
An Afterword on the Wondrous Thickness of First Things

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Do Titans also have helpless childhoods, awkward adolescences, and false starts that would noiselessly fall by the wayside, were it not for the masterpieces that followed? Or are bits of later genius somehow extractable from everything a Titan writes, at any stage, and thus worthy of our reverent recuperation? So deep are the shadows cast by masterpieces that the work that precedes them can be dismissed as a mere preliminary and at the same time—paradoxically—enhanced, hyper-scrutinized for hints of later, larger themes. Reading the first works of famous authors, the temptation to live in the shadows is great.

Placing greatness in its proper context is a delicate task with Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. One important reason has been the global reach of their spiritual and intellectual legacy—like Shakespeare, the Bible, the Buddha, the Koran, these two titanic Russian authors belong to the world (and have been translated into most of its languages). Another is the mesmerizing weight of their work within the Russian tradition, the perennial fascination exercised by their two biographies and the competition between them. It has long been routine among literary critics to contrast their life-trajectories, usually seen as a case of deprivation versus abundance. Dostoevsky was assailed by disasters and crises imposed

from without (poverty, arrest, exile, epilepsy, all conditions of loss), whereas Tolstoy, born into privilege, wealth, talent, health, and conditions of plenty, generated his crises from within, creating an event for himself by voluntarily *taking something away* (denouncing it, urging us not to do it). In her Introduction, Elizabeth Cheresch Allen bends this familiar contrast the other way, noting parallels between these two writers. Each had an orphaned childhood punctuated by painful deaths, uncertain first steps, a full-stop and then a significant gap, followed (after ten years in Dostoevsky's case, three years in Tolstoy's) with works of qualitatively different genius. In time, each would lose half of his children (Dostoevsky two out of four, Tolstoy six out of thirteen). Allen notes that the early works of both men were raved over as well as panned. At the time, neither readers nor critics knew with whom they had to deal; greatness did not yet exist. But it was incubating in both of them—and as several essays in this volume attest, much in the mature value systems of each was in place from a very early age, even in their maiden works. So the trial decade (for Dostoevsky the 1840s, for Tolstoy the 1850s) cannot quite be called a laboratory, nor the routine quest of a beginning author in search of identity. Backshadowing too must be avoided, that is, the temptation to take greatness as a predestined given and read it back into the early works. These were years when an apprentice writer's raw talent could develop, or could collapse and die. Success could fuel it—but (as Dostoevsky's career eloquently shows) so could crisis and trauma. Potentials everywhere exceeded actualities. As Tolstoy went on to ask in *War and Peace*, do "causes" or "laws" exist that might explain why things tip one way rather than the other?

After Tolstoy himself (and perhaps Aristotle), the contributor to this volume who has most closely pondered the theory behind such questions, and provided the framework for their discussion, is Gary Saul Morson. He opens his 2013 collection of essays *Prosaics and Other Provocations* with a conviction that has shaped his career: that "time is open, the present moment makes a difference, and whatever does happen, something else could have."¹ Morson lays out this idea in his *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time*, where the creativity of these two Russian novelists comes to sanctify, with a sort of secular grace, the idea of uninterrupted potency across a temporal continuum.² Tolstoy is examined for his commitment to contingency, Dostoevsky for his commitment to human freedom. Linking the two is Mikhail Bakhtin—for whom

novels in general, and novels by these two Titans in particular—were “forms of thought” that liberated the tied-down, boxed-in world of epic, and of lyric and tragic drama as well, into a world of possibility. But as Morson (together with Bakhtin) never tires of arguing, to say things could have happened otherwise is not to say that the world is wholly open, arbitrary, or relative. Some early drafts and apprenticeship works are indispensable for a writer’s development, and some are not. At times, working over a story (or an idea, or a personality) ruins it, at other times improves it. Details might mean sublimely, or might mean nothing, or might even mean negatively, cluttering and obscuring the scene. According to scholarly convention, to read a work of art closely means to justify all its details within the designed frame. But why, Morson asks, need structure be taken as the most necessary virtue of a work of verbal art? Equally virtuous can be situations where “the actual process of writing provided not a predetermined design but a series of provocations.”³ In life, whether inside the novel or outside of it, the very idea of a structured past is an empirical fallacy. This insight might be applied not only to the works of a writer, but also to the writer’s biography. Can the creative history of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky be approached processurally? Is it possible, from our present vantage point, to read potentials in the early works “on their own,” not as part of a scaffolding that conceals masterpieces? The essays here suggest various ways of “reading but not reading *in*,” that is, of being alert to particulars but not linear in their projection, not backshadowed (which is “foreshadowing after the fact”).⁴

Literary commentary that comes a century or so after its subject matter was created cannot avoid some sort of shadow, however. One productive use of this volume’s after-shadow might be to identify clusters of themes, or gravitational force fields, that appear to have organized the energies of both our Titans in their apprenticeship. In this afterword I discuss two such pivotal clusters, taking my cue from categories provided by Bakhtin.⁵ One field belongs to the fictive “hero” (as a created, living personality), and is thus necessarily a view from the inside outward; the other is the field of the “author” (that consciousness at work on the formal craft of creating a world), a synoptic and coordinating view constructed from the outside in. In the realm of the hero, our focus will be the interlocking anxieties of shame and the creative imagination. In the realm of the author, it is experimentation at the literary edge: the attempt by these two fledgling writers to force literary forms into new service (what Morson called,

three decades ago, work on the “boundaries of genre,” those liminal domains that the great Russian writers so love to disrupt, suspend, and reconstruct). For each cluster we will identify territory shared by our two writers, and note where the scholars represented here see the most significant points of divergence.

First, the disconcerting issue of creativity and shame. At the center of the volume, Elizabeth Cheresch Allen (for Dostoevsky’s *Netochka Nezvanova*) and Robin Feuer Miller (for Tolstoy’s *Childhood*) overlap on an excruciating moment in the lives of children: an orphaned young person in search of love pursues a self-affirming fantasy—and discovers the thrill of creative writing. In this pursuit Allen distinguishes the moral imagination, which is capable of assessing the potential effects of one’s actions on others, from the creative imagination proper, a more free-wheeling force that in Dostoevsky’s desperately deprived children provides an alternative, an escape, literally a lifeline for the threatened self. *Netochka* saves herself (or buys time for herself) by bonding with the amoral storyteller, outside and inside her own consciousness. It is difficult to censure the orphan for this. Although ashamed of her indulgence in fantasy, she is very young, helpless, and alone. Dostoevsky and Tolstoy are far less patient with motivations for creativity in grown-ups. When Dale Peterson pursues the same theme but with an older protagonist in *White Nights*, the solitary walker of St. Petersburg, one feels that Dostoevsky is indeed censuring both the Dreamer and Rousseau. This is a faked *flâneur*, who pretends an intimacy of interaction with houses but cannot manage any actual contact. The story is told fifteen years after the fact and its only real encounter, as Peterson points out, is solipsistic, with the Dreamer’s earlier self: during those distant white nights, he had preferred to be a “phantom lover.”⁶ All the more amazing, then, that Peterson seems to assume that the fantasy-object Nastenka really existed, that the Dreamer had actually met this divine, trembling, bereft creature that first evening on the bridge. That need not have been so. Peterson properly sees chronic dreaming as a pathology. But he does not take the final step, which would be to view the Dreamer as a writer with (in Allen’s terms) a mature “creative imagination,” a person who knows full well how to tell life from fantasy (the narrator is brutally honest with his “dear reader” on this score) but chooses not to do so, for tantalizingly long stretches of narrative.⁷ The dreamer is no shameful self-punishing coward, no merely timid suitor, no victim of idle circumstance or bad luck when he “loses” his Nastenka. In his dream-story,

the lodger *must* return at some point and snatch his love away—deep down the Dreamer knows this must happen—because she was herself dreamed up. The denouement to the tale must be written in such a way that he does not wake up with her in real life, within his four drab walls. He postpones that moment as long as possible, because these fantasies are his only spiritual nourishment. But only nothing can come of nothing.

Dreaming up Nastenka—the wise, passionate, vulnerable young woman of his most intense desire—is not the same, of course, as the paranoid Goliadkin dreaming up his double. Gary Saul Morson, in his explication of the dark sides of thinking empathetically, hammers home the difficult truth that we don't bother to torture a stone. If it's alive, it is worth poking with a stick, prodding into a reaction. But, Morson asks, when I cannot accept what I see of myself, when I create an alternate to myself, from what perspective can I know I am real? The shameful horror and mystery of a "misidentification of a subjectivity *from the inside*" leads Morson to suggest something more awful than Bakhtin had permitted himself in his ruminations over Dostoevsky.⁸ We are humanized not by thought but by feeling—but pain alone is insufficient to humanize us. Only humiliation can do that. Here Lewis Bagby provides a complementary insight into Dostoevsky's psychic economy when he notes the peculiar form that shame takes in Makar Devushkin's letters to his far more pragmatic, resilient correspondent, Varvara Dobroselova, in *Poor Folk*. Everything in this text is stripped down: no omniscient narrator, no frame, no epilogue, only the slow unstoppable loss of Makar's one intimate interlocutor, and his frantic scrambling to replace the intimate company of his Varenka's letters with a literary style of his own. As the humiliated Makar intuits, it will become his only autonomous capital. Among the most startling aspects of this fledgling epistolary novel, which is also central to its early companion piece *A Faint Heart*, is the unexpected kindness of the poor clerk's superior, who generously slips him a hundred rubles (unlike Tolstoy, Dostoevsky allows people in power to be generous). But this humanitarian gesture eventually feeds into the shame. Susanne Fusso's discussion of the early Dostoevsky and vaudeville provides valuable counterpoint to these horrific no-exit scenes. Only in those genres where inner shame and pain are registered as comic, almost circus routine and not as deep psychic realities, namely in *commedia dell'arte* and its descendent, the vaudeville stage, can the audience laugh at humiliating

situations. The faithless wife in "Another Man's Wife" is a hero and a winner; only the men under the bed are fools. Fast forward to that 1870 masterpiece, *The Eternal Husband*, to see this erotic triangle played out in the crookedly cruel talent of Dostoevsky's novelistic prose, with the addition of the sacrificed child.

What about the early Tolstoy on creativity and shame? Miller provides the topic sentence for comparing our two writers on the creative impulse: "For Tolstoy, from his earliest fiction this impulse was marked with ambivalence—euphoria and moral guilt—whereas for Dostoevsky the creative impulse and the process ensuing from that impulse were affirmative, even when the undertones were dark."⁹ Indeed: as crookedly as his creations might grow toward the light, Dostoevsky *must* affirm, his words must create, for his scenarios (especially in his early period) are sunk in poverty. His impoverished characters dream, double themselves, create loopholes in order to survive; they create epistolary novels and memoirs out of desperation and fantasize by the book. Since they are proud, there can be shame when others catch them at these activities. By contrast, Tolstoy's scenarios, for all that they share the grievous loss of a parent, are sunk in security and wealth. They are the rosy well-fed children behind the window through which Dostoevsky's ragged orphans timidly peek and fantasize a better life. In order to survive, Tolstoy's siblings in *Childhood* do not need to create art. They take up poetry and drawing as part of their noble-class upbringing, and even the days that begin in humiliation (a dead fly falls on Nikolenka's nose) end in delighted self-expression and love. Miller emphasizes this healthy, well-endowed child's honesty and sense of wonder. And then she cites the astonishing letter from Tolstoy in 1865, in which he insists that children are not fooled by adult cleverness or cover-up, that what impresses the child is the "flush of shame appearing on my face against my will," the sure sign of what is "secret and best in my soul."¹⁰ Shame, for the pre-Titan Tolstoy, was confessional and purifying. For the pre-Titan Dostoevsky, operating almost all the time dangerously close to starvation, violence, and the irreversible violation of innocence, shame could quickly become unbearable. Unless dramatized in a vaudeville skit, it drove one not into wisdom, but into madness.

Let us now consider our second cluster: an author's experimentation with the boundaries of received literary form. Both Dostoevsky and Tolstoy set vigorously to this task, the former in his brilliant re-castings of the Gogolian

“poor clerk,” the latter in his overall rejection of romanticism in favor of sterner, more analytic and didactic eighteenth-century genres. But as the contributors to Part II demonstrate, Tolstoy experimented with more vanity and self-loathing, and with bitterer vengeance. “Euphoria and moral guilt”¹¹ accompany his every move from pen to paper, from his very earliest publications. In Tolstoy’s quasi-journalistic dispatches from the Caucasus discussed by William Mills Todd and Justin Weir, the bitterness, anxiety, and anger have multiple causes. The first is simple aristocratic disdain at any interference in his work, whether by government censor or the discretion of an editor: if it pleases you to take this piece, writes the young count, “you will not change anything at all.”¹² But the deeper cause is revealed later: Tolstoy bears a grudge against the very institution of journalism, with its presumption of a general public treated to a journalist’s generalized voice. My honor as author admits of no collective critical reception, Tolstoy seems to suggest. This is not class war or social war but a duel. Thus it must be conducted eye to eye, my personal word against your personal word. He does, of course, have an “imaginary reader” in mind for his work, but as always with Tolstoy, that reader is modeled on himself.¹³ Thus the shame and anxiety of not getting it right, of having words (or life) fail him once again, can never be alleviated or supplemented by someone else’s take on the matter. In the self-proliferating dynamics of this sort of confession, any audience worthy of Tolstoy’s trust can only echo his narrator’s failure and thereby reinforce it. Liza Knapp further explores Tolstoy’s arsenal of discomfiting, sure-to-fail devices in her juxtaposition of Tolstoy’s *Sevastopol Tales* to the sermonizing of Harriet Beecher Stowe. Tolstoy surely learned from the hortatory second-person address of this earnest sentimental novelist, the “daughter, wife, and sibling of ministers,” but one suspects that he feared Stowe’s method did not hurt enough, that it was too easy on the reader (which is to say, on the author-surrogate, which was himself). “Affirming but subverting sentimentalism,” Tolstoy complicates any easy identification the reader might make with bereft mothers and motherless children.¹⁴ With that situation he had long been familiar; in his mature writing, it would be transformed into nostalgia for the purity of childhood grieving, untainted by the fantasies and drives of adolescence. Tolstoy needed a new boundary to disturb, a new shock to administer. So he stretched the sermonic mode to its absolute outer limit, to incorporate cosmic irony, even a cosmic void. Tolstoy claims (in “*Sevastopol in May*”) that

the hero of his story, “which is and will always be beautiful and magnificent,” is Truth—but he feels no obligation to spell out its content, as a preacher might at the end of a sermon. Let the reader gaze at the dead bodies strewn across the meadow. In the final Sevastopol story, “Sevastopol in August,” both brothers die in a battle that was already lost.

In the volume’s final two essays, all these themes figure in: the dependence and pathos of children; the shame of writing and perhaps even of language (together with its creative benefits); the attempts to break new literary ground by estranging genre conventions or juxtaposing types of narrative. Both Anne Lounsbery and Ilya Vinitsky approach these themes through Tolstoy and the peasantry. Lounsbery, a scholar of Russian geographical space, notes that Tolstoy’s tales of the rural gentry belong to different genres depending on whom he wants to shame, or whom to spare shame. Seen from the gentry child’s innocent perspective (as in *Childhood*), serfdom is automatized, gently patriarchal, loveable even, an indispensable part of the security of the idyll. From the point of view of unhappy well-intentioned Nekhliudov, the landowner who would discuss civic reform and justice with his serfs, it is a communication nightmare. For Nekhliudov’s experience that morning, the correct genre is the philosophical tale of Voltaire, designed to “test ideas against hard facts” and watch the ideas fall apart.¹⁵ In “A Landowner’s Morning” Tolstoy looks back both to *Candide* and to the tendentious slave owner’s apology offered by Nikolai Gogol. But what inevitably flies to mind for us are the later embedments of these nightmares in the great novels: Konstantin Levin trying to grasp the logic of his peasant laborers in *Anna Karenina*, and those painful chapters on the discontent and rebellion of the Bogucharovo peasants in *War and Peace* (Princess Marya Bolkonskaya wants only to help them, but they stonewall her utterly; what the peasants trust and respect are Nikolai Rostov’s fists). If we eschew all backshadowing and ignore the rich human contexts that inform those later “scenes from peasant life,” the indeterminate early story that Lounsbery analyzes becomes as damning as the final Sevastopol tale. People who own other people and live off their labors are corrupt in *all* their faculties, creative as well as perceptual and communicative; they cannot take “an honest account of either their own lives or others’ motives.”¹⁶ The whole person is held accountable for sins that come with the epoch. Again, we would be kinder to a helpless and capricious child.

In his treatment of Tolstoy as pedagogue to peasant boys, Vinitsky shows us the landlord of Iasnaya Poliana mixing (or dissolving) genres in a stubborn, even tyrannical way. The same irritated tone toward journalism that Todd and Weir registered on behalf of Tolstoy in “Fear and Loathing in the Caucasus” is present in Tolstoy’s insistence on the non-political nature of his educational ideas, and thus the innocence of his publications. But Tolstoy’s intent to found a “secret society of public education” gives him away.¹⁷ If a secret society is required, then its principles are probably subversive. At stake is not only Tolstoy’s word, anchored in Rousseau, against everyone else’s. Also constantly on display is the force of Tolstoy’s own personality, playing piano, planning and animating the lessons, mesmerizing the young boys, insuring that no punishments are inflicted and no disciplinary rules laid down (since no one disobeys, both are unnecessary), while not failing to notice where the teaching staff falls short of duplicating Tolstoy. The creativity of these young pupils fed into Tolstoy’s own creative writings on pedagogy. But with this one large difference: that the boys wrote for themselves, whereas Tolstoy generalized on them for the sake of a doctrine intended to castigate grown-ups. The terrifying emotional honesty that Tolstoy brought to his three-year pedagogical passion, his need to “save” his corrupt adult self through these activities, adds yet another genre to the primer, confession, philosophical tale, and sermonette that served Tolstoy the writer: the temporary “scenario of salvation.”¹⁸ He could not, of course, pretend that the peasant lads Fedka and Semka were as much under his grip as were Natasha Rostova, Pierre Bezukhov, or even that model peasant entity, Platon Karataev. But the peasant pupils did one thing to perfection: with their spontaneous intelligence, keen eye for fakery, and straight-as-an-arrow moral judgment, they could humiliate the civilized adult. For Tolstoy, this reproach was irresistible. Dostoevsky—who knew humiliation in infinitely finer detail than Tolstoy—did not crave this psychological condition.

“Before they were Titans”: let me close on the title of this volume. Recall that the Titans were the first offspring of Gaia and Uranus (Mother Earth and Father Sky), six sons and six daughters. Only the youngest, Cronus, was courageous enough to rebel against his father (at Gaia’s request) for casting their brothers, the Cyclops, into Tartarus. But Cronus, ascending to rule, proved himself a dishonorable Titan. So that no child of his could repeat his patricidal act, Cronus swallowed each newborn infant until his wife Rhea (goddesses put up with the barbaric ways

of their menfolk for only so long) hid the newborn Zeus in a cave and tricked her husband into swallowing a swaddled stone. Zeus survived to launch a massive war against Cronus, after which Olympus could at last be built, the gods canonized, regularized, each given a human skill or need to protect.

There are periodic rebellions, in Russian culture, against the Titans. With that much greatness smothering the field, how can anyone born later draw a clean full breath, say a new word? Mayakovsky and the Futurists bragged about throwing some of the greats off the steamship of modernity; Nicolai Berdiaev, in his traumatized essay from 1919, "Specters of the Russian Revolution," held Gogol, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy responsible for the degeneration and collapse of a civilization. Maxim Gorky demonized Dostoevsky both before his departure from Lenin's Russia and after his repatriation to Stalin's USSR; Bakhtin did battle against Tolstoy for decades. And of course our two mature Titans, while alive, struggled warily and at times mightily against one another. They were Russia's most famous contemporaries who refused to meet.

Before they were Titans, this wariness, territoriality, and antipathy was less pronounced. There was more "loose space" and "loose time" around each of them. Their writing was less well weeded, perhaps, thicker than it would be later on, when mastery of their medium would refine the details, perfect the lines, draw up more precise boundaries and ideologies. Tolstoy and Dostoevsky are so very great that, had they not chosen to become preachers or prophets, the world would have thrust that mantel upon them. The essays here are hardly bathed in sunshine, just because they try to avoid backshadowing. But they do alert us to an earlier texture for the voices of these two immortals, as their gifts are breaking out into the light.

Endnotes

- 1 Morson, *Prosaics*, 1.
- 2 See Morson, *Narrative and Freedom*, especially chapter 2 ("Foreshadowing") and chapter 4 ("Sideshadowing").
- 3 Morson, "Strange Synchronies," 486.
- 4 See Morson, *Narrative and Freedom*, chapter 6, "Backshadowing": "The past is viewed as having contained signs pointing to what happened after, to events known to the backshadowing observer. Visible now, those signs could have been seen then" (234). For the idea of the backshadow, Morson

is indebted to the late Michael André Bernstein, *Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

- 5 In Bakhtin's view, an author creating a hero works with the same two perspectives that orient any human being in the world, that of the "other" (the outside view that creates coherence) and the "I" (the inner view that generates free movement). The "otherly" perspective—from which authors must work—sees what Bakhtin calls "surroundings" ["окружение"]: it always includes within its purview the body of the character as a finalized object for others. The "I" or inner perspective has access solely to a "horizon" ["крягозор"]: modeled on what my own eyes see, it cannot therefore include the finished outer contour of my own body but only the bodies of others. A horizon is the sole perspective available to the consciousness of heroes. See Bakhtin, "Author and Hero," 13-15; 22-27.
- 6 Peterson, "Dostoevsky's *White Nights*," 105.
- 7 Ibid., 97.
- 8 Morson, "Me and my Double," 50.
- 9 Miller, "The Creative Impulse," 154.
- 10 L. N. Tolstoy, quoted in Miller, "The Creative Impulse," 173.
- 11 Miller, "The Creative Impulse," 154.
- 12 L. N. Tolstoy, quoted in Todd and Weir, "Fear and Loathing," 195.
- 13 Todd and Weir, "Fear and Loathing," 203.
- 14 Knapp, "Tolstoy's *Sevastopol Tales*," 222.
- 15 Lounsbury, "On Cultivating One's Own Garden," 269.
- 16 Ibid., 281.
- 17 Vinitsky, "Tolstoy's Lessons," 301.
- 18 Ibid., 310.

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