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A REVIEW OF FIVE RUSSIAN NOVELS

A Paper
Presented to
Mrs. Black
Ouachita Baptist University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for
Honors Special Studies, Eng. 491

Honors Paper # 78

by
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January 17, 1968

A REVIEW OF FIVE RUSSIAN NOVELS

Regardless of what subject the Russian writer is concerned with, there are two things which almost all Russian novels have in common. One is a great emphasis on Russian virtues and frailties which are common to all men. To read a Russian novel is to become Russian for a few hours and realize that Russians and Americans are not very different after all. The other common trait of Russian novels is an interest in the Russian social structure. This preoccupation crops up both before and after the revolution, but the greatest Russian novels are either actually produced before the Revolution or written about periods before or during the Revolution. The five novels reviewed in this paper have these two traits in common in varying degrees. The first, Smoke, by Ivan Turgenev, is concerned primarily with the aristocracy and its shallowness. The Brothers Karamazov by Fëdor Dostoievsky is concerned with man's groping for beliefs and also with man's potential goodness. Resurrection by Count Leo Tolstoy is a novel of both the inhumanity and the compassion of man. Dry Valley by Ivan Bunin is a novel of the past and its class distinctions. And Quiet Flows the Don by Mikhail Sholokhov is a study of the Cossack--his passions, virtues, and philosophy of life.

The summary of Smoke is as follows: As a very young man, Litvinov was in love with the beautiful young Irina Osinin.

For a long she ignored him, but she finally admitted she loved him. After this admission, she loved him with an intensity that amazed him when he remembered her former coldness toward him. The two finally became engaged, but upon Litvinov's urging, Irina attended a great ball, her first. After this she wrote a letter to Litvinov breaking the engagement, saying she was not worthy of him and that although she was unhappy, to do so, she was leaving for Petersburg. Litvinov was crushed, but succeeded in forgetting Irina. He became engaged to Tatyana, and it is at this point that the novel begins--he suddenly sees Irina. She is married, but she does not love her husband. She begs Litvinov to come see her, and he does. He struggles against his feelings, but they fall in love again anyway. With much anguish he breaks his engagement so that he and Irina can go away together. At the last minute, however, Irina realizes that she cannot leave the society life she is accustomed to leading. Litvinov painfully decides that Irina, the aristocracy, and all the rest of Russia are nothing but smoke. For three years he feels that he has nothing to live for, but after working on his small farm with the peasants for awhile, his spirit is restored. He experiences the first delight he has felt in years when he asks Tatyana if he can visit her, and she cordially invites him. As soon as he sees her, he realizes that he still loves her, and she forgives him completely.

There are several important ideas in Smoke. One is embodied in Litvinov's discovery that nothing in civilization is lasting, no matter how vital it seems to be. This

is shown quite plainly when Irina's love vanishes as quickly as it had appeared, both in Litvinov's youth and later. Another idea Turgenev expresses is that of the importance of one being where he belongs. This idea is developed through the experiences of Litvinov. The first time Litvinov fell in love with Irina, he was happy, and he was miserable when she broke the engagement with him. But after he had forgotten her and had become engaged to Tatyana, he had again found his place in life. For this reason, he was miserable during his second courtship of Irina, and he was not happy again until he was reunited with Tatyana. Litvinov was unhappy in the tinselled aristocratic world also; he experienced peace of mind only when working on the land, using it as an antidote to the poison of Irina's world. Irina, however, belonged to this world and was at least honest enough to admit it. The final and most obvious point Turgenev is making in Smoke is that of the superficiality of the aristocracy in Russia before the Revolution. The aristocracy is represented as utterly repulsive in its self-centeredness, its vanity, and its utter uselessness to society.

The political discussions at the beginning of Smoke are neither convincing nor interesting, and the language sounds stilted and contrived. Only when Turgenev begins writing about Litvinov's experiences with Irina does he write naturally. The detailed portrayal of Litvinov's emotions as he finds himself loving Irina again are especially believable and are touching as well. The simplicity with which Turgenev describes the visit with Tatyana at the end of the novel is perfect--he neither

sentimentalizes nor ridicules. Turgenev has a knack for creating empathy for his characters; he does this in Smoke a little less well than in First Love, but much better than in Fathers and Sons. This, coupled with an interesting plot, makes Smoke a compelling novel.

The Brothers Karamazov is a novel about three brothers: Ivan, Dmitri, and Alyosha. Dmitri begins the plot by telling his gentle brother Alyosha of the two women with whom he is involved; one is wealthy and one is little better than a prostitute. The former, Katya, was the daughter of Dmitri's lieutenant colonel, and this is how he had met her. Dmitri discovered a deficit in the old man's account, and told Katya's sister that he would make up the difference if she and her aunt would persuade Katya to go to him secretly. Katya went, and although he had hated her when she walked in the door because of her nobility, Dmitri could not take advantage of her. He gave her the money, opened the door, and bowed respectfully. He had loved her from that moment on. Later, after Katya had become an heiress to a fortune and paid Dmitri back, she wrote him a letter which said that she loved him and wanted to marry him. They became engaged, but he met Grushenka and fell in love with her also. When Katya gave him 3,000 roubles to post, he spent it on Grushenka. It is at this point that the novel begins moving forward. Fyodor, the brothers' unscrupulous father, is found murdered, and all evidence points to Dmitri. In the first place, Dmitri hated his father, and had made threats on his life. To make matters worse, 3,000 roubles were stolen from the murdered man, and Dmitri had spent quite a few roubles

on the night of the murder. He had also tried to borrow this sum on the same night. The old servant said that it was Dmitri who knocked him down outside of the Karamazov house, and that Dmitri was running away. He was covered with blood when the police arrested him. But Dmitri claims that although he had gone to the house with the intention of killing his father, something had kept him from doing so, and he had run away, knocking the old servant down. He also says that he did not touch the money, but that the money he spent had been the remainder of Katya's 3,000 roubles. He says that he had worn it in a rag around his neck, intending to return it, but he had gone on and spent it because he had intended to commit suicide. However, since he does not have any of the rag left, and since no one else knew about it, he cannot prove that his story is true. Katya finds out about all this, and is ready to help Dmitri; she wants to save him from himself. Also at this time, Grushenka realizes that she really loves Dmitri, and with Alyosha's help, undergoes a transformation for the better. Dmitri's trial begins. At one point, he almost is proved to be the innocent man he actually is--before his death, the real murderer, who was supposedly under an epileptic attack at the time of the crime, admits his guilt to Ivan, Dmitri's other brother. But even though he gave Ivan the stolen money, the case is confused in court because Ivan is delirious at the time he is called for a witness, and keeps insisting that he is the murderer. Katya suddenly hysterically produces a letter from Dmitri saying that he killed his father, and Dmitri is found guilty and sentenced to hard labor in Siberia. To atone

for her part in getting Dmitri sentenced, Katya decides to get Dmitri and Grushenka to America. Katya and Dmitri finally let each other go, and Dmitri loves Grushenka totally for the first time.

The most valuable aspect of The Brothers Karavazov is its richness of personalities. Even the less important characters are sharply delineated and completely realistic. Ilusha, a schoolboy, is appealing both in his loyalty to his father and in his complete selflessness. His half-demented mother is pitiful and yet not repulsive in her childishness. Lise's mother is completely scatter-brained and is always worried about something. But the best characters are the ~~main~~ ones. Grushenka is bewitching in her complexity--she is a teasing child at one moment, a malicious shrew at another, and a loving, compassionate woman at still another. Katya is a person whose nobility is largely emotional, almost hysterical, rather than intellectual. She falls in love with Dmitri because she wants to save him from himself, not because she loves him for himself. Dmitri himself is a paradox--his actions and desires always seem to be opposed to one another. He wants to prove worthy of Katya, yet he squanders the money she entrusted to him; he spends the night of the murder drinking with Grushenka, and he writes Katya a letter admitting guilt to a crime he did not commit. He knows Katya is a better person than Grushenka, but he is determined to marry Grushenka. All of his actions combine to show his inner confusion. Alyosha, his brother, has no such confusion within him. He believes in God, and he also believes that the good in man will ultimately prevail. He realizes that there is evil

in the world, but he thinks that there is a reason for all the evil man does. He himself is completely good, and yet he has compassion and a true understanding for those who are not. He is not a prig; he is gentle, thoughtful, and the possessor of a good sense of humor. His purpose in the novel seems to be that of acting as a stabilizing agent--his actions remain the same in all circumstances, and this is rather comforting to the reader enmeshed in all the sordid details of the novel.

The Brothers Karamazov holds the reader's attention completely because of the interesting contrasts--the atheism of Dmitri with the Christianity of Alyosha, the nobility of Katya with the earthiness of Grushenka, and the hopes of Dmitri with his reality. The most important contrasts are obviously the first two; the third is inseparable with them. Dmitri's struggles with himself and with Alyosha over whether or not God exists form the basis for his uncertainty in all areas. This uncertainty is made even more poignant and intense because the reader automatically compares him with the serene, purposeful Alyosha. The second contrast is a basic one in the novel also. Katya and Grushenka would be rivals no matter what their personalities were. But two people more unlike each other would be hard to imagine. Katya is concerned primarily with the ideal aspects of life; her love for Dmitri reflects this in its extreme idealism. She wants to help him, to make a better person of him--the person he could be. On the other hand, Grushenka is down-to-earth and practical. She loves Dmitri for what he is, not what he could be, and she loves him physically as well as spiritually--perhaps more than spiritually.

Dmitri is in love with both the women because they represent his two selves which are at odds with each other. If this is true, then Grushenka becomes more nearly a complement to Dmitri when she decides to become a better person because she combines realism with idealism. In a symbolic sense, the trial becomes a catharsis for both Dmitri and Grushenka, and they emerge as complete people.

The summarization of a Tolstoy novel is no easy task because one is forced for brevity's sake to leave out the endless diversions and subplots that hold much of the interest of the novel. This summary of Resurrection is handicapped in this manner, but is as complete as possible. The plot is as follows: The prominent Prince Dmitry Ivanitch Nehlūdof is obligated to act as a juror for the trial of three persons accused of poisoning the merchant Smelhof. Nehlūdof discovers with horror that one of them, the prostitute Katerina (or Katushka) Māslova is a woman with whom he had once been deeply in love, but he had seduced her and left her, later putting her out of his mind completely. In the course of the trial, he decides that although she gave the merchant the poison, she did so in complete innocence, thinking that it was a sleeping potion. The other jurors believe this also, and they return the verdict of "guilty", explaining that they believe she administered the poison without knowing what it was. However, because they do not add the phrase "without intent to take life" to the verdict, Katushka is sentenced to hard labor in Siberia. Nehludof, who has experienced an intense spiritual rebirth as a result of his self-examination after seeing Katushka,

is determined to save her in order to atone for his wrongdoing. He goes to her and explains this, and tells her he wants to marry her. He then tries to get her sentence repealed, but fails. He decides to follow her to Siberia and convince her to marry him. Before he goes, he tries to ease his peasants' poor conditions, but he does not succeed as well as he had hoped because the peasants do not trust him. On the way to Siberia, Nehlúdog becomes increasingly aware of the horrible conditions that exist among the prisoners. He also sees the wrongs incurred by the serf system. Katushka has meanwhile fallen in love with one of the other prisoners, and they ask Nehlúdog if they can marry. He, of course, consents, disappointed but happy that Katushka is feeling a genuine love again at last. Later, Nehlúdog has the sudden clear insight that if man would follow the commandments given by God, he would eliminate evil. The book ends with Nehlúdog's resolution to put God's laws into practice.

Tolstoy intended his novel to be the story of the unfolding of a man's soul, and the book is partially autobiographical in this respect, because Tolstoy experienced a similar soul revival. Tolstoy had much preferred this novel to any of his earlier works, but the characterization and plot are not nearly equal to those of Anna Karenina and War and Peace. None of the characters of Resurrection are as complex or as realistic as those of these earlier novels; Katushka, who could have been as great a character as any Tolstoy created, is developed up to a point and then dropped almost completely. Nehlúdog, the only other important character, is too perfect to be believable.

The true value of the novel is neither in the spirituality that Tolstoy was so enthralled with nor in the characterization that is so compelling in his earlier novels; rather, it lies in the revelation of the conditions existing in Tolstoy's time. The novel has careful description of prison and peasant conditions as they existed, and it also shows the selfish attitude of the officials and the aristocracy responsible for these conditions. Tolstoy shows, perhaps without meaning to do so, that mere reform was useless in this situation--although Nehlúdor was influential, he got little cooperation and almost no results in his efforts to help the people. He reveals that some sort of revolution in Russia was not only inevitable, but that it was also very necessary.

Although Resurrection is slow-moving and weak in plot-construction, it is not a poor novel. The weakest facet of the book is the spiritual side. The spiritual rebirth of Nehludof is unrealistic because it seems totally inconceivable that a man like Nehlúdor could ever be so callous and frivolous that he would need as great a revival as the one he underwent. Both his seduction of Katushka and the position he enjoys in society are incompatible with his nature. This sort of change might possibly take place in life, but a portrayal of it in a novel is almost certainly doomed to being tainted with unreality or sentimentality unless it is handled extremely carefully. Tolstoy was unable to do this, probably because the experience was so personal. However, the novel does have good points, the most important being its air of social reform. Resurrection is the kind of novel that can make the reader furious about

man's inhumanity to other men. Tolstoy talks about the injustices suffered by the criminals and equally by the innocent with a strangely objective air; it is only when Nehlúdorff observes what is happening that Tolstoy expresses any emotion. But he manages in this calm manner to capture a picture of injustice revealing the ease with which it can exist when people are unconcerned.

Dry Valley by Ivan Bunin is a short novel which is actually a reminiscence about ~~Nathalia~~, the main character. Her parents had died when she was small. As a child she had lived at Dry Valley and had been treated almost as though she were one of the family. Life had been smooth until Petr Petrovitch, the master, returned from the army. Nathalia fell in love with him, and his daughter Tonia also fell in love. Nathalia stole a little silver mirror that belonged to Petr, and although she was miserable because of the theft, she was too fascinated with the mirror to return it. Eventually she was found out, and Petr ordered her hair cut and sent her away. Nathalia was crushed not only by the disgrace, but also because she was being sent away from the only home she had known. Even after this, however, she could not forget Petr. While she was gone, Tonia went insane because her lover left her; and Petr remarried. Eventually Nathalia was allowed to come back. After flying into senseless rages at every little thing, Tonia accepted Nathalia and they became friends of a sort. One day a man named Iushka drifted into Dry Valley and went to work there. He was completely repugnant to Nathalia, and she was horrified when one day he told

her that he would come to her one night and that if she resisted him, he would burn the house down. She had felt that something like this would happen, because she had had symbolic dreams foretelling it. Finally he came during an electrical storm, and he kept coming night after night. She submitted to him resignedly, knowing that there was nothing to be done. Before long, he drifted on, leaving Nathalia pregnant. She later had a miscarriage, and then her life settled into the rut in which it remained the rest of her life. After she and Tonia visited the bones of a Saint in Voronezh, Tonia calmed down, although she was still insane. Nathalia was reconciled to her life, even to seeing Petr occasionally. But when Petr was killed, Nathalia kissed the dead face over and over again, laughing and crying uncontrollably. The novel ends with the author's reflections on the bygone era of Nathalia, and on the links that connect the past with the present.

The most valuable part of Dry Valley is its symbolism. Dry Valley itself is symbolic of the old life before the revolution. This life to Bunin was beautiful, but it was built on illusions and half-truths as well as on the solid, never-changing land. Bunin represents life in general as an endless succession of generations all bound together unequivocally by the land. Another symbol, one which recurs several times, is that of the owl. The owl can be equated with the ever-present fearful aspects of life; Tonia fears the owl's cry, and years later, the children fear the same cry. The storms that gather at Dry Valley are also symbolic of the dark, unknown aspects of life, and Iushka is somehow bound up in them. Another symbol,

one which is purely a symbol, is the dreaming of Nathalia. The last paragraph in the novel is a list of symbols: The gilded cross can be equated with religion or the Church. The rye is, of course, nature itself, and the old, white nag is doubtlessly symbolic of death--the white horse has long been a symbol of death. Bunin says, in effect, that these three things are the links of men throughout the ages--all men believe in something, all men are forced to depend on nature for sustenance, and all men must face the reality of death. Dry Valley is a picture of a bygone age, and yet this is an age which can be brought back in the imagination by the contemplation of the three constants mentioned above. The novel has a dreamlike air which tones down even the most painful happenings in the novel and makes them seem unimportant. It is as if Bunin is saying that everything that seems important will pass; time will erase the most heavy marks humans make.

The most appealing part of Dry Valley is its hauntingly beautiful imagery. Bunin's choice of words have a dreamy, hazy effect on the reader, and yet it produces concrete sensations. One sentence will illustrate this perfectly:

The wind, running through the garden, brought to us the silken rustling of the birches with their satiny-white trunks, maculated with black, and their wide-flung green branches; the wind, sighing and rustling, came running from the fields, and a glaucous-golden oriole would emit its raucous and joyous cry, darting like a wedge over the white flowers, in pursuit of the chattering jackdaws that, with their numerous kindred, used to inhabit the ruined chimneys and dark garrets, where there was an odor of old bricks, and the golden light fell in streaks through the skylights upon mounds of violet-grey ashes.

This use of sensuous imagery coupled with the creation of

meaningful symbols make Bunin seem almost like a poet rather than a novelist, but his dialogues are completely natural as are the narratives which reveal Nathalia's thoughts. The picture created of the past is pleasant in its general impression, but it actually reveals some extremely unpleasant realities of life. Perhaps the effect is softened because the novel makes it clear in the beginning that the story is in the past. The story seems rather transient because the reader realizes from the outset that no matter what the past has been, the present is set. At any rate, Dry Valley is a most interesting and intriguing novel, even though it does not attempt to answer any of life's ever-present mysteries, but is content merely to show them as clearly as possible.

And Quiet Flows the Don is a novel about the Cossack in the period surrounding the Revolution. The first section of the book, "Peace", provides a clear picture of the Cossack way of life. It tells of the Melekhov family--Pantaleimon, the father; Piotr, the son; his wife Daria; Gregor, the younger son; and Dunia, the daughter. Gregor is in love with Aksinia, the wife of Stepan, a neighbor who is at the Cossack camp. At first Aksinia resists Gregor, but finally she gives in and eventually loves him more than Stepan. When Stepan comes back, he finds out about the affair and beats Aksinia, but she still sees Gregor whenever she can. Gregor meanwhile marries Natalia and takes her to his home, as is the custom. But he cannot forget Aksinia, and they eventually run away together. For awhile they work at a rich landowner's estate, but Gregor leaves to fight the Germans. Natalia goes back to her own home

after Gregor and Aksinia run away together, and, tortured by the rumors about her, she tries to kill herself, but succeeds only in mutilating herself by cutting a tendon in her neck. The second section, "War", tells about Gregor's life in the army, and Aksinia's life on the estate. Gregor is repulsed by the savagery with which the enemy is slaughtered, but he finds that he is able to kill as many men as anyone else. He gets wounded, and at home, Aksinia's child dies. Because of her loneliness and unhappiness, Aksinia becomes Eugene's mistress (Eugene is the son of the landowner). Gregor returns and finds this out, which makes him go back to Natalia. The third section of the book, "Revolution", is basically a series of episodes dealing with the war--its savagery, the duplicity of the officers, and the growing dissatisfaction of the soldiers. The fourth section, "Civil War", is about the war between the Red Guards and the White Guards. The plot centers around two young Red Guards, Anna and Bunchuk. Both of these young people are idealistic, and they inevitably fall in love. Anna gives herself to Bunchuk freely, and they are idyllically happy for a time. Anna becomes pregnant, and Bunchuk is happy about it, even though Anna is worried. Soon after this, Anna is killed while bravely leading some Red Guards into battle. Bunchuk is crushed, but soon after this, he and many other Red Guards are executed by the Cossacks, who have been persuaded to side with the White Guards in order to preserve their land.

The chief value of And Quiet Flows the Don is that it can be a great help in understanding the ease with which the Revolutionary forces in Russia took over. The Cossack felt that

he was a true master, and he wanted to do away with the middle class. He resented the Czarist government for sending him to war. He wanted peace, and he thought the Bolsheviks would give it to him. He also thought it would be good for everyone to have land. Up to this point, he was exactly like the Russian peasant, except that he felt himself a master independent of Russia. But there was one major difference--the Cossack loved his land. He liked the idea of sharing other people's land, but when it came to his own, he balked at the idea. The Cossack was swayed by one thing only--the power of persuasion. A parallel can be drawn between the Cossacks and the Russian peasants on this point also, probably; at least one can reasonably infer such a conclusion.

And Quiet Flows the Don is not the sort of novel which can be read and understood by immature readers. It deals with the animalistic side of man in a great portion of the content, but it does not do so in order to appeal to this side of the reader. The novel is certainly not a beautiful one; brutality and death are described minutely in their most horrible aspects. It is only in the love of Anna and Bunchuk that a measure of beauty is added, and this is short-lived. There is not much hope in the novel, either; the Cossacks are clearly a savagely independent race destined to be ruled by the more complex thinkers because the Cossacks primitive thinking and uninhibited actions and reactions are easily controlled. However, the Don River itself affords a little hope in that it symbolizes the continuity of the Cossack

way of life. It is the Cossack's father in many old songs, and the land is his mother, and in his loyalty to the Don, the Cossack can never cease to be until the river ceases to be. Another symbol of this continuity is the incident in the last page of the novel; A female Bustard lays her eggs on the grave of one of the Cossacks. All in all, And Quiet Flows the Don is not an enjoyable book, but it is important for the insight it gives of a people of whom very little is and ever will be known.

The Russian Novel encompasses every aspect of man--his birth, his love, his wars, his inner conflicts, his death--with absolute frankness and sometimes with captivating matter-of-factness. One feels like a Russian while reading a Russian novel, so detailed are the portrayal of emotions and the analysis of thoughts. More important than this, however, is the fact that it can be truthfully said that the Russian novel is almost always more than a novel--it is life itself in epic proportions.