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The Realism of Russian Literature.

When the commonplace person has nothing to say, he utters a desperate commonplace. If he has "the time and the place and the loved one" all together, concentrated upon the discussion of the literature of Russia, he remarks profoundly that Russian writers are realists. It is a parrot phrase. Realism was probably defined once upon a time, long, long ago, but its meaning has been completely lost. Am I too bold, in suggesting that realism originally meant that a man should "draw the thing as he sees it for the God of things as they are"? But the Anglo-Saxon mind is so essentially foul, by virtue of the taint of Puritanism, that the thing as he sees it is always disgusting. To hide the truth is the one aim of the journalists. However innocent and pleasant the truth may appear, he does not care to take a chance by stating it. It probably conceals something loathsome. The word realism in Anglo-Saxondom, in the world kept safe for hypocrisy, has come to mean the depiction of the base sides of life, so-called, for it is a positive obsession with the Puritan that "whatever is, is wrong".

For a great deal of this we legitimately blame certain French authors, notably Zola. It does seem as if Zola entirely failed to see the heroism and beauty of life. His characters are scoundrels without even

brains to redeem them, or weaklings without even affection to make one sympathize with them. But why drag in Zola? Zola is but a bad pupil of Balzac, who was certainly the greatest master of realism that ever lived. And in Balzac we have Le Colonel ~~Chaper~~^{fert} to set forth against La Cousine Bette. Is there a more beautiful and sympathetic character in all literature than the little old German in *Le Cousin Pons*? Is there a finer type of woman than Eugénie Grandet? This does not prevent Balzac from painting things as they are. I have noticed as the most remarkable fact that Balzac has always ~~had~~^{taken} the greatest pains to inform us as to the state of the bank account of every character at every period of his career. That is a wonderful piece of realism, for financial conditions modify human character in the profoundest way. But while he recognizes this, he understands perfectly that there are some people who are slaves to money and others who are not. True realism paints the whole of life. Zola's stories, though incomparably better in every other respect, are, as pictures of life, as false and foolish as those of Robert W. Chambers.

Russian writers, by an extension of the particular to the general, which is perfectly illogical, have been tarred with this brush of realism in the Puritan sense of the word. Nothing could be more unjust and ridiculous.

The Russian is an instinctive mystic. To him reality is God and nothing else. ~~Everything~~ Russian would agree with the Mohammedan sage who was stoned for saying, "I am the Truth, and my turban wraps round nothing but God." Every incident of life is therefore ultimately an effect of the will of God. There may be anti-Christ or the devil, but the principle of evil works only by God's good pleasure, one may almost say, for God's amusement. To admit ultimate philosophical reality to the operations of the devil is Manich^{clasan}ism, which is heresy. The Church ^{deceives} ~~deceives~~ it to be heresy, although in practice, to the shallow-minded, the antithesis between good and evil is of course the working theory of the universe. So much may be called Orthodoxy, but I think we may go a little further, and say that Christianity has never wholly supplanted the original Russian beliefs, which are Pantheistic in character. On this theory, we might say that the Russian, generally speaking, is in substantial agreement with such statements as these: "Everything that lives is holy." ; "Every man and every woman is a star." The Russian would not deny even to a vampire ^(I mean a real vampire, not a charming lady!) the right to existence. Every individual is unique, independent and -- interesting. The Russian writer therefore has no scruples in depicting characters, of what Puritans might call, demonic tendencies with the same objective sympathy as saints and heroes. Father Zosima and Taras Bulba are persons of the drama just as

much as and not more than Nastasia Fillipovna and Smrdio-
koff. The Russian author does not have to keep on
labelling people in the way beloved by Anglo-Saxon prig-
gishness. It is not necessary to brand Cain every few
sentences. There are murderers in the world; there are
cold-blooded calculating murderers, but even they are human.
W. S. Gilbert was much more right than he himself supposed
when he sang:

"When the enterprising burglar is not a-burgling,

not a-burgling,

He loves to hear the little brook a-gurgling

And to take his children to the pantomime, pantomime."

If the Anglo-Saxon author fails to talk about his mur-
derer with the crude violence of the district-attorney,
he is afraid lest his publishers shall suspect him of sym-
pathy with the "abandoned villain". The Russian author
does not believe that the man is a murderer ^{at all} in the ~~palace~~-court
sense of the word. He believes that the murderer is God,
and it interests him to show how He became a murderer
despite himself. Criminal jurisprudence has justified
the Russian in this point of his realism. We have begun
to understand that there are any number of causes for any
effect. There is a chain of causes going back like a
spread fan. And we understand how true it is, that word
of the apostle, "predestined from before the foundation of
the world".

It remains for us to reconcile these apparently contradictory conceptions, "Every man and every woman is a star, a supreme God, self-determined", yet at the same time, "Every man and every woman is the play-thing of his destiny". The answer to that problem takes us infinitely far into the unknown beginning of things, where (even) there is no beginning, for all must be eternal, since even ~~the idea of~~ special acts of creation are just as determined as the most commonplace things in life. How is it (assuming the idea of a created God) that he made the Universe such that the sum of the angles of every triangle is equal to two right angles? (It was a Russian, by the way, who disputed that theorem and showed the possibility of two other kinds of space, in one of which the sum of the angles was more, and in the other less, than two right angles).

The astute reader will see from the very tone of this article that the canon of literary art in Russia is not realism at all in the regular sense if the word, but idealism. Yes, indeed: Idealism is the secret of realism to the Russian mind. It is this which sets the great gulf fixed between the Russian realists and such writers as Zola. With the characters of Zola we feel little sympathy unless we happen to be of the same calibre as he, - persons of morbid mind, whose perverted sex instincts are stimulated by a depiction of the loathsome. We get absolutely no such feeling in Russian literature. Nastasia Phillipovna is a

courtesan, who might be matched with Nana. But do we feel for one moment that they are sisters? One recognizes instinctively that the lightest breath of circumstance would waft Nastasia into a nunnery. Nana is of the Paris gutter and nothing would ever change her. Such animals as Nana are not to be found in Russia. But would a Russian realist be disconcerted if he found one on his model's throne? No, he would paint her as she was: a gross, vulgar, dirty, lecherous sow. But he would not be content with such a summary. He would feel that she was a woman: that she was made in the image of God: that she was God. Zola's picture is a false picture. There are no such women as his Nana. Any one who knows the life of the Paris gutter, who has associated intimately with its vilest products, recognizes, if there be any insight, that there is infinite innocence and beauty in the nature of every such woman, however that may have been crusted over in self-defense against the ravages of environment. We are then to take Zola's La Terre as a stupid libel on the French peasantry; his La ^{curie} Coeur as a caricature of the profiteer and his gang. Zola is a romanticist à rebours.

So, although the Russian writers draw pictures in even darker colours than the so-called realists, though they depict more desperate conditions, more hopeless and insoluble soul problems, yet the atmosphere is utterly different. It is written that the spirit of the Gods brooded

upon the water. It is written: Let there be light; and there was light. The earth was without form and void, but the spirit was there brooding; and because 'every man and every woman is a star', that spirit broods, and there is light. Do not imagine that the earth is without form and void. It is your dull apprehension, or your Pharisaic pride, which tells you so. There was light, and there is light. Just so far as my wretched words can explain, ^{the} it is the attitude, possibly for the most part, sub-conscious, of the Russian writer. He does not believe in materialism. To him, as to the authors of the Upanishads, everything is illusion. The truth is God. There is one radical difference between Russian mysticism, which is Russian realism, and that of the East, in that the Russian regards suffering as the essential to salvation. The reason for this is painfully simple. It is that Sadism and ^{och} Masochism are more or less normal to the ^{ta} vital sexualis of the Russian. This is a question of race, climate and what not, and is less essential than ~~writers~~ writers of such subjects commonly assume. The cardinal point is the absolute sub-conscious mysticism. I must announce the thesis that mysticism is the only hypothesis possible to democracy. "Every man and every woman is a star", and although one star differs from another in glory, "every man and every woman is a star". The King is primus inter pares. His position is a conventional accident of time and space and has nothing to do with reality. The psychology of the mujik is in no way different from that of the Tsar. Russia respects the sovereignty of the individual in a way which would shock America out of its seven senses. It is a well known story;

but may I use it for an example? In Russia it is the custom on Easter morning for a man to go out of his house, throw his arms around the first human being that he meets, kiss him and cry, "Christ ^{is} risen". On one such occasion the Tsar did this, and as luck would have it, he gave the greeting to a Jewish sentry, who replied with perfect confidence, "Your Majesty is a liar". Can any one imagine a similar incident in any other democracy? Therefore for the Russian writer there is a real equality among men based on the fact, not that every one is a voter, but that every one is God. It is the spirit of Asia. In India the greeting between any two men is, "Thou art That". By That he means God. This is sub-conscious in the Russian spirit. The Russian writer does not apologize for introducing "stinking Elizabeth". She, too, is God. He does not have to make his hero the son of a millionaire, and his heroine a virtuous manicure, as Anglo-Saxon writers seem to find it essential to their -- prosperity, unless their publisher tells them that the public need a change and want the heroine the daughter of the millionaire and the hero a virtuous chauffeur. The Russian writer is absolutely unable to see the existence of *accidentals*, except as an accident. It is this quality which makes their novels and stories so simple and so true. The element of snobbishness is entirely lacking in their point of view. They do not keep on affirming that Jack is as good as his master. It never occurs to them that Jack is not as good as his master. It is this quality of

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absolute unconsciousness with regard to all artificial
~~facilities~~^{als} that has made Russian writers sublime. They
have conquered the world by utter simplicity; and if, in
certain savage tribes, snobbery in particular, and the
sense of sin in general, yet linger through the efforts
of the virtuous newspapers and the pious Sunday-school-
ma'ams, the ~~hour~~^{hour} is at hand.