Introduction: Before They Were Titans

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Imagine nineteenth-century Russian literature without Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. Its stature would rest largely upon the poetry of Aleksandr Pushkin and Mikhail Lermontov; the short stories, plays, and one novel of Nikolai Gogol; the novels of Ivan Turgenev and Ivan Goncharov; and hundreds of stories and sketches by Anton Chekhov. However extraordinary many of those works are—and however many excellent second- and third-tier authors of nineteenth-century Russia there were—they would not elevate Russian literature to rank among the handful of the world's preeminent literary traditions. The great works of Fyodor Dostoevsky and Lev Tolstoy do that almost by themselves. Symbolist Andrei Bely dubbed the two of them "bogatyrs" ["богатыри"], larger-than-life warrior heroes of Slavic folklore.[1] Yet they rise even above that status. They are the Titans of Russian literature.

But they also in many ways differ dramatically from each other. As Caryl Emerson has observed, by the 1920s it had become "almost a cliché" in Russia to describe them as intellectual and artistic opposites. Dostoevsky, she says, was viewed as "a mystic, the apocalyptic poet of the underground, the celebrator of the trap of human consciousness" whose characters "live on the edge of perpetual crisis" and whose plots "rely heavily on madness, murder, and

suicide."[2] By contrast, Tolstoy was seen as "the teacher of life. His is the sphere of *zhivaia zhizn'* ('living life'), an above-ground and exuberant immersion in nature, physicality, and organic process."[3] This difference has become pretty much the common view of these two authors in the West as well, and any reader can see the reasons for it.

The eminent critic George Steiner exemplifies this perception in his emblematically entitled study *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky*. While acknowledging "the characteristic magnificence of the art of [both] Tolstoy and Dostoevsky" achieved through the imaginative scope of their greatest novels, Steiner sees the two "radically opposed" regarding the largest subjects they took on: human history, fate, and "the mystery of God."[4] He identifies Dostoevsky with the dramatic depth, psychological penetration, and moral passion of Shakespeare, which gave rise in Dostoevsky to an intensive subjectivity, to an "assault" on order, and "a sense of nightmare" in human existence that pays "homage to the absurd."[5] Steiner identifies Tolstoy with the epic breadth, psychological elevation, and moral dispassion of Homer, leading Tolstoy to a detached objectivity, a sense of harmonious order or "grand design," and an "essential sanity" rooted in an elemental humanism.[6] Amidst many such critics contrasting the two authors, we can point to Dmitrii Merezhkovsky, who summarily asserted: "If in the literature of all ages and people we wished to find the artist who was the most opposite of Tolstoy, we would have to point to Dostoevsky."[7]

It is not difficult to find sources of the contrast between Dostoevsky and Tolstoy in their lives. Dostoevsky, born in 1821, seven years before Tolstoy, was the son of a strict Russian Orthodox doctor and a merchant's daughter. Although not impoverished as a child—his father had been awarded a small estate outside of Moscow that yielded some income—he lived an adult life marked by emotional upheavals, prolonged imprisonment and exile, chronic poverty, recurring bouts of epilepsy, and compulsive gambling, until he gained a measure of emotional stability and relative financial security only in the decade before he died in 1881, at the age of fifty-nine. In contrast, Tolstoy was born in 1828 into an aristocratic family, and he enjoyed good health and ample wealth throughout most of his life. He did suffer troubles, but these were largely troubles of his own making: he belonged to the elite and yet strove to live like a peasant; he was an innate sensualist and yet sought to behave like a monk; he preached universal brotherhood but emotionally tormented his wife; he

fathered a large family but then died in isolation in 1910 at the age of eighty-two, having left his ancestral home to seek the spiritual peace he could never find.

And yet, as different as the lives of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy proved to be, their beginnings exhibit some striking similarities. Each author had lost both parents before his literary career began; each was unsure whether or not he wanted to devote his life to literature and flirted with a career as a journalist; each spent much of his early twenties in a large city—Dostoevsky in St. Petersburg, Tolstoy in Moscow—liberally indulging in the youthful urban male decadence of drinking, gambling, and prostitutes. In addition, each started by writing prose fiction in his early twenties and enjoyed widespread initial acclaim for his first published work, only to have the second work disappointingly received by critics and readers alike. Subsequently, they each experienced abrupt breaks in their literary careers, but then resumed them and rose to the pinnacle of literary greatness. The early writings preceding those breaks also show some provocative kinships, even while suggesting the divergent routes the two authors would eventually take on their way to literary greatness.

Still, why bother with the early works of any major author? For many reasons: how those authors started out, how they experimented with literary forms and contents, what they chose to adopt and what to reject, how they managed influences upon them, how they transmitted distinguishing characteristics of themselves, how they hinted at works to come and how they did not. But the early works of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy deserve attention for more than any or all of those reasons. They warrant reading and study for themselves as literature. Youthful creations as they are, they have much to say on their own. To encourage more attention to what they say is one principal purpose of the essays in this volume.

Yet in truth, it must be granted that if Dostoevsky and Tolstoy had ended their literary careers leaving only their early works, they would have remained relatively minor, if promising, authors. For it would be difficult to argue that the early works have the breadth and depth of the major novels. The early works are more inconstant in narrative style and tone, slighter in characterization, simpler in plot, and shallower in philosophy than the later works. They are, after all, the writings of young men and fledgling authors. But, that said, the early works are well worth exploring for several reasons. They played formative roles in the two writers' literary careers. They display Dostoevsky and Tolstoy experimenting

with character types, literary genres, ideas, and narrative styles, drawing on their own experiences, and testing other authors' influence on them. Indeed, what William Mills Todd III and Justin Weir say in their essay on "The Raid" could be said of any of the early works treated here: they give "a remarkable account of the gestation of an artistic consciousness developing in response to both philosophical and narrative challenges," in which we can observe "some of the exciting chaos" caused by youthful experimentation with "aesthetic and professional decisions."[8]

Some of these experiments might be seen to typify any young author searching for a literary identity. Others might reflect the youth of the modern Russian literary tradition itself, barely half a century old, in which genres were still in flux—for instance, Pushkin would label his narrative poem *Eugene Onegin* a "novel in verse" and Gogol would dub his novel *Dead Souls* a "narrative poem." Still others may be said to contain seeds of the great authors that Dostoevsky and Tolstoy would become. The search for foreshadowing is probably the most common reason for reading the early works of any major author. Who could resist reading them with that in mind?

Nonetheless, the early works should not be reduced merely to "the laboratory in which the ideology and techniques of the great novels were worked out,"[9] which risks what Gary Saul Morson has labeled "backshadowing," as Caryl Emerson has pointed out in her perceptive Afterword, or "foreshadowing after the fact," that is, assuming that "the past contains legible signs of the future" that were "clearest in light of what happened later, but they were legible from the first."[10] In her essay included in this volume, Anne Lounsbery refers to that erroneous assumption applied to literature as the "already-always" fallacy. This fallacy induces readers to think they can detect with assurance in an author's immature works the shape of an author's mature thought and art, misperceiving future achievements as *faits accomplis*, as if, for instance, to say, "Look, there he is—it's Tolstoy! He's already *himself*!"[11] And as readers of *War and Peace* know, Tolstoy himself became openly hostile to such a linear, evolutionary view of events, past and present.

It could be more worthwhile to perceive early works in the light of what Morson has called "sideshadowing," which means "the sense that actual events might just as well not have happened" because *"something else* was possible." That "something else" "casts a shadow 'from the side,' that is, from the other

possibilities" implicit in an early work that might have shaped later writings but did not. For literature, these "unrealized but realizable" possibilities can be experiments with narrative style or tone, plot, characterization, or theme that an author appeared to embark upon, but declined to follow, in whole or in part.[12] Hence Dostoevsky, for instance, could have sustained throughout his mature works the somewhat sentimental tone of *Poor Folk*, the comic style of "Another Man's Wife," or the female narrative voice of *Netochka Nezvanova*, but he did not. And Tolstoy could have carried throughout his mature works, say, the lyricism of *Childhood*, the reportorial style of *The Sevastopol Tales*, or the philosophical uncertainties of "A Landowner's Morning," but he did not.

Such roads not taken lend as distinctive an interest to early works as do any purported foreshadowing of things to come. For they point to what authors reject while seeking a literary identity with their own voice and vision. And that can say as much about them as does what they embrace. Later, literary maturation and life events set authors on the roads they will eventually take—although not necessarily to the end, as Tolstoy unpredictably proved in the last twenty-five years of his life. But who can tell what might have happened otherwise, given the circumstances of their beginnings?

In 1840, Dostoevsky found himself an orphan in St. Petersburg at age nineteen, enrolled in the Naval Military Engineering Institute, his father having died the previous year and his mother two years earlier. Promoted to the rank of ensign in 1841, he moved away from the Institute, continuing his military studies but devoting much of his time to attending the theater, ballet, opera, drinking, gambling, and generally leading the life of cosmopolitan *bon vivant*. And, as biographer Joseph Frank remarks, that life was expensive: "All of these amusements, of course, required a liberal supply of funds; and Dostoevsky was chronically short of cash. This was not so much poverty as a careless prodigality… . For Dostoevsky received his salary as an officer as well as a large share of the income from his family estate… . But he was always in debt" — a condition that would plague him almost throughout his life.[13] However, while carrying on this profligate life, he nonetheless appears to have nurtured fantasies, if not serious plans, of becoming a writer.

It was partly to earn money that Dostoevsky first acted on his amorphous literary ambitions. He took up the task of translating Balzac's *Eugenie Grandet*, and he tried writing historical dramas of his own—one he called *Mary Stuart*,

another was his version of *Boris Godunov*—but these came to nothing. Then, in 1844, after resigning his military commission, he devoted himself to writing the epistolary novella *Poor Folk* (see Lewis Bagby's "Agency, Desire, and Fate in *Poor Folk*"), which was published in 1846. To his surprise, the most influential Russian literary critic of the day, Vissarion Belinsky, highly praised this debut work, befriended Dostoevsky, and drew him into Belinsky's own social circle. Dostoevsky thereupon resolved to dedicate himself to the literary life.

However, his next work, also published in 1846, the post-Gogolian, proto-absurdist novella *The Double* (see Gary Saul Morson's "Me and My Double: Selfhood, Consciousness, and Empathy in *The Double*"), was dismissed by Belinsky, who wrote a review article that, as Dostoevsky bitterly complained, "certified the total shipwreck of [my] literary reputation."[14] Discouraged, but not daunted, he took up journalism the next year as a necessary source of income, authoring several *feuilletons*, or short chatty essays on current cultural events. Yet, despite his literary discouragement, he continued to write and publish works of fiction, including the deceptively slight, humorous stories "A Jealous Husband" and "Another Man's Wife" (see Susanne Fusso's "Husbands and Lovers: Vaudeville Conventions in 'Another Man's Wife,' 'A Jealous Husband,' and *The Eternal Husband*") and the enigmatic novella *White Nights* (see Dale Peterson's "Dostoevsky's *White Nights*: Memoir of a Petersburg Pathology"), all in 1848. Although these works received at best mixed reviews, they kept him writing. Meanwhile, he also cultivated new circles of friends and acquaintances with whom he shared dinners and conversations on many subjects, such as literature and music, as well as social and political ideals, while falling further into a life of disarray and what had become consuming debt.

Unfortunately, the tsar at the time, Nikolai I (1825-55), psychologically scarred at the outset of his reign by the Decembrist Rebellion of young aristocrats and by the Revolution of 1830 in France, was fearful of anything that suggested political dissent. From the beginning of his reign, he had strengthened literary censorship and created a network of secret police and spies; when revolutions against monarchs erupted across Europe in 1848, he ordered the arrest of anyone even loosely associated with activities or groups that might be considered subversive.

Although Dostoevsky was no political revolutionary, he was something of an idealist and vehemently opposed serfdom. He had even discussed with

like-minded friends setting up a clandestine printing press to disseminate literature condemning that dehumanizing practice. Such activities got him into trouble. Just as he was beginning to serially publish his first—very apolitical—novel, which retrospectively portrays early stages in the life of a young female opera singer (see my "Dostoevsky's Orphan Text: *Netochka Nezvanova*), he was arrested in 1849. Subjected to an emotionally shattering mock execution, he was subsequently sentenced to hard labor at a prison camp in Siberia, followed by mandated service in the Siberian army. He would return to St. Petersburg in 1859 a psychologically and spiritually changed man. That ten-year period of literary silence marked the end of the first phase of Dostoevsky's career as a writer.

The comparable formative period for Tolstoy commenced not long after Dostoevsky was sent to prison. The orphan Tolstoy, at age twenty-two, having dropped out of the University of Kazan, had returned in 1850 to the family estate to undertake its management. But his youthful self-indulgence soon induced him to shirk those responsibilities and to spend much of his time in Moscow and St. Petersburg drinking, gambling, and visiting prostitutes. As Andrew Wachtel has observed, "Although [Tolstoy] had harbored vague literary plans for years," in the early 1850s "there was as yet no sign that he would become a professional writer… . He had tried his hand at a number of occupations and had, in his own estimation and in that of his family, failed miserably at all of them. He had not gotten a university degree, his efforts to reorganize the family estate had produced no results, [and] he had accumulated gambling debts."[15]

So, like Dostoevsky in the early 1840s, Tolstoy, ten years later, at loose ends and in debt, also wound up in the military. But unlike Dostoevsky, he actually experienced the rigors of real military life. In 1851, he joined his brother Nikolai in the Russian Army stationed in the Caucasus. That same year, while recuperating in a military hospital in Tiflis, Tolstoy began to write what would become his first published work, the semi-autobiographical *Childhood* (see Robin Feuer Miller's "The Creative Impulse in *Childhood*: The Dangerous Beauty of Games, Lies, Betrayal, and Art").

Buoyed by the critical enthusiasm for *Childhood* when it was published in 1852, Tolstoy decided that he would write a series of "Caucasian sketches," which included the ambiguous and ambivalent portrayal of martial life in

"The Raid" (see William Mills Todd III's and Justin Weir's "Fear and Loathing in the Caucasus: Tolstoy's 'The Raid' and Russian Journalism"). Still unsure what type of writer to become, he considered working as a military journalist, but instead, in 1854-55, he published a series of fictionalized scenes based on his own experiences during the Crimean War, the openly anti-war *Sevastopol Tales* (see Liza Knapp's "Tolstoy's *Sevastopol Tales*: Pathos, Sermon, Protest, and Stowe"). However, although he had already envisioned writing long novels, including a three-part extension of *Childhood* and a novel about a Russian landowner, he did not produce one. He did publish two shorter sequels to *Childhood*, entitled *Boyhood* and *Youth*, as well as the novella *The Cossacks* and a handful of short stories—among them the thought-provoking tale of a conflicted serf owner "A Landowner's Morning" (see Anne Lounsbery's "On Cultivating One's Own Garden with Other People's Labor: Serfdom in 'A Landowner's Morning'")—over the course of the 1850s, but none of these works received the critical praise given to *Childhood*.

In late 1855, Tolstoy returned to St. Petersburg, but he remained uncommitted to the writer's life. As Boris Eikhenbaum points out, Tolstoy's writing was "constantly interrupted by other plans."[16] Besides that, Tolstoy felt insufficiently appreciated by readers and critics alike. He noted in his diary in 1857, "My reputation has fallen or barely squeaks and I was greatly distressed within."[17] In that dejected mood, he left Russia for Western Europe in 1858. Upon his return later that year, he wrote to his sister, "It seems I will never write again."[18] And he turned his prodigious energies from literature to what he had decided would be a more useful and rewarding enterprise—educating peasants.

Tolstoy had begun conjuring up his own pedagogical theories years earlier. Now he put those theories into practice, founding a school on his family estate in 1859, taking a second trip to Europe in 1860-61 in order to study European teaching models and methods, and publishing provocative pedagogical articles in the short-lived journal that he launched in 1862 (see Ilya Vinitsky's "Tolstoy's Lessons: Pedagogy as Salvation"). This fervent embrace of pedagogy might have ended Tolstoy's literary career, but it did not. Instead, it was more of a fruitful pause in that career, which he resumed in 1863.

The three-year hiatus between the uncertain first phase of Tolstoy's literary career and the mature writings that followed echoed, albeit it in a briefer, less

tortured form, the ten-year break between Dostoevsky's early and mature careers. After those periods away from writing fiction, both authors started anew with more confidence in their intellectual and stylistic literary identities, and ready to give voice, in their own distinctive ways, to big, bold ideas, which they did in some of the biggest, boldest, most powerful novels the world has ever seen.

Arranged chronologically, in order of publication of the primary work examined, these essays offer insightful elucidations of works by Dostoevsky and Tolstoy written in first decade of the literary life of each author. For Dostoevsky, that decade was the 1840s; for Tolstoy, it was the 1850s. Some of these works are known and read outside scholarly circles; most are not. Some have received a fair amount of literary critical attention; most have not. None has received the attention from readers or critics that later works, especially the major novels, have attracted. But they all played formative roles in the two authors' lives on the paths to literary renown before the breaks in those lives that would give them surer footing.

On Dostoevsky's works of the 1840s: Lewis Bagby delves into the complex interplay of human desires and individual agency in *Poor Folk* to reveal the limits imposed on freedom and self-control by misperception and self-deception, as well as circumstances; Gary Saul Morson sets forth the existential quandaries and absurdities of *The Double* in uncovering vexing complexities of consciousness and empathy; Susanne Fusso exposes the unexpectedly dark and violent subtexts in "The Jealous Husband" and "Another Man's Wife" that underlie even these two seemingly slight comic short stories; Dale Peterson detects in the evocative novella *White Nights* a searing critique of urban dwellers' psychological disorders, nourished by a dreamlike city; and I elucidate the evolution of the moral imagination in the eponymous character of *Netochka Nezvanova* to show that Dostoevsky early on rooted morality in creativity, rather than in religion or rationality.

On Tolstoy's works of the 1850s: Robin Feuer Miller plumbs the intricate narrative *Childhood* to illustrate tensions between what she labels "the creative impulse" and the exigencies of actuality; William Mills Todd III and Justin Weir team up to highlight Tolstoy's uncertainties in "The Raid" about both military life and journalism as he searched for his own career; Liza Knapp probes Tolstoy's powerful rendering of human suffering in *The Sevastopol Tales*,

exploring the ways Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* influenced that rendering; Anne Lounsbery discerns the deft intermingling of literary genres that subtly conveys the ambiguous view of serfdom in "A Landowner's Morning"; and Ilya Vinitsky maintains that founding a school for serf children was as much the result of Tolstoy's quest for personal salvation as his desire for social justice, as expressed chiefly in his contributions to the pedagogical journal he established.

I should note that these essays were not intended to be either comprehensive—that is, to provide a thoroughgoing survey of Dostoevsky's and Tolstoy's early works—or comparative—that is, to stress connections or contrasts between the two authors. Nor were these essays intended to advance theories about early literary writings or to explicate their debts to the past. The essays, each written by a leading specialist in nineteenth-century Russian literature, single out one early work (or, in one case, two, in one case, three works) by one of the two authors to give fresh, sophisticated readings, from the essayists' own critical perspectives, in their own distinctive voices, without any specified length, critical subject, or method of treatment—some favor close reading, others take a more interdisciplinary tack. But by the very eclecticism of their lengths, subjects, and critical methods, these essays almost uncannily mirror the eclecticism of the young Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, as they themselves tried their hands at different genres, subjects, and so on.

Individually, the essays demonstrate that these early works possess hitherto unexamined or insufficiently known literary riches rendering them worthy of appreciation for themselves alone. And together, the composite portraits of these two artists as young men yielded by the essays disclose unexpected similarities as well as expected differences, and unfamiliar qualities as well as familiar ones. Thus the sum of these essays is greater than its parts. Above all, the essays collected here illuminate in masterly fashion the searching curiosity and precocious literary skills that Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, from the beginnings of their careers, brought to subjects that would occupy them throughout their lives: the mysteries of human nature, the ambiguities of morality, and the yearnings of the human spirit. These essays therefore clearly show, with lucidity and grace, that the early works of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy can arrest our attention and win our admiration for many reasons, long before these authors became the Titans of Russian literature.

Endnotes

1 Bely, *Трагедия творчества*, 8.
2 Emerson, "Tolstoy Connection," 348.
3 Ibid., 346.
4 Steiner, *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky*, 18, 11.
5 Ibid., 229, 150, 229.
6 Ibid., 69, 75.
7 Quoted in Curtis, "Metaphor Is to Dostoevskii," 111.
8 Todd and Weir, "Fear and Loathing," 194.
9 Mochulsky, *Dostoevsky,* 113.
10 Emerson, "Tolstoy Connection," 234.
11 Lounsbery, "On Cultivating One's Own Garden," 294.
12 Morson, *Narrative and Freedom*, 118 (italics Morson's).
13 Frank, *Seeds of Revolt,* 115.
14 Ibid., 212.
15 Wachtel, *Battle for Childhood,* 7.
16 Eikhenbaum, *Young Tolstoy,* 120.
17 Tolstoy, *ПСС*, Chertkov edition, 47:161.
18 Ibid., 60:295.

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