

The Master of Petersburg

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A writer has to create actors in his novels, actors who are real persons. Without the palpable presence of a real personality, the inspiration of the author runs dry, as characters in novels are not, as we are being told early on, to be thought as mere cardboard cut-outs to be manipulated at will, but entities with their own wills and ambitions leading the narrative on to unexpected conclusions. To create such personalities is not easy, and in fact it is not clear that their creations are the results of voluntary and deliberate actions. There are short-cuts, the most common one being to write in the auto-biographical mood. (One may also argue that all literary characters are just embodiments of the writer's supposedly many-faceted personality.) Another short-cut is to take historical personages, preferably well-known to the reader. In this novel, Dostoevski is called upon to fulfill the role of a fictional character. It is a short-cut, and a very effective one at that. The educated reader (to whom this book is clearly addressed) knows Dostoevski, and has probably not only read a few books by him already, but is familiar with the main features of his biography. Being plunged in *media res*, the reader is not lost. He knows the character, he knows what to expect from him (up to a point) and does of course know the story behind it all.

Starting with such advantages there is a definite risk of back-lash, because such advantages also builds up expectations. To the credit of the author, he does not disappoint. It is a nice pastiche, wisely deciding not to emulate a Dostoevsky novel to the utmost, but to strike a happy medium. There is a nice evocation of the Petersburg milieu, and the interchanges do have a certain Dostoevskian touch to them. Nicely done.

Dostoevsky is returning to St-Petersburg illegally to pick up the remnants of his son, who has died suddenly and unexpectedly. A father feels a deep tenderness for a young son, a tenderness which in this case is not diminished by the fact that the son is not of his flesh, but 'only' of a step. Arriving he gets erotically involved with the landlady, in spite of himself as well as in spite of herself. There is also an anarchist in the plot, involved with his son, and perhaps directly or indirectly responsible for the death. An anarchist, this both points to our contemporary obsession with terrorism, as, more to the point, Dostoevsky's own writing on the subject in his 'The Possessed'. It is only by being familiar with that book one is able to reconstruct the lines which will emerge from his mouth. The young daughter of the landlady does not see kindly on the burgeoning relation and in a way she retaliates by befriending the anarchist. In the end the whole thing dissolves, as it always does in real life as opposed to a novel. This does of course heighten the illusion of realism. Maybe even the unwary may be forgiven to mistake this for a real fragment of Dostoevsky's life. If so the author has to be congratulated. In many ways the success of an author in his craft should not be measured by its impact on the sophisticated but on the untutored.

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