded his activities with prison. Another humanitarian, Alexander Radíshchev (1749-1802), was even sentenced to death for his *Journey from Petersburg to Moscow* (1790), in which he attacked the horrors of serfdom. The death-sentence was graciously commuted to exile in Siberia, whence he returned a broken man and committed suicide. Radíshchev and Nóvikov were the first victims on the Golgotha of modern Russian literature.

II

Towards the end of Catherine's reign new literary influences were noticeable in Russia. Thus Nikoláï M. Karamzín (1766-1826) introduced the so-called sentimentalism. His *Letters of a Russian Traveller* are reminiscent of Sterne's *Sentimental Journey*. He specialized in "feelings" which happened to be in great demand in those days; he even exaggerated them in his tearful *Poor Liza*. However, tears apart,

Karamzín was the first "light" prose-writer in modern Russian literature. In his attempts at creating a true literary language, he went even further than Lomonósov by rejecting all compromise with the Church-Slavonic; a step which provoked a reaction on the part of the conservative Shishkóv and his group. He also possessed a wide literary knowledge, and was the founder of the important monthly, *Vyéstnik Evrópy* (*The European Messenger*, 1802). Although he had started his career as a pupil of Rousseau, he dedicated the last years of his life to the completion of his *History of the Russian Empire,* conceived in a reactionary spirit. The work is an exuberant glorification of the Russian autocracy.

The fashionable sentimental trend found its expression in the work of several poets, particularly in the mellow lyrics of Iván Dmítriev (1760-1837). Yet in the poetry of a man almost contemporary, Iván A. Krylóv, we see the very reverse of all sentimentality. Krylóv (1768-1844) tried his strength first by writing in progressive journals, then as playwright, and finally achieved real greatness with his *Fables* alone. Some of these he translated or adapted from foreign sources—chiefly from *La Fontaine;* the majority are, however, his own creations. He blends the traditional form of the fable with all the fragrance of the racy folk-speech, with a wonderful realism, with a shrewd common sense and an epigrammatic terseness which is all the stronger because of its hidden stings. Many of Krylóv's fables are satires in which he attacks the negative aspects of Russian life.

The reading public was now increasing both in quantity and in quality. All new European forms and theories found a fertile soil in Russia. But while accepting them, she tried to imbue them with her own spirit and content. That she was already capable of good original poetry is proved also by the work of Konstantin Batyushkóv (1787-1855), who wrote only in his younger days, because later he lost his

reason. Epicurean and sentimental in tastes, he adhered to the "neo-classic" style in which he composed most of his intense lyrics.

In contrast to Batyushkóv's classicism, the Muse of Vasíly Zhukóvsky (1783-1852) drew inspiration from Karamzín, as well as from various "romantic" elements of foreign literatures—English and German. He was a pietist and a "beautiful soul"—dreamy, soft, and sentimental. His original verse was, on the whole, less important than his translations, in which he excelled almost beyond measure. He translated from Gray, Moore, Byron, Bürger, Goethe, Schiller, and others. Towards the end of his life he enriched Russian literature also by a fine version of Homer's *Odyssey* (the *Iliad* had already been done by N. Gnyéditch in 1830). He produced two translations of Gray's *Elegy*, neither of them inferior to the original. Some of his own lyrics, saturated with elegiac mood, are great. His favourite form was, however, the ballad. He also wrote "romantic" narratives in verse partly adapted to the Russian folk-lore, and with attempts at folk-tone.

Zhukóvsky was the creator of the *poetical* Russian language. He made it sing. He made it light, elastic, and ripe for all forms and rhythms. So much so that it could now compete in this respect with any great European tongue. It was only waiting for a genius powerful enough to synthesize all these achievements. Such a genius came at last in Púshkin. Zhukóvsky was his John the Baptist.

CHAPTER III

ALEXANDER PÚSHKIN

I

THE great landmark in modern Russian history is Napoleon's invasion of Russia in 1812. The advance

of the French army on Moscow stirred up all classes, uniting them in a common aim and purpose—to get rid of the invader. Events followed one another. The Odyssey of the Russian army carried many young officers as far as Paris, where they came into contact with progressive ideas. These they brought home, together with their luggage. The generation of the '20's was particularly fine. Its representatives belonged to the nobility, yet they were antagonistic to the court circles and to the conservative higher bureaucracy. The guardianship of Russian culture was now in their hands, and they did their utmost to cherish this worthily. Highly educated and refined, they were anxious, above all, to create a real national literature of Russia.

The clash between the old feudal and bureaucratic grandees with their petrified ideas on the one hand, and the rising youth of the progressive nobility on the other, is wonderfully portrayed in Griboyédov's comedy *Woe from Wit* (*Góre ot Umá*). Alexander S. Griboyédov (1795-1829), himself a brilliant specimen of the new generation, wrote his masterpiece during 1822 and 1823 in rhymed verse and in a language akin to that of Krylóv. He, too, knew how to blend social satire with a strong realistic vein and a matchless characterization. His condensed language is racy, dynamic, and almost over-saturated with "between the lines." The only drawback of the play is its chief hero, Chatsky, whose witty invectives against "society" are at times long and even tiresome. Yet he is typical of that new mentality which infected the well-meaning younger men in the reactionary period of Arakchéyev. Some of them (mostly officers in the Guards) formed a revolutionary circle, whose programme included the liberation of the serfs and a constitution. The abortive December rising in 1825 was their deed. Five of their ringleaders were hanged —among them the talented poet Ryléyev.

The defeat of these "Decembrists" was a heavy

blow to the cultured nobility. Under the iron rod of Nicholas I., they began to feel "superfluous." Consequently they were ceding ground to ambitious *raznochintsy* (*i.e.*, plebeians), from whom came later the bulk of the Russian intelligentsia. Yet in spite of the embargo upon new ideas, all that was considered advanced in Europe was smuggled also into Russia. Philosophic and literary circles sprang up. Moreover, it was during this period of political stagnation that literature suddenly reached—at least, in poetry—the acme of perfection. The Great Age of Russian poetry coincided with the first years of Nicholas' rule. It was during those years also that the greatest Russian poet, Alexander Púshkin, produced his best work.

II

Alexander Sergéyevitch Púshkin was born in Moscow in 1799. The only redeeming feature of his parents' home was a fine French library, of which the boy made full use. At an early age he was sent to the Lyceum at Tsárskoye Seló. Here he became conspicuous for that frivolous and riotous temper which later on found its expression in several unprintable poems. This sort of life he continued also after his college years. Owing to some political epigrams, he was exiled to the south of Russia. He lived for a while in Bessarabia, in Odessa, visited the Crimea and also the Caucasus, by which he was much impressed. On his return he was exiled again—this time to his mother's estate, Mikháilovskoye: a fact which prevented him from taking part in the rising of the "Decembrists," with whom he was connected. Púshkin was, however, pardoned by Nicholas I. The Emperor even became his special protector and also a kind of "fatherly" censor of the verses he now wrote. In 1831, Púshkin married Natalya Goncharóva—a society star as beautiful as she was shallow. The jealous poet could not remain indifferent

to the queue of her admirers. The most persistent of them was Baron George Heeckeren-d'Anthès, the adopted son of the Dutch Ambassador, whose idiotic intrigues were partly responsible for the poet's tragic end. To the usual gossip vile anonymous letters were added. The result was a duel with d'Anthès on January 27, 1837. Púshkin was mortally wounded, and died two days later.

Such were the events of his external life, in the course of which his genius had to pass through a complex inner evolution. His first poem was printed as early as 1814. Even before leaving college he was elected a member of the exclusive Arzamas Society, which cultivated light and witty verse. Púshkin's youthful poems reflect French influences, particularly those of Voltaire, Parny, and Chénier. Of Russians he was impressed by Derzhávin, Batyushkóv, and Zhukóvsky. In 1820 he published his first important work, *Ruslán and Lyudmíla*—an epic in six cantos. Its subject-matter is reminiscent of the Russian folk-lore, but its garb is eighteenth-century French, with a flavour of Ariosto. It is a cold but exceedingly amusing and lively poem. Owing to its technique, its diction, and its Mozartian lightness of touch, it certainly deserves to be called the first landmark of that "Golden Age" of Russian poetry, which came to an end with Púshkin's death.

In the next period we see his Muse under the spell of Byron's romanticism. The European romantic movement began to filter into Russia in its three main aspects: the sentimental, misty, and mystical German trend found its expression in Zhukóvsky; the "furious" and rhetorical school of France appealed to some minor and less cultured writers; while the vigorous self-assertive and protesting note of Byron's Muse found a congenial temperament in Lérmontov. As to the young Púshkin, he adopted several external and technical devices of Byron's Eastern tales. They are apparent in his *Captive of*

the Caucasus (written in 1820-21) and in his musical *Fountain of Baghchisarái* (1822), based upon a Crimean motive. The action of his other Byronic tale, *The Robber Brothers* (1821), takes place on the Volga, and that of *The Gipsies* (written in 1824, published in 1827) in Bessarabia. These romantic themes are, however, treated by Púshkin with a classic precision and lucidity, and also with an innate realistic sense, which abhors all pose or cheapness. *The Gipsies* is particularly striking by its sober poetic beauty. Apart from this, its hero, Aleko — an uprooted, civilized individual who joins a gipsy camp, and brings only mischief into it—is regarded by Dostoévsky as the father of all the "superfluous" individuals and tragic failures in modern Russian literature.

III

Byronism was to Púshkin only a stepping-stone towards the summits of his own genius, which was not romantic, but realistic in the finest sense. This is noticeable in his subsequent poetic narratives: *Count Núlin* (1825), *Poltava* (1828), *The Little House in Kolómna* (1830), *Eugene Onyégin, Skazki* (Russian fairy-tales, 1831-32), and *The Bronze Horseman* (1833).

The first and the third are just witty anecdotes in verse. *Poltava,* on the other hand, is more ambitious. It combines—not quite organically—two themes: the hero of one of them is the aged Mazeppa, and of the other, Peter the Great. The culminating point is Peter's victory over Charles XII. and over his Ukrainian ally Mazeppa, near Poltava, in 1709. The language of the poem has a tremendous sweep achieved by the simplest means. This sweep is even increased in *The Bronze Horseman,* the most powerful poem in Russian. It describes the fate of a hapless clerk who became insane because of the death of his sweetheart in the great Petersburg flood of 1824. Yet the symbolic hero of the poem is again Peter the Great, whose genius was bound to disregard all

private misfortunes resulting from the foundation of his own imperial city.

As to *Eugene Onyégin,* Púshkin began it in his Byronic period, but finished it only in 1831. It therefore reflects in some measure his poetic development during those years. Eugene, the hero of this "novel in verse," is also an uprooted individual of the '20's—not a romantic Aleko, but a bored dandy, whose early dissipations are exquisitely described in the first canto. He inherits an estate, and leaves for the country. Tatyána, his neighbour's daughter, falls in love with him, and confesses it in a touching love-letter. Eugene is inwardly too cold for any deep feeling, yet he takes no advantage of her naïveté. From sheer boredom he flirts with her younger sister, and fights a duel with her fiancé, whom he kills. Years of travel follow. At last he returns to Petersburg, where he meets Tatyána—now a general's wife and a brilliant society beauty. This time he falls madly in love. Tatyána decides, however, to remain faithful to her husband, although she still loves Eugene.

This is all. The tone and the manner of the epic, as well as its frequent subjective digressions, remind one of *Don Juan.* Yet the resemblance does not go beyond external traits. The work is both Púshkinian and Russian to its very core. Its unexciting theme is developed upon a realistic canvas—realistic by its "atmosphere," its figures, its tone, its pictures of country life, by the whole of its gentry *byt** of the '20's. Tatyána herself is the first embodiment of that ideal Russian woman, whose further development we find in some later writers, especially in Turgénev. In short, *Onyégin* is a novel in verse, and a perfect novel, too. As such it exercised a profound influence upon subsequent prose fiction.

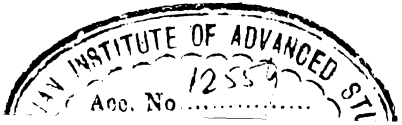
* An untranslatable word which means both manners and the stabilized forms of life.

IV

Púshkin is the most universal Russian poet, universal not only in his appeal, but also in the fact that he could assimilate foreign influences without forfeiting an ounce of his own individuality. Thus he learned a great deal from the eighteenth-century French writers. He found his further stimuli in the literature of England: first in Byron, then in Shakespeare and in Scott.

Under Shakespeare's influence he wrote, in blank verse, his most ambitious dramatic attempt, *Borís Godunóv* (1825). Its subject is taken from the "troubled times" when the False Demetrius was threatening Moscow and its ruler Borís, the supposed murderer of the real Tsarevitch. Púshkin, whose treatment of Borís conforms to Karamzín's *History*, renders the inner torments of the usurper, as well as the weight of the impending doom, in a masterly way. Yet this first Shakespearean play in Russian literature is a dramatized epic rather than a real drama. It is like a huge frieze full of poetry and of vivid single scenes, which only prove that Púshkin was a great poet without being a great dramatist. He achieved real intensity only in detached episodes. This is why he was more successful in the dramatic miniatures he wrote in 1830: *Mozart and Salieri*, *The Stone Guest* (the Don Juan theme), *The Covetous Knight*, and *The Feast during the Plague* (an adaptation of Wilson's *City of the Plague*, with the addition of two original songs). His last, and perhaps most promising, dramatic attempt, *Rusalka* (1832), was partly taken from Russian folk-lore, and remained unfinished.

Following the lead of Karamzín, Púshkin also created a prose which is classic in the best "French" sense of the word. His chief prose works are: *The Negro of Peter the Great* (1827), which comprises the first chapters of an unfinished novel from Peter's



epoch, with Púshkin's Abyssinian great-grandfather in the centre; *Tales by Byélkin,* five excellently told anecdotes; the unfinished *Dubróvsky* (1832); *The Queen of Spades* (1833); *The Captain's Daughter* (1833-35); *The History of the Pugachóv Rebellion* (1833). The most notable of them is his *Captain's Daughter*—a wonderful "family chronicle," with the Pugachóv rising of 1773 in the background. Although suggested by Sir Walter Scott, it is superior to Scott's novels, not only in its economy, but also in its realistic manner. It is a synthesis of realism and classicism. The same classic terseness—this time applied to a romantic theme—we find in *The Queen of Spades,* and also in his unfinished *Dubróvsky,* a vivid picture of manners, with a somewhat theatrical "idealized brigand" as the central figure. His other prose writings, too (*The History of the Village Goryúkhino, Kirdjali, The Egyptian Nights, The Voyage to Erzerum*), are examples of a straightforward, lucid, and concise prose.

V

Púshkin's numerous lyrics would require a treatise to themselves. Suffice it to say that most of them are among the gems of world poetry. Yet they are untranslatable precisely because of their divine obviousness. And the more obvious they are, the more they are poetically suggestive. Let me show just one example—his short poem *I Loved You* (translated by Prof. R. M. Hewitt):

"I loved you; even now I may confess
Some embers of my love their fire retain.
But do not let it bring you more distress,
I do not want to sadden you again.
Hopeless and tongue-tied yet I loved you dearly
With pangs the jealous and the timid know;
So tenderly I loved you, so sincerely,
I pray God grant another love you so."

Púshkin's magic is that of naturalness. By a secret of his own he saturates the most ordinary colloquial words with the greatest poetic content. Owing to the external absence of all effort, his poetry is as spontaneous as it is perfect. Perfection is, in fact, so natural to him that he seems to play with it. Whether we take his intimate lyrics (especially some of his profoundly felt elegies) or his objective descriptions, narratives, and ballads, it is impossible to detect a single false note. He is a past master in that supreme art which conceals art. Whatever his human defects may have been, Púshkin the poet possessed that higher harmony which is the privilege of the elect. Literary "schools" may come and go, but he remains, and will remain. There is a strong cult of Púshkin even among some of the best Bolshevist poets.

CHAPTER IV

PÚSHKIN'S CONTEMPORARIES AND SUCCESSORS

I

THE '20's were not only the age of good poetry, but also of good taste. The standard of poetic craft and culture was very high. Hence it is not surprising that the giant Púshkin was surrounded by a galaxy of minor *confrères,* each of whom did admirable work. Space does not allow us to discuss the poems of the "Decembrist" Ryléyev, of Délvig, Vyázemsky, Glinka, Polezháyev, and several others. All we can do is to mention a couple of names, before we pass to the "master-singers" of the next generation—Lérmontov and Tyútchev. Iván Kozlóv (1779-1840), for example, could be called a typical though rather sentimental Byronist. His *Monk* (1824) was a poetic "best seller" of the time. A great deal of romantic temper we find also in Nikoláï Yazýkov (1803-46), who

was a virtuoso on the line between poetry and exuberant rhetoric. Evgény A. Baratýnsky (1800-44), again, is rightly considered the most important man of the pleiad. His work has a wide range—from narrative and anacreontic poems to odes, elegies, and philosophic monologues. He is somewhat intellectual, however; and no matter how romantic his subject-matter may be, he always treats it with a kind of classic dryness. His moods are divided between epicureanism and pessimism, until the latter prevails. Another highly gifted poet was Dmitry Venevítinov (1805-27). In spite of his extreme youth, he was the soul of that Moscow circle of "Wisdom Lovers" which came under the influence of the German idealistic philosophy. Unfortunately he died too young to fulfil his great promise.

A few years later—in the '30's—we see a gradual decline of interest in poetry and a sudden rise of prose. Yet the '30's produced a few good poets. One of them was Alexander Koltsóv (1808-42)—the "Russian Burns," as he is often styled. The son of a cattle dealer, he was a genuine poet, who knew how to extract from the Russian folk-song all its fragrance, its melancholy, its rhythm and music, in order to embody them in lyrical masterpieces of his own. Those poems, however, which he wrote in the conventional "literary" manner are of small interest. Almost together with Koltsóv we see the rise of two greater bards—Lérmontov and Tyútchev.

II

Michael Yúryevitch Lérmontov (1814-41) was of distant Scottish descent; the name of his ancestors was Learmont. Having lost his mother early, he was brought up by his wealthy grandmother, who allowed him to develop into a spoilt child. He studied for a time at the Moscow University, became a cavalry cadet, and eventually an officer in the Hussars. He started writing at the age of fourteen, but fame

reached him only in 1837—owing to his poetic invective, *On the Death of Púshkin*. The price of this fame was temporary banishment to the Caucasus, the wild beauty of which had already made a lasting impression upon him once before, in his childhood. He was soon allowed to return to Petersburg, but in 1841 we find him again in the Caucasian spa, Pyatigórsk. Here he met his former school comrade, Martýnov, and began to pay attention to his lady. He even ridiculed him in her presence. A duel followed, in which the poet was shot, at the age of twenty-seven.

This tragic incident does not throw a sympathetic light upon Lérmontov's character. In fact, he was self-assertive, vain, and a regular bully, without much consideration for other people, whom he generally despised. This was, however, only one side of his personality. Its other and hidden side was that of an exile on earth. Already in his youthful *Angel,* he points out his dual nature: in the depth of his soul there is still a dim remembrance of the heavenly "music of the spheres," and for this very reason he feels an alien on earth. Lérmontov thus became the poet of romantic uprootedness. Idealist by temperament, he was compelled to thwart all his higher aspirations. Once suppressed, they degenerated into hatred, disgust, and cynicism. The less he was allowed to realize all that was good and noble in him, the more destructive became his rancour, which was increased also by the fact that "high" society looked upon him as a social inferior. In his isolation he fell back upon his own ego, developing a sneering aloofness and a morbid self-analysis. It was only through his poems that he gave vent to both his rancour and his wounded idealism. His literary work became the intimate diary of an *enfant du siècle*. Negation, pessimism, and despair—these are the notes of his aggressive and tragic Muse. Self-divided between his romantic temperament and his coldly "realistic" vision of the world, Lérmontov is the first poet of

rebellion in Russian literature. The non-acceptance of reality is as conspicuous in him as the acceptance of it is conspicuous in Púshkin.

Lérmontov's teachers were Púshkin, Schiller, and, above all, Byron, with whom he has much in common. His early romantic (and rather pretentious) plays, his lyrics, and his narratives in verse are unequal; yet at his best he is the greatest poet after Púshkin, although he may be his opposite in more respects than one. He also retained to the end that Byronic strain which is so noticeable in his poetic tales, *Ismail Bey* (1832), *Boyar Orsha* (1835), *The Demon,* and *Mtsyri* (*The Novice*). In the first of them we find one of his Caucasian motives—the fight of the proud mountaineers with the Russian invaders. Its chief figure is the "enigmatic" byronized savage, Ismail, with his war and love adventures. The poem is diluted, badly constructed, and has become hopelessly out of date. More condensed is the *Boyar Orsha* with its two self-willed and "strong" characters in the foreground: the old Orsha and his servant Arsény, who seduces Orsha's daughter and escapes to Poland. Later he kills his former master in a fight and hurries to his castle; but instead of his beloved he finds there only a heap of bones and ashes in the room in which her father had immured her for penance. The posthumous *Demon* is regarded as Lérmontov's best work. The poem certainly abounds in unsurpassed music and in equally unsurpassed descriptive passages. It was conceived as early as 1829—probably under the influence of Byron's *Cain*. Its theme is the love of the proud Demon—a rather theatrical symbol of cosmic loneliness and negation—for the beautiful Caucasian Princess Tamára. He causes the death of her bridegroom, invades her dreams in the convent, hoping that his great love might reconcile him to God and life. But when he kisses Tamára she dies. Her soul is carried away by an angel, and the melancholy "spirit of exile" is left in the same cosmic isolation as before.

Whatever the defects of the poem, one cannot deny its élan, sustained from the first to the last line. The same applies to his *Mtsyri*, the history of a Caucasian novice who escapes from a monastery in order to taste liberty, and is found dying in the desert.

Lérmontov's finest achievement in longer poetic narrative is *The Song of the Czar Iván Vasílyevitch, the Young Oprichnik and the Brave Merchant Kaláshnikov*. He used here the style and the manner of the *byliny* in a perfect way. As to his lyrics, they are both musical and intense, but their intensity is often more emotional than purely poetic. It was only during the last years of his life that he completely mastered that simplicity and directness which we find in his best poems and also in his great novel, *A Hero of Our Times* (1840).

III

This work is the first analytical novel in Russian literature. Its chief character, Pechórin, is a "superfluous man" of the '30's: a new variation of Onyégin, but a tragic Onyégin. He is superior to others by his gifts and by his will-power; yet as these cannot find a positive aim and channel, they become destructive. The novel consists of five fragments. The first two (*Bela, Maksim Maksímytch*) introduce Pechórin from without, again with the Caucasian scenery in the background; while the other three (*Taman, Princess Mary, The Fatalist*) show him from within: they are his personal notes and reminiscences. In spite of this casual construction, the portrait of Pechórin is complete. So are the portraits of other characters, particularly that of Maksím Maksímytch.

There is no doubt that this work is partly autobiographic. Most of Lérmontov's former "romantic" figures seem to be converging towards Pechórin, who typifies an entire generation suffering from scepticism, inner paralysis, and tedium. The novel itself is one of the important landmarks of the rising Russian prose.

IV

A contemporary of Lérmontov was Fyódor Tyútchev (1803-73), whose work shows many traces of German romantic philosophy. His chief strength is in his lyrics, which are classic in their reserve, romantic in their temper and vision, hauntingly musical in their rhythm, symbolic in their imagery, and pantheistic in their conception. Tyútchev is the greatest metaphysical pantheist in Russian poetry. His images are the result of his symbolic attitude towards the whole of reality. Yet he never "translates" his ideas into poems. They are as organically blended with each other as the soul is with the body: by trying to separate them we kill both.

His pantheism makes him a melancholy dweller in this universe of ours where evil celebrates its daily triumphs. There is, however, something stoical and manly in his sadness: he expresses it without complaining. His love poetry, too—particularly that of his later years—is poignant and deeply felt. His patriotic poems, on the other hand, are mainly rhetorical. All things considered, he is the most "modern" poet of that period.

CHAPTER V

NIKOLÁÏ GÓGOL

I

THE proper development of Russian prose began in the '30's. This does not mean that there had been a lack of prose-works before or during the age of poetry. In addition to Karamzín's writings, we can mention A. Izmáïlov's novel of manners, *Eugene* (1796), the polished "Voltairian" tales by A. Benitsky, the realistic-satirical *Russian Gil Blas* (1814, a distant relation of Gógol's *Dead Souls*) by V. Naryézhny, and

the first "best seller" in prose, *Iván Vyzhígin* (1829), by the notorious T. Bulgárin. The "furious" romantic style found its adept in A. Bestúzhev-Marlínsky, a man whose life was almost as exuberant as his writings. Towards the end of the '20's we see also the first significant fruit of Scott's influence in M. Zagóskin's historical novel, *Yury Miloslavsky* (1829), which was a great success. Another follower of Scott was I. Lazhéchnikov (1792-1869), while the stories of A. Veltman (1800-69), and later those of Prince V. Odóevsky (1803-69), bear evident traces of German romanticism.

Early Russian prose crystallized in the prose-works of Púshkin and Lérmontov, which contain all the best elements of the subsequent Russian realism. Yet another writer of the first rank began his career in the '30's—a man the vagaries of whose genius had a great effect upon the further trend of Russian literature. This man was Gógol.

Nikoláï Vasílyevitch Gógol (1809-52) was of Ukrainian origin. As a youth he was restless, secretive, boasting, suspicious, and touchy. Already at that age he was a bundle of contradictions, and such he remained all his life. Being small and ugly, he soon became extremely self-conscious. It is quite possible that from sheer self-protection he fostered his characteristic tendency to discover in things and people all that was bad, ridiculous, and grotesque. This tendency he combined with a temperament and imagination completely romantic. Yet his mentality showed, above all, the negative features of a romantic type: uprootedness, fear and hatred of reality; a strong need to forget the world as it is; and an even stronger need to expose it, or to take revenge upon it by means of protesting "realism."

His chief works are *Evenings on a Farm near Dikánka* (2 vols., 1831-32), *Mírgorod* (2 vols., 1835), *Arabesques* (1835), including his three "Petersburg stories" (*A Madman's Diary, Nevsky Prospect,* and

The Portrait), *The Revizór* (or *The Inspector-General*, 1836), *The Greatcoat* (1842), and *The Dead Souls* (1842). Of these the *Evenings*, and largely also *Mírgorod*, are collections of romantic tales and fantasies. The first is bubbling over with fun and gaiety, in which the author revels all the more the more he wishes to forget the actual world. Yet there is hardly a single theme in it invented by Gógol himself. He only relates things which he had either heard from his Cossack grandfather, or which were suggested to him by anecdotes and by the Ukrainian folk-lore; but he relates them in a new way. His vivid rhetorical language is saturated with ornaments and similes, yet at the same time it vibrates with rhythm and music. Gógol is often in danger of drugging himself with the sensuous aspects of words; but the instinct of a born actor, or impersonator, that was in him makes his very rhetoric racy and alive.

The same kind of gorgeous prose we find in his Cossack romance, *Tarás Bulba*, printed in *Mírgorod*, and probably suggested by Scott. But in that very volume his two "realistic" sketches are conspicuous—*The Quarrel between Iván Ivánovitch and Iván Nikíforovitch*, and *The Old-World Landowners*. This realism of his is subjective, personal. And apart from its hidden romantic root, it shows, not an inventive, but only an intensifying imagination. Being unable to invent, Gógol intensifies—that is, exaggerates out of all proportion everything he sees, feels, or hears. At the same time he evokes the proper mood in the reader, partly by his verbal music and partly by a deliberate accumulation of trifles which he arranges with the skill and cunning of a stage producer. His invariable mood is that of flight from reality, or else that of negation and disgust. Except in the *Evenings*, his very humour is prompted, not by benevolence (as it is in Dickens), but by spite. In fact, he cannot smile; he can only ridicule and laugh "through the tears." This is conspicuous in his two masterpieces, *The*

Revizór and *The Dead Souls,* the themes of which were suggested to him by Púshkin.

II

The Revizór is a satirical comedy based on the traditional *quid pro quo.* Owing to a secret intimation that the Inspector-General is coming incognito, the corrupt officials of a provincial town mistake a casual traveller—a certain Khlestakóv, who typifies the Russian Tartarin—for the dreaded Inspector. They feast him, bribe him; but when he has extracted from them all the money possible, Khlestakóv runs away. The curtain falls with the announcement that the real Inspector has arrived. With Griboyédov's *Woe from Wit,* this comedy is one of the finest Russian plays. Its construction is skilful, its characters alive, its dialogue so racy as to be utterly untranslatable, and its laughter is stinging beyond words. "In my *Revizór* I decided to deride all that is bad in Russia," says Gógol, and in this he succeeded. Yet the hue and cry aroused by this comedy was so loud that he soon left for Italy, where he finished his great novel, *The Dead Souls.*

This novel, or "epic," as Gógol calls it, is without a plot and even without a love story; in spite of this, it is one of the most remarkable achievements of European literature. He worked at it for years. Later he conceived the idea of enlarging it into a kind of Russian *Divine Comedy.* The first part of this projected trilogy (and the only one he finished) is a true Inferno of Russian reality as seen through the subjective vision of Gógol himself. The author displays in it his incredibly sharp "eye for all that is ugly and vulgar." Behind the tedium of our petty existence he sees, as it were, the presence of some transcendental Evil Power, which wants to drown all life in vulgarity and drabness. Gógol's art became a fight with this power which he felt, not only in the surrounding world, but also in himself. Hence he attacked it all

the more fiercely through his vindictive "realism" and through his cruel laughter.

The hero of *The Dead Souls,* Chíchikov, is the very embodiment of vulgar self-complacency combined with moral irresponsibility. He travels from one landowner to the other in order to buy those fictitious—*i.e.,* dead —serfs (or "souls," as they were called in Russia) whose deaths have not yet been registered by the official census, to pawn them in the bank and thus become rich with one stroke. On this errand he meets all sorts of types, whom Gógol makes alive with a kind of static or frozen intensity; but for this very reason they hold the reader's imagination like grotesque spooks. Through an accumulation of trifles, Gógol presents here a huge panorama of life as he himself saw it: drab, mediocre, and tediously vulgar. Not life, but only existence. The novel is the greatest epic of human vulgarity.

The five preserved chapters of the second volume are less convincing—partly because Gógol wanted to create in them something "positive." While his negative figures are always real, his virtuous characters (and his beautiful women too) are just clichés. The final draft of this volume was burnt by him in a fit of semi-madness.

III

About the same time as *The Dead Souls,* Gógol's *Greatcoat* was published. It is the story of a poor old scribe whose only ambition is to buy a new greatcoat. With many privations he scrapes enough money together; but on the very first day of his joy hooligans stop him and run away with his garment. The scribe dies from despair. Many elements of this story became the staple food of Russian realism: an insignificant subject, a skilful management of trifles, an "offended and injured" character, and a note of human pity. A similar theme had been already developed by Gógol in his *A Madman's Diary* (1835), in which, however,

the comically grotesque tone prevails over its tragic pathos. Both stories influenced the young Dostoévsky.

Gógol's other works deserving mention are his grotesque *The Nose;* his comedy, *The Marriage;* his weaker dramatic sketch, *The Gamblers;* and his *Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends* (1847). The latter is interesting because it shows Gógol's impotence outside the domain of artistic creation. The book is a collection of high-faluting commonplaces about religion, morality, politics, art, and literature on the part of a man who forces himself to be a preacher, or even a new Messiah, for the ultimate benefit of Russia if not of the whole world. It is an apotheosis of conceit, naïveté, and intellectual immaturity. No wonder that it provoked attacks from all quarters. It marks the decline of Gógol's genius, and also of his sanity. At this period he was already haunted by the idea of death and of hell.

Like most introspective characters, Gógol was morbidly conscious of his own defects. His literary creation was a continuous endeavour to expose and ridicule them all the more in others as he became more aware of them within himself. Hence his chronic need of ridiculing and of moralizing. Yet at the same time he was so infected with inner pride that he interpreted his moments of inspiration as the work of God Himself, who wanted to use him as His privileged agent in order to reveal the Truth to Russia. Of course, after his inspiration had finally gone, he was bound to think that God no longer wanted him on account of his sinfulness. His depression was increased by his atavistic fear of the devil and by his futile efforts to work himself into religious moods. He even went to Palestine, to our Saviour's tomb, but in vain; his soul remained cold and unmoved. He died in a fit of religious mania at the age of forty-three.

CHAPTER VI

FERMENTATION OF NEW IDEAS

I

BEFORE we pass to the great wave of prose after Púshkin, Lérmontov, and Gógol, a few words must be said of Russian journalism and criticism, which also began to develop in the '30's, and which enlisted several talented "plebeians," thus paving the way to the classless intelligentsia. After the Decembrist débâcle the cultural centre of gravity was transferred for a time to the Universities, particularly to that of Moscow with its debating circles. Bielínsky (1810-48), the most influential critic of that generation, was partly a product of the Stankiévitch circle, in which the philosophy of Schelling and Hegel was, perhaps, no less discussed than in Germany itself. Another group of the Moscow youths became more interested in European social doctrines (Saint-Simon, Fourier, George Sand), and produced, later on, such radicals as Herzen and Bakúnin. A third group, again—that of the brothers Kiréyevsky—went in the direction of romantic Slavophilism. It was in the '30's and '40's that the actual differentiation between the two currents of Russian thought took place and divided the intellectuals into two hostile camps—the "Westerners" and the "Slavophils."

One of the chief causes of this split was the problem of Russia. Has Russia a destiny, a mission of her own, or must she follow Europe and her progress? This crucial question had been asked already by Peter Chaadáyev in his remarkable *Philosophic Letters,* the first of which appeared in 1836. His answer was an attack on everything Russian. He proclaimed the existence of his own country as something casual, and saw her only salvation in a close co-operation with the *Catholic* West. A similar view of the backwardness

of Russia was adopted by the radicals, only they conceived "progress" in the sense of the scientific, liberal, and socialist ideas then prevalent in Europe.

The Slavophils, on the other hand, claimed for Slavonic Russia a special mission and a cultural type of her own—a type which should be the reverse of the materialist Western civilization. The leaders of this trend were the brothers Kiréyevsky, the theologian (as well as a gifted "political" poet) Alexander Khomyakóv, and the brothers Aksákov—Iván and Konstantin. They idealized Russia's past, trying to find in her Orthodoxy and in her old institutions elements capable of saving her from the fatal influences of the "decaying West." Being convinced that Russians have preserved the profound religiosity of a "God-bearing" nation, and together with this the tendency towards an inner, organic union of mankind (as distinct from the purely external, mechanical union preached by the socialists), most Slavophils saw the Mission of Russia in imparting this tendency of organic pan-humanity to the rest of the world. In spite of this creed, many of them degenerated into imperialist Jingoes. The curious duality of a Messianic "universal man" and a militant imperialist is noticeable in Tyútchev, for instance, and later in Dostoévsky.

II

Owing to its religious character on the one hand, and to its philandering with autocracy on the other, the Slavophil current never appealed to the wider circles of intellectuals. Hence it easily ceded ground to the "advanced" Western doctrines duly imported into Russia. The most salient figure in the radical camp of the '40's was the "plebeian" Vissarión Bielínsky, a man of ruthless honesty, of great intellectual courage, and of an exuberant style and temperament. At first he was under the spell of Schelling and of Hegel, but, owing to the influence of Feuerbach and of contemporary socialist ideas, he adopted a utilitarian

attitude towards literature. In his rôle of critical mentor he demanded from art two things—social service and truth to life. His sermonizing articles lowered the standard of Russian prose, but they helped enormously towards that "realistic" orientation which resulted in such a rich literary harvest but a few years after his death.

Another conspicuous radical of the '40's was Alexander Herzen (1812-70), the author of the problem novel, *Whose Fault?* of a striking series of "memoirs," *My Past and Thoughts* (*Byloe I Dumy*), and of a book of fine essays, *From the Other Shore*. As a political *émigré* he published in London (1857-61) his weekly *Kólokol* (*The Bell*), which was the most influential radical paper of that period all over Russia, in spite of its being prohibited.

In contrast with the cosmopolitan eclecticism of the Westerners, the Slavophils stood for a national culture. This was advocated also by Apollón Grigóryev, the best critic after Bielínsky. The differences between the two camps increased particularly after the Crimean War, during the great reforms in the '60's, when the liberal Westerners controlled the influential press. Passions ran so high that Dostoévsky, for example, saw red whenever he thought of the radical "atheists," whom he reproached with superficiality and spiritual flunkeyism of the worst kind.

III

True, many Westerners were cultural upstarts—very active, very sincere, but at the same time devoid of depth, taste, and refinement. Dogmatic in outlook, they introduced thoroughly utilitarian valuations into Russian culture, and also a worship of hasty "scientific" theories received by mail from abroad. After the idealism of the '40's, therefore, we see in the '50's and '60's a sudden influx of the extremely materialist doctrines of Büchner and Vogt. Yet the Russians put even into those shallow formulas so much zest and

passion that the theories of a few second-hand German thinkers became with them almost problems of life and death. The representatives of this period were the publicists, Chernyshévsky, Dobrolyúbov, and the vehement Písarev.

In the '70's English thought attracted many Russians. Such gifted publicists as Lavróv and Mikhailóvsky followed Herbert Spencer and Stuart Mill on the one hand, and French positivism on the other. With all this, Russian philosophic and social thought remained rather derivative and even sterile until the advent of the great philosopher, Vladímir Solovyóv, who began his career in the '70's. On the other hand, all vital and profound problems were soon absorbed by the growing Russian fiction. This became an important social force, for the very reason that it did not shrink from any quests or questions, and that it became as broad, as universal as life itself.

CHAPTER VII

THE AGE OF PROSE

I

PÚSHKIN, Lérmontov, and Gógol are responsible—each in his own way—for the further destinies of Russian fiction. In the '40's the so-called "natural school" sprang up with its blend of realism and sentimental humanitarianism; and within the next two or three decades Russian prose became a literary Great Power culminating in the works of Turgénev, Goncharóv, Písemsky, Tolstóy, Dostoévsky, and others. The Russian realism, with its simplicity, its human sympathy, its keen psychological sense, its absence of shams, as well as its profound conception of life, was a revelation to the Western World. Moreover, it soon began to exercise a growing influence upon the older and more experienced literatures of Europe.

The first outstanding figure in the post-Gógolian fiction is Sergéï Aksákov (1791-1859), the father of the two Slavophils. Although he discovered his own manner from his contact with the "realism" of Gógol, he has nothing in common with Gógol's morbid subjectivity. His *Family Chronicle* (begun in 1840 and published in 1856) is a broad panorama of life on his grandfather's estate in the Bashkirian steppes. There is no plot in it, but only a string of incidents, impressions, and portraits, described in a quiet epic tone. Squires, officials, peasants, intriguing relations—they all pass before us like old acquaintances. And the patriarchal grandfather himself, with his blend of gentlemanliness and autocratic self-will, is an unforgettable figure. So is his discreetly portrayed son (the author's father)—a shy insignificant official who, after many adversities, marries a town belle far superior to him. The *Chronicle* finishes with the birth of their first male child, whom the old squire proudly puts in the Family Tree. The same dispassionate objectivity we find in Aksákov's *Recollections* (1856), and in his *Years of Childhood of Bagróv-Grandson* (1858). Both are autobiographic. His language, slow, placid, and homely, has all the healthy charm of his own personality.

Chronologically next to Aksákov stands Turgénev, who was the first to introduce Russian fiction into world-literature.

II

Iván S. Turgénev (1816-83) began to write in the '40's. In 1847 he published the first of those jottings, which five years later came out under the title, *A Sportsman's Sketches,* and struck a new note with regard to both matter and manner. The new subject-matter was the peasant (who was taken up also by a less significant writer, Grigoróvitch); and the new manner was that suggestive impressionism which found later on such a consummate master in Chékhov.

The sketches themselves betray all the qualities of Turgénev's balanced genius. They are full of a gentle melancholy, coupled with a great mellowness of language and with an almost feminine fastidiousness. He never "takes liberties" with Nature or with his heroes. Hence his avoidance of all striking lines and colours. His landscapes resemble delicate lyrical pastels. His characters, too, are made alive not by analysis, but by his dexterous use of small touches. Nor does he offer us clever plots, but only impressions, portraits, and bits of ordinary life raised into art. Some of these sketches—*The Singers,* for example—are among the best things Turgénev ever wrote.

The rest of his work is divided between novels and stories. His novels are: *Rúdin* (1855), *A Nest of Gentlefolk* (1858), *On the Eve* (1860), *Fathers and Children* (1861), *Smoke* (1867), *and Virgin Soil* (1876). They are of unequal value. The second, for instance, may appear to modern readers somewhat sentimental, yet the portraits of the main characters, as well as the "atmosphere" of the nobility *byt* in the '40's, could hardly be better expressed. Liza, the heroine of the novel, is a direct descendant of Púshkin's Tatyána. So is Natasha in *Rúdin.* In depicting Rúdin (whose prototype is supposed to be the famous revolutionary Bakúnin), Turgénev remains to the end so discreet and subtle that—bit by bit—the most contradictory features shape themselves into a strange but living personality. A clever talker and a parasite; a genuine idealist by his impulses, and a will-less coward in practice; profoundly noble by nature, and at the same time often ignoble owing to his lack of will-power; such is Turgénev's Rúdin, whom we seem to love the more the less we respect him. Turgénev himself betrays at times an almost Chékhovian tenderness towards this pathetic "superfluous man."

The high-water mark of Turgénev, the novelist, is his *Fathers and Children.* Its theme is the clash between the sentimental generation of the '40's and that

of the active '60's, represented by the plebeian "nihilist" (the word was invented by Turgénev) Bazárov. Bazárov is the only strong man Turgénev ever depicted convincingly. And he is portrayed with such impartiality that we really do not know whether we find him repelling or fascinating. He is both. In his stoical death, however, he becomes truly grand. The social-political note of this work is well blended with its artistic side—a thing which cannot be said to the same extent either of *Smoke*, or of *Virgin Soil*. The first is attractive by its love-story (again with a fine woman in it); yet Turgénev's embittered attacks and political discussions lower the value of the novel. *On the Eve* is his weakest and least readable work. Its ideal heroine is overdone, while its main character, Insárov, is created with a visible strain. This straining to say something which was expected and needed is felt also in *Virgin Soil*, dealing with the "populist" movement of the younger revolutionary generation in Russia. The energetic Solómin is as wooden as Turgénev's previous active hero Insárov. Marianna, on the other hand, and a few minor figures are alive and convincing.

Turgénev's chief title to glory are his stories. Some of his *Sportsman's Sketches*, then his *First Love*, *Asya*, *A King Lear of the Steppes*, *The Spring Torrents*, and several others, are among the finest productions in European literature. He is particularly good when describing all the vague and evasive shades of love. He himself was hopelessly in love with the famous singer, Mme. Viardot-Garcia, who treated him to the end only as a friend. No wonder that all his love-stories have an unhappy ending. Disappointed in love and life; grieved also by the unfriendly reception of some of his works in Russia, he spent all his later years abroad. In politics he was a resolute Westerner. The resigned pessimism of his old age is reflected in his poems in prose, *Senilia* (1879-83). He also wrote a few plays. The best of them, *A Month in the Village*,

anticipates several features of Chékhov's plays—above all, the "atmosphere" and the absence of plot.

III

Simultaneously with Turgénev's first sketch in prose (1847) appeared the first novel by Iván A. Goncharóv (1812-91), *A Common Story*. This story of a disappointed idealist made a strong impression upon Bielínsky. Goncharóv was proclaimed a promising realist. He justified, or even surpassed, all expectations only in 1858, when launching his famous novel, *Oblómov*.

This book is without a plot, and its hero is again the well-known "superfluous man." At the same time he is a symbol of certain qualities which are typical of many Russians. Pure, noble, and gifted, on the one hand, and devoid of any will-power on the other, he gradually drifts into hopeless inertia. His own lethargy hovers over him like a sort of Fate. Neither the efforts of a loving woman nor those of his practical friend, Stolz, are of any avail; he sinks lower and lower without, however, losing our profound sympathy and even love. The atmosphere of doom—produced by the sheer accumulation of trifles—reaches at times, particularly towards the end of the novel, an almost unbearable tragic intensity.

Oblómov has become a byword. His "Russian" passivity is called "oblomovism" (*oblómovshchina*). The book is a classic, in spite of its somewhat monotonous style and language. Goncharóv's third novel, *The Precipice* (1869), is inferior. His voluminous *Frigate Pallada* (1856) is a record of his journey to Japan in 1853.

Somewhat apart from other writers stand Alexander Písemsky (1820-81) and Nikoláï Lyeskóv (1831-95). Písemsky's method is largely naturalistic, yet without any neglect of the plot. Aware of the vulgarity and hardness of life, he is an embittered pessimist. His *A Thousand Souls* (1858) is one of the best

Russian novels. This study of an ambitious *jeune homme pauvre,* who sacrifices everything to success but disappointed by it tries to redeem it later on, is excellent with regard to both *byt* and psychology. His other novels, too, show originality of subject, an acute observation, and a great constructive skill. He also wrote a few plays, the best of which is *The Bitter Lot.*

Lyeskóv's works have only recently met with the appreciation they deserve. His big anti-radical novels have lost their freshness, but his long stories and legends, told in the racy style of the simple folk, are unique. He is a man of the soil, healthy, full of common sense, of humour, and of genuine sympathy for his people. His "picaresque" *Enchanted Traveller,* or his wonderful *Sealed Angel* could have been written only by a Russian.

To the generation of great writers belongs also Michael Saltykóv-Shchedrín (1826-89). His *Golovlyóv Family* (1876), which depicts the degenerate gentry types on the background of a nightmarelike provincial existence, is as powerful as it is gloomy. Also his satirical *Fables* (in prose) are remarkable. Otherwise he is too much of a sardonic radical journalist.

The variety, richness, frankness, and depth of the growing Russian realism were astounding. All trends, moods, and matters strove to find in it a proper expression. Its only drawback was a too frequent political or social note, which in the '60's and '70's was almost obligatory, and then a certain neglect of style. Both defects mar the great creative power of Glyeb Uspénsky (1840-1902). Like N. Zlatovrátsky and many other "populists," he was interested in the peasants and the peasant commune which he was inclined to idealize. A heavy blow to such idealism was dealt, however, by M. Reshótnikov's (1841-71) *The People of Podlípnaya,* a panorama of village *byt* full of unrelieved gloom. M. Pomyalóvsky achieved unusual popularity with his weird *Seminary Sketches* (describing the life of clerical seminaries); while the

hapless alcoholic and literary proletarian, N. Kushchévsky (1857-76), created one of the liveliest books of the period in his *Nikolái Negórev,* with its pictures of a typical old-world school, and of various characters from their boyhood up to their successful or unsuccessful starts in life.

The two towering figures of that epoch, Tolstóy and Dostoévsky, must be treated separately.

CHAPTER VIII

TOLSTÓY

I

Lev Nikoláevitch Tolstóy (1828-1910) is one of the most enigmatic giants in world literature. A Count by birth, he found his ideal among the working masses; an Epicurean in his youth, he became a great ascetic in his mature years; a rare artist by his gifts, he made a violent onslaught on art; and surrounded by admirers from all parts of the world, he secretly ran away from his home at the age of eighty-two with the object of spending his last days in loneliness and poverty. A prophet and a sceptical rationalist, a healthy pagan and a Byzantine monk, a spontaneous child and the shrewdest psychological vivisector, a proud aristocrat and a humble peasant—all these elements seemed to meet and mingle in his complex personality as well as in his works. Tolstóy the irrational pagan and the artist was ready to enjoy God's creation, to revel in life; but the rational and moralizing double in him always interfered, trying to put the meaning of life before life itself. Hence his inner conflict.

In the first half of his literary activities the artist prevailed, on the whole, over the moralist; in the second half the moralist took the upper hand. Tolstóy's asceticism, with its "revised" Sermon on the Mount, was enhanced by his fear of death, which again was only another expression of his spontaneous

love of life—a kind of paganism from the other end. His very feeling for Nature was that of a pagan savage who is himself still a part of Nature. No wonder that in his youth Tolstóy had been a disciple of Rousseau. And, like Rousseau, he was drawn by all his instincts towards that primitive, patriarchal community whose collective "group-soul" had not yet been destroyed by civilization. Hence his raptures over the vegetative harmony and the unconscious wisdom of the peasant masses as opposed to the "corrupt" and chaotic civilized society. This sympathy with the harmonious primitive mind was, however, only one side of Tolstóy's mentality. Its other side was a continuous fear of his own sceptical and analyzing reason, as well as of that egotistic isolation which is the natural outcome of an inquisitive self-consciousness. As the latter was exceedingly strong in him, he tried to find a refuge from its torments in the harmony of a patriarchal group-soul, which soon became his chief Utopia, his longed-for haven of peace. So much so that he began to regard each separate individuality as a separation from that soul, and, therefore, as a fall and an evil. He saw in history and in culture only a gradual process of such individualization turned against the vegetative happiness of rural humanity; hence he called men back to pre-civilized conditions, and wanted all of them to become tillers of the soil, so that there should be no social or any other division among them. His very conception of God is a kind of deified group-soul, in which all individual selves would merge and become obliterated in a pantheistic sense. "Love each other" means, in his language: suppress your own selves without resistance; suppress them for the sake of a compact group-soul in which alone you will find salvation. And the more he was aware of his own selfish impulses the more eloquently he talked of that selfless Buddhistic "Christianity" which was the outcome of his conversion (so poignantly described in his own *Confession*, 1879).

As a matter of fact, there was no sudden or unexpected conversion in Tolstóy. His "Christian" elements had been present all the time. What happened was only a shifting of his inner centre from one half of his personality to the other. And this inevitable shifting had been prepared by the whole of his previous life and work.

II

Tolstóy's best works are known to every civilized reader; but a complete enjoyment of his style and language is accessible only to those who read him in Russian. What strikes one in his early writings is that full-blooded vitality with which he infects everything he touches. This we feel already in his first sketch, *Childhood* (1852). We feel it in his *Cossacks* (1862), where he gives vent to his love of the primitive Caucasian Cossacks and, incidentally, also to his hatred of civilization. We feel it again, and, perhaps, most of all, in *War and Peace* (1862-69) and in *Anna Karénina* (1875-77), the two greatest novels of the nineteenth century.

It is futile to discuss these two works, since all comment seems inadequate. There remains only one thing: to read them, and to read them again. Tolstóy's uncanny observation, his pictures of the *byt*, his insight into the human soul, his joy in life, his paralyzing quest for the ultimate meaning of our existence, his mistrust of civilization, his love of masses —all this is here expressed by means of that simple and yet magic art which defies definition. Together with Dostoévsky's masterpieces, these two novels represent the highest pitch of Russian realism. True, their construction is not perfect, yet one is inclined to say that they are above construction. And as to their characters, they are so alive and so real that we move among them as among our best friends. We know them better than we know ourselves.

Human and humane as an artist, Tolstóy is

intolerant only when his moralizing double comes in. His portrait of the great egotist, Napoleon, in *War and Peace,* is a subtly malicious caricature; while the Russian Generalissimo Kutúzov—the follower of the instinctive impulses and wisdom of the masses—is slightly idealized. The very symbol of this wisdom is his "synthetic" Russian peasant, Platón Karatáyev. The same partiality we find in *Anna Karénina* whenever Tolstóy's personal "complexes" are concerned. Thus the Squire Lévin (a portrait of Tolstóy himself) is converted to the truth of life by an illiterate peasant. And how severe does Tolstóy become when he wants to punish Anna, whose only transgression was that she had listened to the voice of her living heart and not to that of mouldy "moral" conventions.

In Tolstóy's Puritanic aggressiveness one feels a kind of self-protection against the danger from his own senses. Had he not been so much afraid—morally afraid—of women, he would hardly have hated them as he did. In his moral self-protection he went so far as to forbid (in *The Kreutzer Sonata*) sexual intercourse even in marriage.

III

In the period between 1852 and the publication of *Anna Karénina* (in which one can already anticipate his conversion) Tolstóy wrote a number of works, among them his *Sebastopol Stories, Polikúshka, Kholstomyér,* and others. After his conversion he concentrated upon moral and religious pamphlets, such as *What I Believe, What Then Must We Do? On Life, The Kingdom of God is Within You, What is Art? What is Religion?* etc. They all show his fundamental bias, a "simplification" of problems which are not simple, and also his tendency to make out of his doctrine a kind of Procrustean bed for the whole of history and humanity. Instead of overcoming civilization, he wants to suppress it in the name of a pre-civilized community. At the same time he remains too

much of a rationalist and a hidden sceptic to be spontaneously religious. One feels in him a passionate *will to religion,* rather than true religiosity.

Fortunately, Tolstóy the artist was not stifled even by his conversion. He only simplified his own style and insisted more and more on the "purpose" as such. His notable works of this period are: *The Death of Iván Ilyitch, Master and Man, The Kreutzer Sonata,* the gloomy peasant drama, *The Power of Darkness* (1886), and the Puritanic novel, *Resurrection.* Among his excellent posthumous writings can be quoted the stories, *Father Sergius, The Devil, After the Ball, Hadji Murad, The False Coupon,* and the drama, *The Live Corpse.*

Europe began to appreciate Tolstóy first as a moral teacher and a "Christian," and only later as an artist. At present his philosophic writings look rather threadbare, although many of his indictments of our civilization preserve their vigour. The importance of Tolstóy the thinker can be disputed; Tolstóy, the artist, however, is among the greatest.

CHAPTER IX

DOSTOÉVSKY

I

From the standpoint of European literature, Michael Fyódorovitch Dostoévsky (1821-81) is even more important than Tolstóy, because the whole of recent psychological fiction has been affected—in some way or other—by his work. His life was strange and agitated. A native of Moscow, he came at the age of seventeen to Petersburg, which was destined to play such a big part in his writings. He read a great deal, especially Gógol, Balzac, George Sand, and Hoffmann. In 1846 his first long story, *Poor Folk,* appeared. Although inspired by Gógol's *Greatcoat,* it at once

established his reputation. Bielínsky was enthusiastic about it; but he failed to see the excellence of Dostoévsky's second and better story, *The Double,* which is a fine study of self-divided personality.

These two works anticipate all the chief elements of the later mature Dostoévsky, who is essentially a poet of the *town* with its misery, its nerves, its pathology. He wrote a few more stories, but his career was interrupted by a disturbing event. In 1849 he was arrested, together with the other members of a revolutionary circle. One day all of them were taken to a square, where the death sentence was read to them—in front of the scaffold. At the last moment before the expected execution they were, however, reprieved and sent in chains to Siberia for penal servitude. In Siberia, Dostoévsky spent several years, four of them among the worst criminals, and the rest as a soldier. His gaol life he recorded in his *House of the Dead.*

This work appeared in 1861, after a long pause in his literary activities. It is an amazing book, amazing in its subject-matter, its forgiving tone, its intuition, and also in its insight into the essence of crimes and criminals. Soon after this his *Memoirs from Underground* followed, a work which also strikes a new but more daring note. Through the device of a confession, Dostoévsky here burrows into the most intimate secrets of a thwarted and yet rebellious human personality. The soliloquizing hero tramples with a cruel logic, and with an equally cruel inner chuckle, upon all our " high " ideas and ideals, until he reduces them to mere rags covering the ultimate impulse of every human ego—the impulse of self-assertion *à tout prix.* As he cannot assert his own ego in a positive direction, he asserts it through his impotent and cynical rancour, transmuting thus his very weakness into an illusion of strength. Almost at the same time Dostoévsky wrote his utterly humanitarian novel, *The Offended and the Injured* (his worst book, by the way). Such coincidence proves that not only in

his heroes, but also in Dostoévsky himself "all contradictions existed side by side."

At that period he had to struggle with great hardships and also with his own disease, for he was an epileptic. After an unsuccessful publishing venture he fled from his creditors to Western Europe, where he lived in humiliating poverty. Before his final flight his *Crime and Punishment* appeared (1866). This book is so profound that one is almost afraid of discussing it. Its *leitmotiv* is the self-division of human consciousness between its rational and its irrational truths. Raskólnikov, the hero of the novel, is rationally "beyond good and evil." As he does not believe in God, he cannot accept any transcendental or eternal moral law. He commits murder simply in order to prove to himself that he dares overstep the line of our conventional good and evil, and conquer the final freedom of the man-God who does not recognize any law above and beyond himself. He obtained a complete rational sanction for his crime; yet the subconscious "irrational" reaction after it was so terrible that it drove him to a voluntary confession of his deed, despite the fact that logically he still did not consider himself a criminal at all. The process of this reaction is rendered by Dostoévsky with such dramatic force as to make the book one of the greatest—although not by any means one of the pleasantest—novels in world literature. Raskólnikov's dilemma of "beyond good and evil" was taken up later on by Nietzsche.

II

In contrast with Tolstóy's rationalism, Dostoévsky had an "apocalyptic" mind. Nor do his heroes struggle with any external circumstances, but only with the monsters of their own disintegrating spirit. Their consciousness is in that chaotic flux in which all contradictions meet and mix. The dilemma of God and of absolute individual self-affirmation (not as an intellectual concept of an armchair philosopher, but as

a " psychological " inner reality) became that focus towards which Dostoévsky's themes and interests were converging. He treated also his favourite topic, that of Russia and Europe, chiefly from this standpoint. Being a Slavophil, he devised a quasi-mystical theory of Russians as the " God-bearing Christian nation " in opposition to the " faked " Christianity of the West. This view he inserted—in some form or other—into all his big novels after *Crime and Punishment.* The problem of Europe and Russia he invested, moreover, with truly symbolic proportions in his novel, *The Possessed* (1871).

The central figure of this book, Stavrógin, is a self-divided sceptic in whom the inner dilemma of Raskólnikov is tackled once more. Since there is no God, there are no eternal values; everything is relative—even morality. Life in this void can be, at its best, only a series of experiments—upon oneself and upon others. One of such experiments on the part of Stavrógin is his connection with the " possessed " Nihilists, whose portraits are a terrible indictment of the extreme radicals of the '60's. The novel is, in a way, a Slavophil counterpart to *Fathers and Children,* the " Westernizing " author of which is also caricatured in it, in the person of the writer Karmázinov.

His previous novel, *The Idiot* (1868-69), on the other hand, is chiefly a study of the divine fool, Prince Myshkin. He, too, is inwardly divided—between his love for Aglaya and his pity for Nastasya. Together with this he represents the intuitive " higher mind " as against the purely clever logical reason. Myshkin, a former inmate of a lunatic asylum, is so devoid of all rational cleverness that he gives the impression of an idiot; but for this very reason his intuitive wisdom manifests itself all the more freely. He is an *ingénu,* and a genius without brains. Yet even those who at first laugh at him and exploit his childlike goodness soon become fascinated by his puzzling charm, and finish by admiring him as a higher being. After a

series of painful experiences, in the middle of various "human-all-too-human" types, his insanity returns in a terrifying scene which concludes the novel.

Without dwelling upon the loosely constructed *Raw Youth* (1871)—again with a self-divided character, Versílov—we come to Dostoévsky's crowning glory, *The Brothers Karamázov* (1879-80). This work, which he wrote in Russia and under improved material conditions, is a whole compendium of life, viewed in a new dimension, as it were. Its main theme is the differentiation of human consciousness in a whole family. The father Karamázov, for instance, is an old sensualist with a wild and chaotic "life-force" which assumes entirely different aspects in his sons: the impulsive and emotional Mitya, the cold sceptic Ivan, the somewhat distressingly pure Alyósha, and the degenerate, weak-minded Smerdyakóv, their illegitimate half-brother. The problems of God, of good and evil, of Christianity, of Russia and Europe, of the ultimate aims of mankind, and then of love and lust in their intensest forms—all are treated here with consummate psychology and consummate art. And in the background we feel, as it were, the whole of the restless, seeking, and spiritually vexed Russia. The chapter under the heading, "The Grand Inquisitor," is of particular interest, not only because of its depth and grandeur, but also because it shows (between the lines) that Dostoévsky himself was wavering all the time between extreme religiosity and extreme spiritual Nihilism.

III

Dostoévsky's long stories (*Nétochka Nezvánova, A Bad Predicament, The Village Stepánchikovo, The Gambler, The Eternal Husband,* etc.) are as thrilling in their intensity as his novels. He is the most dramatic of modern writers. Hence his wonderful dialogue. If Tolstóy, with his epic genius, sees first and then divines, Dostoévsky divines first and then sees. And

he feels perfectly at home only in that chaos in which the most contradictory impulses, truths, and values are disputing the ultimate fate of man's Spirit. In his effort to embody this struggle, he creates characters who are hauntingly real without being realistic in the usual sense of this word, for they are, above all, projections of his own tormented mind.

As a publicist Dostoévsky is more interesting than important. His *Diary of an Author* (together with his Púshkin Address of 1880) throws much light upon his mind and work. It gives a further proof that the great seeker Dostoévsky wrote because he was inwardly impelled to do so. He had all the weakness of strength and all the strength of weakness. And in spite of his vagaries, he never ceased wrestling with the dark forces of his own soul for the highest realization of man and life. The originality of his work is due to the fact that he was able to translate his great inner struggle into great art.

CHAPTER X

OSTRÓVSKY AND THE RUSSIAN DRAMA

I

Russia can boast of many good actors and at present also of the finest stage craft, yet she has no playwright whom she could put beside such novelists as Dostoévsky and Tolstóy. Russian plays were for a long time dependent on foreign examples. Both Fonvízin and Griboyédov followed the French tradition, not to speak of Sumarókov, Ózerov, and Knyazhnín. Púshkin's *Borís Godunóv* is modelled upon Shakespeare, while Lérmontov's dramatic attempts savour both of Byron and of the young Schiller. Minor writers, Polevóy and Kúkolnik, were trying to naturalize the "romantic" manner in some of its worst aspects, but fortunately without lasting results. A real theatrical

event was Gógol's *Revizór*. Apart from this, the theatres from the '30's onwards remained flooded with imported vaudeville plays. Turgénev's dramatic ventures, delightful though they were, cannot be compared with his best stories and novels. And as to the works of a later playwright, Alexander Sukhovó-Kobýlin (1817-1903), they are lively and well constructed, particularly his *Wedding of Krechinsky;* but his satirical blows are often more violent than strong. Písemsky's *Bitter Lot* (1860), however, and also Tolstóy's *Power of Darkness,* are the most impressive naturalistic plays in Russian literature. The historical drama found a passable exponent in Count Alexis Tolstóy, whose "Shakespearean" trilogy, *The Death of Ivan the Terrible* (1866), *Czar Fyódor Ivánnytch* (1868) and *Czar Boris* (1870), is not devoid of convincing characters and striking scenes; yet on the whole it is reminiscent of operatic pageants. In short, Russian dramatic literature would be rather poor but for Ostróvsky—the first and so far the only creator of a national Russian drama on a big scale.

II

Alexander N. Ostróvsky (1823-86) was born in that merchant quarter of Moscow which, until the reform of 1861, remained untouched by Western or any other influences. This was a world of its own, based on a ruthless tyranny of parents over their children, on extreme conservatism, on the bullying wilfulness of the rich, and very often on callous dishonesty in commercial matters. In a word, it was a real "dark kingdom," and the outsiders who penetrated into it were, for the most part, petty officials in search of rich brides.

Ostróvsky, who was working for a time in a commercial Court, had ample opportunities of studying this curious remnant of Old Russia. And so his first plays and comedies (*The Bankrupt,* 1849; *The Poor Bride,* 1852; *Know Your Place,* 1853; *Poverty is No*

Crime, 1854) deal primarily with the merchants' *byt.* He added to it officials, landowners, peasants, vagrant actors, etc., until he gradually enlarged it into a kind of miniature Russia. Yet the merchant remained his favourite. He was particularly fond of portraying the patriarchal domestic tyrant whose family régime reminds one of Eastern autocrats. Ostróvsky's best plays are *The Thunderstorm* (1860) and *The Forest* (1871). The first of them gives a picture of the merchants' domestic life in a Volga town. Its victim, Katerina, with her conflict between love and moral duty, is a fine tragic figure. In this play there is more " atmosphere " and inner intensity than action proper. *The Forest,* on the other hand, depicts the *byt* of the country gentry and shows a great variety of characters from the noblest to the meanest. Ostróvsky wrote also several historical dramas (in blank verse), in which there is, however, often more good will than good art.

III

The virtues and defects of Ostróvsky's plays are, on the whole, the same which we find in Russian prose writers. He is, above all, simple and natural—so natural that he gives the impression of following the depicted events rather than organizing them. He neglects the plot and concentrates upon the characters and their dramatic conflicts. These are taken straight from life with great tolerance and objectivity. This is why his plays have the logic of life itself and not that of literary inventions. His sober eye, as well as his strong sense of measure, avoids all tricks or effects for their own sake. His very irony seems to be the irony of life caught by the author quite by chance, as it were.

Yet there is perhaps just one flaw in his figures: they are those of a great observer rather than a great creator. They need the stage in order to be completed by the creative effort of the actor himself. Likewise

Ostróvsky does not raise his heroes on to the plane of universal reality and significance. The reason is that he cannot sufficiently detach himself from the *byt* he describes. As he remains too much bound to it, he does not entirely transmute it into art. Even his matchless dialogue is a reproduction of the racy folk-lorist side of the language. He is so much in love with the latter that he often does not think it necessary to interfere with it, as it were. In short, his works are strong and inspired only so long as he remains in touch with the *byt* and the folk-lore which he loves for their own sake. But as he does not go beyond them, his art—original though it is—cannot pretend to that importance which is allotted to the great European dramatists.

CHAPTER XI

POETRY DURING THE AGE OF PROSE

I

THE active '60's began with one of the greatest reforms of modern times—the abolition of serfdom, which required a thorough change in the social and economic structure of Russia. The epoch became practical, "scientific," and positivist. The interest in fine literature and in poetry as such became weakened. Infected by militant journalism, the literary tastes of the day were moulded by the didactic sermons of the radical publicists, Dobrolyúbov, Chernyshévsky, and Písarev. The spirit of the age required even a "useful" poetry. And so a sharp differentiation between the humanitarian and the purely æsthetic poets took place. In the first camp Nekrásov towers alone, while in the second a small group of "Parnassians" are courting the neglected Muse: Count Alexis Tolstóy (1817-75), Apollón Máïkov (1821-97), Yakov Polónsky (1819-98),

and Afanásy Fet (1820-92). Tyútchev, too, was still alive, and even wrote at that period his best love-poems.

II

Nikoláï A. Nekrásov (1821-77) puzzles one by his lack of distinction between high and low both in life and in poetry. His morbid pity on the one hand, and his love of the Russian people on the other, were the two chief sources of his poetic inspiration. Prompted by the former, he took up the cause of all the "offended and injured," while the second is responsible for the racy tone and spirit of his best creations. The majority of his social-political or "civic" poems are the rhymed journalism of a radical intellectual. Those productions, however, in which he is "Russian" in the organic sense of this word, are works of a great and original genius. Thus, in his epic *Who is Happy in Russia?* (1870-73), he assimilated and reproduced the folk-style, as well as the folk-accent, to perfection. He is equally racy in his inimitable *Pedlars,* in his *Red-Nosed Frost,* and in many other pictures and ballads from peasant life.

All these works are monumental in their rugged and condensed realism. He never condescends to anything conventionally poetic, and this lends a peculiar manly vigour to his genius, the raciness of which is even more *instinctive* than that of Ostróvsky. On this plane he is truly unique; but no sooner does he abandon it than he is assailed by all the temptations of bad taste. Yet even in his "civic" poetry he achieves at times genuine intensity by the sheer force of his indignation.

III

The most prolific of those poets who were interested in art for its own sake was Alexis Tolstóy. He wrote poems, tragedies, and an historical novel, *Prince Serébryany,* dealing with the times of Ivan the Terrible. He has a strong realistic vein, good taste,

and a natural fluency, which he displays in all sorts of verses, from intimate lyrics to satires, from solemn religious dirges to jokes and parodies. His vision is clear and acute. So is his language. Yet with all this he lacks the creative élan of the highest order. There is something cold and intellectual in him: as if he were getting his inspiration only in bits which he tries to weld and to prolong by a too conscious effort. A blending of joy and sadness is his typical mood; and his typical passion is his cult of Beauty.

Afanásy Fet drinks out of a smaller glass than A. Tolstóy, but his glass is made of crystal. Having severed his poetry from practical life, he sang only at rare moments. Those moments he distilled into short lyrics, which are so concise and exquisite that they will remain a joy for ever. His best lyrics deal with love and Nature. In his worship of Nature he is both an Epicurean and a Pantheist. His manner is classic in its terseness and impressionistic in its music and nuances. Together with Tyútchev he is a predecessor of Russian symbolism.

Polónsky and Máïkov are excellent at their best. Yet they both sacrificed the quality of their poetry to its quantity, and perhaps also to the demands of the intelligentsia, which was gradually losing all orientation in art. Russian poetry fell into a state of paralysis, in which it remained till the end of the century, when an important revival took place.

CHAPTER XII

CHÉKHOV AND MODERN PROSE

I

THE social and political impetus of the '60's wore itself out in less than twenty years. In the reactionary '80's it gave way to a new apathy, to Philistinism, and nostalgia. The superfluous man was now extended:

he became superfluous intelligentsia whose blind-alley is reflected in the poetry of Nádson and in Gárshin's prose. Although the lyrical gift of Semyón Nádson (1862-87) was not negligible, it fell a prey to the spirit of the age, as well as to his own lack of taste and technique. At his worst he condescends even to a kind of whining emotionality. Vsévolod Gárshin (1858-88), on the other hand, is a distant heir of Turgénev and partly of Tolstóy. There is much conscious and fine craft in his stories, yet their intensity is often that of a clinical kind—the intensity of "nerves" over-strung by pity and pessimism. The hero of his best-known sketch, *The Red Flower,* for instance, is a madman who dies in the happy delusion that he has destroyed all the evil of the world. Gárshin became a victim of his own exaggerated sensibility: in a fit of madness he committed suicide.

Nádson and Gárshin were not strong enough to embody their age artistically. Such a feat was, however, performed by another and greater man whose talent was ripening in those very years. This man was Chékhov.

Antón Pávlovitch Chékhov (1860-1904) began writing in the early '80's while studying medicine in Moscow. His first sketches were amusing pot-boilers for humorous papers. Later he devoted himself entirely to literature, yet his boisterous fun soon gave way to a despair which permeated all his best stories. This change occurred between 1886 and 1889. After this his dominant mood was the resignation of an observer who knows beforehand that there is no outlet. The lyricism of futility is the note which Chékhov brought to perfection. He was too honest with himself to believe in any "ideals" or "messages." Even his occasional talk of future progress is vague and non-committal: the talk of a man who would like to have some faith or other, and cannot accept it at the price of cheating himself.

Chékhov is morbidly aware of the fact that our

existence has lost its organic wholeness, its focus, its unifying idea. Hence the casualness and that utter isolation of man which cannot be overcome even by love and friendship. As our life is no longer rooted in any deeper values, it is bound to disintegrate, to grow chaotic and ugly. Vulgarity and Philistinism triumphant—these are its chief elements. Everything refined is doomed beforehand. And so one often turns away from life not because of one's weakness, but because of one's good taste which may not be compatible with what people call nowadays "success." Chékhov's best characters suffer from a terrible fear of life simply because instead of life they see only vulgar and dull existence all around. They feel superfluous and impotent. This tragic helplessness finds its expression already in his first play, *Iványov* (1886), and in his *Tedious Story* (1889), after which it remained his favourite *leitmotiv*. It reached its highest pathos in some of his longer stories, particularly in *Ward No. 6*, and in his plays: *The Seagull* (1896), *Uncle Vanya* (1900), *The Three Sisters* (1901), and *The Cherry Orchard* (1904).

It is this attitude towards life as a whole that gives a key to Chékhov's cult of failures. His successful characters are always vulgar. At times he is even openly intolerant towards them. But how warm and tender does he become when describing the innumerable victims of life! And his warmth is all the stronger because of its reserve. He knows how to be intimate without a touch of familiarity. Take his wonderful story, *The Darling*. His voice remains throughout even and pleasantly monotonous—like the monotony of the autumn rain. And the understanding smile which lingers at times on his lips is perhaps the most humane smile in Russian literature.

With regard to technique, Chékhov combines the suggestive impressionism of Turgénev with an incredible skill in weaving narrative miniatures out of the most trifling incidents of daily life. Even his

longer stories are nothing but strings of such incidents blended by the general mood of gloom and futility. This method he applies also to his plays, which are undramatic in construction (*i.e.*, without a plot, or even without action), and at the same time thoroughly dramatic in their effect: they are dramatized "atmosphere." In all this he is classically concise and simple, although his language is less racy than that of his great predecessors. His genius, too, is of a smaller calibre than the genius of Tolstóy or of Dostoévsky. Yet he is one of the supreme masters of the short story. He died from consumption at the age of forty-four.

II

Chékhov already marks the decline of monumental Russian realism. There was (in the '80's and '90's) a great output of prose for the general reader on naturalistic lines—the countless novels by Boborýkin, for instance. On the other hand, various smaller writers were trying to keep the good old traditions alive. The best of them is Vladímir Korolénko (1853-1921). He is a link between the impressionism of Chékhov and the straightforward narrative of the older school. His delicate feminine touch verges at times on sentimentality, from which he is, however, saved by his sense of humour. Devoid of all disgust and malice, he firmly believes in human nature. During the last years of his life he was active chiefly as a progressive publicist.

A new and unexpected note came into Russian prose with the advent of Gorky in the early '90's. Owing to the great famine of 1891-92, the intelligentsia was roused from its apathy. New interests were awakening, and together with them the need of faith, the will to action. This will became symbolized, as it were, in Maxím Gorky (Alekséï Pyéshkov, born 1869). Being of humble origin, he fortunately had no "regular" education. His only teacher was life. In

literature he appeared in 1892. His first stories blended a realistic method with a romantically adventurous temperament. Gorky was the very negation of Chékhov's fear of life. He was an optimist, with a warlike belief in man, and with an equally warlike hatred of Philistine stagnation. He gave vent to this attitude chiefly through his tramps and hooligans, whom he naturalized in modern fiction. Gorky's tramp is the deliberate antithesis of all bourgeois smugness. He is a free wanderer, a bully, a thief, and often also a simplified Nietzschian—at least, in so far as the conventional good and evil is concerned. The voice of the young author was so impressive by its unconcerned, courageous tone that the public entirely overlooked his rhetoric and his second-hand philosophy of egotism, which was more striking than solid.

After an unprecedented literary success, Gorky joined the Social-Democrat party. He took up the cause of the labouring masses and began to write plays and novels with a purpose. This is his least interesting period. His popularity was at its height during the revolution of 1905, after which it decreased. It never returned to the same extent, although he suddenly gave proof of renewed creative power in his *Confession* (1908), and later on in a series of books, *Childhood, In the World, My Universities,* and others. His talent shows no visible marks of decline even now, in his voluntary exile. As to his plays, he tried to apply to them the technique of Chékhov without Chékhov's touch and subtlety. The result was often deplorable. Even his well-known *Lower Depths* is strong by its subject-matter rather than by its art.

III

Maxím Gorky was joined by a host of emulators. One of them, Leoníd Andréyev (1871-1919), went his own way, and his fame nearly eclipsed that of Gorky. If Gorky is the stormy petrel of the '90's, Andréyev reflects the apathy and the inner nihilism after the

unsuccessful revolution of 1905. All sorts of literary drugs were now required. Andréyev learned the art of making them, and soon became a best seller. He specialized in despair and in horrors both physical and metaphysical. Taking up various Dostoévskian problems, he treated them in a superficial "modernist" style, the glaring tricks of which are reminiscent of Edgar Poe, of Maeterlinck, of the painter Goya, and of the Polish decadent, Przybyszewski. He affects one's nerves rather than one's æsthetic sense. His themes are always interesting, but they are usually bigger than his creative power. Yet whenever he does not force himself to be "modern" and overwhelming, he can be strong. His *In the Fog, The Governor, The Dark, Judas and Others, The Seven who were Hanged,* and also some of his first stories are very good indeed. Such works, on the other hand, as his *Red Laugh, The Curse of the Beast, Eleazar,* the dramas—*King Hunger, Anathema,* and the like are scarcely readable at present on account of their pompous artificiality.

Andréyev's plays show, on the whole, the same defects as his stories. Even at his best he cannot steer quite safely between the Scylla of poster-like sensationalism and the Charybdis of melodrama.

IV

Of those writers who were continuing the traditions of realism we can mention V. Veresáyev (once a popular mouthpiece of the more positive intelligentsia), Kúprin, Artsybáshev, and Búnin. Alexander Kúprin is a healthy, straightforward narrator. He could become a kind of robust Maupassant but for his lapses of taste. Only a man without reliable taste could have written such a book as his tedious *Ditch* (Yama), a concoction of cheap naturalism (he describes the life of prostitutes), of artificial sentiments and artificial moralizing. Michael Artsybáshev was another symptom of the general decadence after 1905. In his *Sánin*

(1907) he mixes pornography with lectures on "freed" sex; while his *Breaking Point* is a diluted apology of suicide. Both novels are fairly weak as literature, but as documents they are interesting. A truly significant talent is Iván Búnin (b. 1870), who is also a good poet of the old school. He is a cultured, disciplined artist, but his somewhat static treatment may not appeal to every reader. The dying manor and the decaying village are his favourite themes, yet he is capable of dealing with even the most exotic subject. He possesses a strong lyrical vein, often tempered by a cold and cruel aloofness. His most important works are his two sinister novels, *The Village* (1910) and *Sukhodól,* and then his long story, *The Gentleman from San Francisco.*

Of many other names, that of Count Alexis N. Tolstóy (b. 1882) is prominent. Although influenced by various new currents, he is essentially a keen realistic observer. Like Búnin, he knows the decaying gentry *byt;* he also knows how to make his figures alive, yet he does not always escape the pitfalls of haste and of brilliant superficiality. Strongly tainted by modernism is the over-decorated, moody prose of Sergéï N. Sergéyev-Tsensky (b. 1876). A delicate though perhaps a too sentimental descendant of Chékhov is Borís Záitsev (b. 1881); while Iván Shmelyóv (b. 1875) combines a strong narrative power with a great originality of subject. Among the *émigré* writers his work excels by its quality.

V

From the '90's onwards Russian realism was undergoing a profound change. Affected by the new experiments in technique and style, it became consciously elaborate, stylized. The modernist prose found its first solid master in Fyódor Sologúb; and it reached the very limit of clever daring in Andréï Biely (b. 1880) and in Alexéï Rémizov (b. 1877). While Biely went back to the exuberant poetical prose of Gógol,

Rémizov took example chiefly from Lyeskóv's folk-style. He feels the flavour and the individual value of each word. His language is "Russian Unbound"—that racy Russian which seems to be above and beyond grammar in the accepted sense. He delights in new patterns of words. The construction of his works, too, is new and original. One of his peculiarities is that he can be both shrewdly profound and charmingly naïve—naïve like a child playing with his toys. Rémizov's writings can be divided into neo-realistic novels (*The Pond, The Story of Stratilatov, The Sisters of the Cross, The Fifth Pestilence, Olya,* etc.) and into artful paraphrases of folk-tales, legends, and apocrypha. He is at present the finest master of living speech and one of the really significant modern authors.

Sologúb and Biely will be dealt with in the chapter on Modern Poetry.

CHAPTER XIII

SYMBOLISTS AND OTHERS

I

Towards the middle of the '90's a new poetic wave arose in Russian literature—a wave which rolled on and on until it reached, in the best Symbolists, a height which can be compared only with the Great Age of poetry seventy or eighty years before. Russian symbolism has two sources; one is philosophic and the other æsthetic. A revived interest in philosophy was due to the imported Marxian doctrine which became fashionable and was much discussed from various standpoints. Yet having inquired into the roots of this doctrine, some less biased Marxians—such as Berdyáyev—saw its onesidedness and turned against it in the name of a deeper valuation of life. They began to grope after a religious-philosophic synthesis, and this was the first impulse towards the formation

of the so-called neo-idealist group in Russia. Its members found their allies in the religious philosophy of Vladímir Solovyóv,* in the problems raised by Dostoévsky, and in the doctrines of the Slavophils. A criticism of modern thought and life on these lines was undertaken and gradually worked out.

The neo-idealists were soon joined also by a few modern poets who were anxious to overcome the blind-alley of their own "decadence." The *rapprochement* between these two groups is partly responsible for the character of Russian modernism. The latter began already in the early '90's, under the influence of the French "decadents" on the one hand, and under that of Nietzsche on the other. The banner of the new school was first raised by Merezhkóvsky and Minsky. But, whereas Minsky only flirted with the new literary fashions, Merezhkóvsky was a real seeker; in fact, he soon proved to be too much of a seeker and too little of a poet. Other and more talented forces came: Zinaida Hippius (Mme. Merezhkóvsky), Fyódor Sologúb, Konstantin Balmont, Valéry Bryusov. Their first task was to emancipate art from all its extraneous services and duties. Together with this they advocated the autonomy of the creative individual—under the auspices of Nietzsche. Their centre was Diághilev's monthly, *Mir Iskusstva* (*The World of Art*, founded in 1898). Yet the self-sufficient æstheticism and the cult of the ego with all its moods and whims appeared to several moderns narrow, sterile, and destructive. They began to freeze in their own exclusiveness. Merezhkóvsky, Z. Hippius, and a few others hoped, however, to save themselves by an act

* V. Solovyóv's philosophy is an attempt at a synthesis of philosophy, religion, and living life. He is one of the profoundest modern interpreters of Christianity, and of the idea of the Universal Church. His mysticism is sometimes reminiscent of Schelling. He was also a talented poet and publicist.

of religious expansion and acceptance of life. Consequently they joined the neo-idealist trend. The result was Merezhkóvsky's "Religious-Philosophic Society," which had among its members not only professional poets and philosophers, but also priests and all sorts of "God-seekers." One of them was, for a time, Vasíly Rózanov (1856-1919), a singularly frank thinker and one of the subtlest metaphysicians of sex in modern times. *The New Path* (*Novy Put,* 1903-4) and later *The Problems of Life* were the periodicals in which the neo-idealists and the symbolists met.

II

The symbolist school of Russian poetry has much in common with romanticism. Regarding the visible forms only as symbols of higher realities, it endeavours to penetrate "from the real to the more real." This often makes it obscure to the average reader. Its difficulty is enhanced also by the elaborate technique which was due partly to Western influences and partly to entirely new experiments with the Russian prosody and language. Russian symbolism reigned between the revolution of 1905 and that of 1917. Merezhkóvsky, Z. Hippius, Ánnensky, Sologúb, Balmont, Bryusov, V. Ivánov were followed by a younger generation including Andréi Biely, Alexander Blok, and a host of others. After 1910 this school began to disintegrate into various new "isms."

Dmitry Merezhkóvsky (b. 1866) was a great stimulus rather than a great creator. As if aware of this, he gave up poetry and wrote essays and novels, in which he propagated his religious-philosophic scheme, reminiscent of Ibsen's "Third Kingdom" in *Emperor and Galilean*. According to this scheme the antitheses of flesh and spirit should be overcome by means of a higher synthesis of the two, or by the Christianity of the Third Testament—a standpoint at which he arrived via Dostoévsky and Nietzsche. Merezhkóvsky's novels show more culture and erudi-

tion than real creative power. His articles, too, are often more striking than convincing. His best work is the well-known study, *Tolstóy and Dostoévsky*.

Zinaida Hippius (b. 1867) was in her first phase perhaps the most typical decadent. Her introspective, intellectual, and somewhat Dostoévskian poetry is as perfect and incisive as it is cold. Her prose is less accomplished; but the criticisms she wrote under the name of Anton Krainy are remarkable in spite of their violence, or perhaps because of it. Fyódor Sologúb (b. 1863), Konstantin Balmont (b. 1867), Valéry Bryusov (1873-1924), and Innokénty Ánnensky (1856-1909) keep, on the whole, away from religious-philosophic aims as such. They are only poets. And the most perfect of them are Ánnensky and Sologúb. Both write for the elect. Ánnensky's poems are—in spite of their occasional French flavour—among the finest " short-hand " lyrics in Russian modernism. Sologúb is more lucid, but for all this he is no less a craftsman. His poetry is the confession of a tragic decadent who looks upon art as a deliberate shelter from the vulgarity of life. Beauty is the great mystery worth contemplating, while the actual existence is its negation. Hence Sologúb rejects life and its Creator. His cult is that of Death and of Satan, and he expresses it at times in admirable lyrics. He also gives vent to it in his plays, and in prose. His novel, *Melky Byes* (*The Petty Demon*), is a work which symbolizes all the condensed vulgarity of life and remains at the same time a masterpiece of disciplined realism. In some of his later prose-works his romantic symbols are less organic and resemble deliberate allegories.

Balmont and Bryusov were once both regarded as the two strongest pillars of Russian modernism. This attitude has been modified since; but it is only right that their valuable pioneer-work should be recognized and appreciated. Already, in their early books, which are their best, the contrast between the two is striking. Balmont, with his undisciplined expansiveness, and an

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enthusiasm which is more temperamental than passionate, is always ready to plunge into any fleeting moments, emotions, or impressions, and celebrate them in his songs. He is like a wonderful Proteus without a backbone of his own. Perhaps he is not a very great poet, precisely because he is a great poetic Medium reflecting everything with equal readiness and always revelling to the point of delirium in rhythms, harmonies, ornaments, and colours. He is the *moulin à paroles* of modernism, and also its popularizer, its "gorgeous" virtuoso. With all this, he is a great connoisseur of world-poetry and a prolific translator (he translated the whole of Shelley). Bryusov again is more of a modeller than a painter in words. His will is stronger than his imagination. His enthusiasm, too, is intellectual, at times even cerebral. He struggles with words and forms in the obstinate and self-conscious manner of a man who is always sure of his own *métier*. Hence his tendency to return to the discipline and the reserve of the classics. But as the craftsman in him prevails over the poet as such, we find in his verses everything except the "breath of God." His prose, too, is crisp and dry. There is much of a Parnassian eclectic in this conscientious Academician of symbolism.

Deeper and more inward is the work of Vyacheslav Ivánov, Alexander Blok, and Andréi Biely.

III

V. Ivánov belongs by his age (b. 1866) to the older generation; by the trend of his writings he is, however, nearer to the best of the younger. A learned Hellenist, a religious philosopher, and a poet in one, he looks upon art as a kind of theurgy, and upon symbolism as a creation of new myths in the best religious sense. There is, however, something bookish in him, if not even professorial. His verses are at times overloaded with ornaments and Church-Slavonic archaisms. Yet he is a man of great talent who is

striving to embody in new poetic forms a new vision of life. He also wrote essays and translated from the Greek.

Andréi Biely (b. 1880) seems to be divided, like Merezhkóvsky, between religious philosophy and art. Only Biely is a creative temperament and a visionary through and through. Apart from being a poet, a novelist, and a writer of essays, he is an authority on Russian prosody and on verbal technique in general. Yet in all these things he gives the impression of a brilliant and restless experimenter. Influenced by Vladímir Solovyóv (and later by Rudolf Steiner), he is continuously struggling towards something of his own: and whenever he is superficial at all, he is superficial from profundity. He also possesses a sense of humour strong enough to save him from that solemn seriousness which is often more unbearable even than superficiality. His poetry may not be first-rate, but it is full of new technical devices. So is his prose, which is in essence the rhythmical prose of Gógol, only modernized and experimented upon quite consciously, too consciously, in fact. His best novel is his *Silver Dove,* a great achievement in conception and treatment. His later works, *Petersburg, Moscow,* etc., are too involved to be palatable without reservations. They are also permeated by the cardinal Russian dilemmas, such as Europe and Russia, or East and West.

Greater than any of his contemporaries is Alexander Blok (1880-1921). He is one of the best poets in the whole of modern European literature. His early *Verses About the Lady Fair* (1905) is a book of mystical and symbolic love poems addressed to his own transcendental vision of the Eternal Feminine. This vision is easily traceable to Solovyóv's influence, yet Blok expresses it in personal strains which are curiously vague and ethereal in their romantic idealism. Yet gradually a change came over him. He lost his inner vision. The emptiness which ensued could not be filled up by anything, not even by his

profound love of Russia. His symbols and his language became more concrete, but so did his disgust with life. We see this most of all in the poems he wrote between 1909 and 1916. His allegorical plays, too (*A Puppet Show, The Unknown Lady*, etc.), show a hopeless despair which is trying to laugh at itself and cannot. They are full of ominous forebodings. During the revolution he joined the Bolsheviks. In his first enthusiasm over the promised new earth, he wrote his strongest symbolic-realistic poem, *The Twelve;* but this last hope of his was also destroyed before long. He died during the worst years of the new régime.

Blok's poetry is above praise. There is in it less conscious craft and more indisputable genius than in the verses of other symbolists. Some of his poems seem to have been written in a magic trance. And the effect is magical.

IV

In contrast with the obscurity of the symbolists, Michael Kuzmín (b. 1875) preached and practised the "beautiful lucidity," which he embodied in his own chiselled verses. A reaction against symbolism was undertaken in the more sober Petersburg, also by the "Akmeists," whose leader was Nikolái Gumilyóv (b. 1886, and shot by the Bolsheviks in 1921). A pupil of Bryusov and of Gautier, he expressed in his poems all that spirit of courage and of exotic adventure which was so typical of his own life. The Akmeists were grouped round the monthly *Apollón*. Another significant poet of this group is Anna Akhmátova (b. 1889). Her lyrical miniatures are both extremely intimate and extremely reserved. They are discreet and yet palpitating bits of a confession with the accent of a delicately shy woman. No man could have written them. And this is perhaps the best compliment that can be paid to a woman's verses.

Leaving out many names of both schools (Goro-

détsky, Volóshin, Khodasyévitch, Mandelshtám, the severe and ascetic Baltrusháitis, the peasant poet, Klúyev, etc.), we come to the group of Futurists. The word "futurism" was first made popular in Russia by the versatile Igor Severyánin—an illegitimate child of Balmont's Muse and of Gógol's swaggering Khlestakóv, who pretends to dine "only with ministers and ambassadors." He called himself ego-futurist, although his poetry has nothing in common either with Marinetti, or with the Russian futurism proper. The latter has one of its main roots in the "dadaistic" experiments undertaken by Vélimir Khlébnikov (1885-1922), whose quest went so far back that it reached the primary elements of the language. On the basis of these elements he tried to build up new words, new technical tricks, and possibilities. These experiments were then used by his followers in various directions. Mayakóvsky combined them even with Bolshevist propaganda. But this brings us already to the period of revolution.

CHAPTER XIV

THE REVOLUTION AND AFTER

I

Since the revolution of 1917 Russian literature has been split up into that of the *émigrés* and that of Soviet Russia. Among the former are: Merezhkóvsky, Z. Hippius, Balmont, Búnin, Kúprin, Rémizov, and many others. The revolution itself created at first in several poets an almost Messianic enthusiasm, particularly in Blok and in Biely. The hopes of seeing not a renewed Russia only, but a renewed and worthier humanity ran high. The logic of facts was, however, also this time cruelly different from that of the poets. Yet it is surprising that during the first revolutionary years there was a considerable poetic output. The most prominent group was that of the futurists. Their

official leader, Vladímir Mayakóvsky (b. 1892), is a bold experimenter in matters of technique and language. Unfortunately, he has not much content of his own, and, moreover, he cannot sing; instead of singing he only shouts at the top of his voice; and the less he has to say the louder he shouts. He seems to have been predestined to become the poetic "loud-speaker" of the Bolshevist cause—a function which may not be attractive to the Muses, but which certainly develops the voice, even if making it at times rather hoarse. The most talented Russian futurist, Khlébnikov, was concerned only with poetry and died in destitution in 1922; but this, too, was perhaps required by the logic of facts. Others (Aséyev, V. Kaménsky, etc.) are grouped round their monthly organ *Lef*, whose editor is Mayakóvsky. One of the former futurists is also Borís Pasternák. In contrast with Mayakóvsky, he has much to say; but his manner of saying it is so new and uncommon that he is accessible only to the initiated. His best book is his first slender volume, *My Sister Life* (1922).

II

While Sologúb, V. Ivánov, and the majority of the older poets—whether *émigrés* or not—continue to write in their former manner, the revolution produced a group of "proletarian" poets: proletarian by their origin and by their themes (Demyán Biedny, V. Kazín, etc.). Their work has, however, failed so far to become a new revelation. Besides, one must be a cultural dilettante in order to hope that poetry can be reduced to the position of the handmaiden of one single class—no matter whether this class be high or low. More talent and force is in the verses of the peasant poet and "imaginist," Sergéi Esénin (1895-1926), whose best poems smell of the true Russian village. In this he is more immediate and less stylized than the other peasant bard, the symbolist, Nikolái Klúyev. Esénin calls himself the "last poet of the

village." His mentality is, in fact, pastoral. He dreams (in the town cafés) of fields and flocks, of wooden huts, of grazing cows, and laments his bucolic "paradise lost." He has preserved, moreover, even the naïve mythological religiosity of the peasants, which he displays in some of his best verses. His happiest images and similes are taken from the peasant *byt*, the mere reminiscence of which makes him naïve, melancholy, and childlike. But as soon as he loses his naïveté—for example, in his revolutionary and anti-religious poems—he becomes only childish; worse, childishly pretentious. The gulf between the lost village idyll and the actual town, to which he could not adapt himself, was too great. He tried to find a refuge in drink and in various excesses. Finally he committed suicide.

III

As far as recent prose is concerned, there is a fairly energetic literary activity among the *émigrés*. In Soviet Russia, however, fiction was practically dead during the first years of the Bolshevist régime. This unexpected silence was followed by an equally unexpected revival—a revival which is now in progress, and bears promise of good fruit. Without expressing any premature opinion as to its value, we can make a few statements with regard to its general character.

The best younger, post-revolutionary authors of Russia can be divided into two groups: into those who are primarily concerned with a new technique as such, and those who are concentrating upon the narrative as such. The representatives of the first group have been strongly influenced by Rémizov and Biely. Together with their innovations in verbal technique, in style and in construction they are often rather naturalistic in the choice of their subject-matter. We see this, for instance, in the sensational *Bare Year*, by Borís Pilnyák—a description of starving Russia, which should not be recommended to people with

weak nerves. Evgény Zamyátin, Nikoláï Nikítin, Leonid Leónov, Vladímir Lídin, Artyóm Vesyóly, and of the older ones, Michael Prishvín—are all among the prominent experimenters and "ornamentalists." Panteleimón Románov, on the other hand, Michael Zóshchenko, Ilyá Erenburg, Y. Tynyánov, Lydia Seifúllina, Vsevolod Ivánov, and also I. Babel, prefer the more straightforward narratives. There is, however, something which both groups have in common: a new spirit, a kind of youthful energy and a strong will to face the adversities of Fate and Life. The only hero who is superfluous in the New Russian fiction is the former "superfluous man"—that canonized type of the intelligentsia literature. Among the recent literary devices, the attempts to do away with individual heroes and to replace them by masses are as conspicuous as they are symptomatic. The wish to create something new—new in content and form—is perhaps often stronger in these writers than their actual creative power. Meanwhile, the theatres are flourishing, but the dramatic output is poor. Official literary criticism, too, is on a low level, but several independent critics (particularly those of the somewhat one-sided "Formal School") are doing good work.

On the whole, the present state of Russia is that of transition towards a complete transvaluation of values. It looks as if the planetary function of her restless spirit were to prevent the world from becoming petrified in dull capitalist civilization with its cinemas, its revue stars, its bankers, and boxers. It was largely this impulse towards a fuller and worthier life which made her create one of the greatest literatures in the world; and she will probably find in it sources for her further inspiration. It is quite possible that her present trials are only the pangs of a new birth. And a nation which has passed through such an Inferno will certainly have many more things to say than she has said already. Her literature has not only a great yesterday—it also has a great to-morrow.

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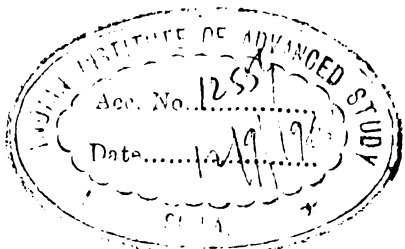

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