

Russian Thinkers

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The 19th century is the great century of Russian literature. The Russian novelists of that period belong to the very best there ever was, but when it comes to Russian thinkers and philosophers, there is supposedly no corresponding embarrassment of riches but rather an embarrassing paucity. Berlin considers this to be unfair. It was the Russians after all, who coined the concept of the *Intelligentsia*, and intellectual ferment was never as intense as in the intellectual elites of that vast, primitive and impoverished country. Revolutionary fervour was indeed widespread also on the continent, but it found a particularly radical expression in Russia, as manifested by the Russian Revolution, which cast its shadow over the greater part of the 20th century, and under whose shadows the present essays in this collection were written.

Russia was an essentially landlocked country until the beginning of the 18th century. Peter the Great famously opened it up to the West, dragging it out of a medieval past, in which it had lingered for so long. It meant defeating the Swedes, who dominated the Baltic, and as a consequence the Tsar was able to move the city from Moscow to the marshes of a Baltic inlet, building from scratch a futuristic city, housing the court, the imperial bureaucracy, and later on scientific academies to which western luminaries, like Voltaire, Diderot and Euler were invited. Still the sophisticated civilization which was imported was but a thin veneer. The country was essentially an agrarian vastness, a backward feudal society of landowners and a huge mass of serfs, ruled by a despot with the connivance of a powerful and corrupt church. The military weight of its inexhaustible manpower allowed it to play a decisive role in the rolling back of the Napoleonic wave in the beginning of the 19th century, thus ushering it into European power politics as a formidable power of reaction.

Its educational elite was thin, and actively discouraged by the authorities to travel to subversive France, it instead directed its western pilgrimage to Berlin, capital of a supposedly more congenial and authoritarian regime. However, revolutionary enthusiasm was as strong in Berlin as in Paris, and Hegelianism was in full vogue, coming to dominate Russian political thinking for the next century and beyond. The hero of the author is Herzen¹, whom he exalts as a truly original thinker, unappreciated to his full extent in the West. Supporting roles are played by his friends Bakunin and Belinsky, the three of them born almost simultaneously, and being the key figures of the first intellectual flowering of the 1840's. In the account of Berlin, Bakunin comes across as almost a caricature, always carried away by his enthusiasm and his radicalism, prepared to destroy everything and be damned, committed to an unrelenting hostility to all forms of central authority. And

¹ Герцен (1812-1870) born in Moscow just before the capture of that city by Napoleon, the illegitimate son of a Russian aristocrat and his domesticized German mistress. His very name supposedly being an allusion to an affair of the heart.

in fact Berlin keeps him in the periphery, much preferring Belinsky, who stemmed from a relatively humble background, a notable fact in a rigidly stratified society in which social migration was exceedingly difficult. Belinsky preserved many of his uncouth provincial manners, often degenerating into unbridled behaviour². His role was that of the sickly critic doomed to suffer an untimely death. Overwrought, sincere, casting himself into the one conviction after the other, living through the consequences, and then abandoning them un sentimentally, whenever those passionately held beliefs turned out to be untenable³. Berlin takes him to task for writing too much, that he detested detail and had no bent for scrupulous scholarship being an unsystematic omnivorous reader, and hence much of what he wrote turned out to be uninspired hackwork⁴ to keep bread on the table. Yet when he found the right topic worthy of his talents, his vision becomes so intense, and articulated with such vividness, that the result is almost as breathtaking to us now, as it was to his contemporaries. Thus he nevertheless played a pivotal role in Russian letters, he was in fact the one, at least according to Berlin, who established Pushkin as the undisputed father of Russian literature, and who supported Dostoevsky early in his career⁵. He also took Gogol to task for his moral desertion, writing him a letter, so subversive indeed that Dostoevsky was sentenced to death for having read it aloud at an illicit discussion club. Only Herzen appears as balanced and profound, seeing through the enthusiasm and the horrors connected with abstract schemes of social engineering.

Herzen poses the natural existential questions. What is the meaning of life? what is the meaning of history? concluding that life is the meaning of life, just as history is the subject of history. We live here and now, and cannot make the present subject to the demands of the future, especially when those are highly abstract, utopian and speculative. Life is lived for the moment and must be enjoyed at the moment, and cannot be made hostage to an idealized future, which may very well for all intents and purposes not come about. What if the earth is hit by a comet and destroyed? Does that mean that not only individual lives have been rendered meaningless but history itself? No, Herzen, claims. It does not matter, history is its own reward, just as a life is not rendered meaningless by its ultimate extinction. We do not live in order to die, we live nevertheless, just as the purpose of a child is to play and be happy, not to grow up and die, death is not the crowning achievement of life.

Furthermore Herzen rejects the vulgarity of numbers. The death of a single individual is no less absurd and unintelligible than the extinction of the entire human race. Death is a mystery, and thus immune to multiplication. In particular a disaster involving the death of many strangers should not have more of an impact on us than the death of a single stranger. The distinction is one mere of journalistic sensationalism than true compassion. Liberty is something here and now, and it is an end to itself. To sacrifice it to something else, some elaborate meta-physical construction, which may only rest on sand, is tantamount to a

² His fearlessness in argument and social interaction was much admired by his friends

³ One example being his 'Hegelian' year, which he characterized as being dedicated to insane logical consistency rather than truth.

⁴ Sometimes expressing ludicrous ideas to the effect that Fenimore Cooper was the equal of Shakespeare

⁵ Although he had no truck with Dostoevskis religiosity, whom he scandalized by his blasphemy. To Belinsky, like men such as Diderot and Voltaire, religion was simply a matter of dark oppression.

human sacrifice. He speaks with bitterness of Communist idylls, and predicts that it will sweep across the world in a violent tempest, dreadful, bloody, unjust and swift.

Still the scepticism of Herzen can hardly be considered unique. It is the scepticism of moderation and common sense, and must have been voiced many a time throughout history. Maybe the remarkable thing is that Herzen maintained his cool, while still being a fervent advocate of radical reform, moving in socialist circles, committed as everyone else not only to reform but to resolute revolution. According to Berlin, the special character of intellectual excitement in Russia derived from the fact that while in the west the educated classes made up significant numbers of individuals, with the consequence that no idea was really allowed to become dominant, but every intellectual suggestion had to compete with others, and only survive by dint of modification and relentless testing and questioning; while in Russia, with its thin elite, new ideas encountered less opposition and were more likely to enflame uncritical enthusiasm. Thus in particular Hegel reigned supreme for many a decade, and no Russian thinker remained wholly unaffected by him.

Platonism is a very powerful idea, and one may safely claim that it lies at the foundation of Western philosophy and its off-spring - science. It essentially teaches us that the world of the senses that present itself to us uninvited is but a superficial sham, and what really matters is the unifying underlying reality, which it is our business to reveal as much as is humanly possible. This is an idea and an attitude to life which is intellectually very hard to resist, and goes back beyond that of Plato himself. It is in fact deeper than mere rationalism, which did inspire the Enlightenment of the 18th century, because the reaction to the enlightenment - Romanticism, was even more committed to the Platonic idea, as e.g. manifested by Schelling, who repudiated the systematic scientific methods of say Condillac and Condorcet, claiming that there were no substitute for sympathy, understanding, insight and 'wisdom'. That in fact in order to understand the essence of beauty in art or the spirit of an age, the pedestrian methods of science, such as experiment, classification, induction and deduction, were sadly inadequate, what you needed was the ability to form imaginative insights, and an innate understanding of the 'inner purposes' and 'essences' of what you were contemplating. This undoubtedly strikes the modern reader as so much woolly mysticism, yet if you question a mathematician or a natural scientist for that matter about the mechanisms that ultimately allows their discoveries, the kind of answers they unflinchingly would articulate, would not be that far from those of Schelling. There is deep within us the conviction while most of our activities may be algorithmic in nature, what really moves us and our imaginations, lies beyond that which can be encoded and mechanically processed.

The obsession of an intellectual is to come up with illuminating explanations, whose beauty lies in their ability to simplify a confusing and opaque reality, to a few simple principles out of which it is forced. In particular the obsession of early 19th century intellectuals were to conceive of new ways of explaining and arranging human societies. An obsession that on the continent came to a head with the failed revolution of 1848 but then started to fade, while the Russian intellectuals, basically unaffected by the failed attempt, were able to keep this obsession furiously alive. Herzen was once again a renegade. He started to doubt the very basis of the intellectual program, that of being able to deductively out of a few sound principles, build up an encompassing edifice. In particular the idea of

truths being logically forced also when applied to a human setting. If a question was serious and agonising, Herzen assumed it could have no simple and clearcut answer. Herzen classified two kinds of intellectual personalities, the first, he referred to as the dilettant, fearful to get bogged down in pedantic detail, and as a consequence unable to see the trees for the wood; the second the so called Buddhist, who instead decides to immerse himself in the tiny detail, seeing no wood for the trees, and in the process becoming a repellant human being (incidentally often a German). Herzen clearly wanted to avoid both extremes.

The intellectual movement in Russia split into two camps. Obviously such a neat subdivision is ultimately misleading, there being many people who refused to commit themselves to either camp, still as all imposed human classifications, it serves many purposes, served by no conceivable alternative. The 'Westerners' looked to the West for salvation, acutely aware of the shortcomings of their own primitive society. The West offered not only a rich culture, but sophisticated philosophy as well as scientific advance. In such an analysis they found themselves close in spirit to the reformers of the Meiji restoration in Japan during the 1860's, but without the sense of urgency and systematic dedication of the Japanese reformers. Russia was after all a vast country characterized by inertia and subject to no obvious external threats. Such an attitude can roughly be denoted a liberal one, an attitude of progress and change. To each movement towards the left, there is invariably a countermovement towards the right, and the intellectual rights were represented by the so called 'Slavophiles' who looked inwards, sensing that the true mission of Russia lay in its inner essence, the spirit of its people and the spirit of its church as a bulwark against the materialism of the west⁶. Especially the allegiance to the eastern orthodox church irked many 'westerners' with their strong anti-religious sentiments and secular convictions. But what united both camps was an irreplaceable hostility to the present regime, although both camps allowed sufficient latitude for conciliation. The Tsarist state was a police state, clamping down on opposition and any potential for such with an iron hand of censorship and surveillance⁷. Yet oppressive as the Tsarist regime no doubt was, and how much source for frustration and indignation it could provide, it nevertheless appears in retrospect a paragon of tolerance and constraint, almost endearing in its ineffectiveness and lack of principle, when compared to the excesses of the regimes which would replace it. The political oppression of the old regime was directed at the Intelligensia, and as that was exclusive and hence not faceless, the measures undertaken were so influenced, while the oppression of the triumphant communists, was directed not only towards individuals but to abstract entities as well, and so turned what had been a matter of individual application to an industrial enterprise. Mere head counts are usually simplistic, but when there are large disparities, not fully misleading. The victims of Communist repression of the 20th century may be counted in millions, while the victims, at least those directly victimized, of Tsarist persecution may not be counted in larger units than those of perhaps a hundred. But nevertheless the social situation of the 19th century was in the long run untenable, some kind

⁶ Berlin claims that no visitor to the Soviet Union can fail to take note of the Russian ambivalence towards the west. On one hand an inferiority complex as to intellectual capability on the other a conviction of emotional superiority.

⁷ which, according to Berlin, formed that special brand of professional Russian revolutionary, bred in an environment of conspiracy

of reaction had to come about sooner and later, and considering the numerical scale of the problem, any such transformation would involve huge numbers of victims⁸. But was a violent reaction really inevitable? Marxists are often made fun of in their eagerness to bring about a revolution that nevertheless is ordained as inevitable by a historical analysis. Such criticism is of course frivolous, although not altogether unprovoked, the revolutionaries of the Russian Intelligencia, well aware of their personal responsibilities as to the unfolding of history, bringing a sense of urgency to the task, knew that otherwise opportunities may simply slip away. What lay at the heart of their convictions, Berlin reminds us of, was not the inevitability of the revolution but its justness. In fact there was much discussion of whether the Capitalist interlude was in fact necessary, or whether it simply could not be side-stepped in Russia, an idea obviously congenial to the 'Slavophiles'. Herzen did put a lot of faith in the so called *mirs*, voluntary economic communities of peasants, believing that they could provide the foundation and the impetus for a non-capitalistic development. In fact Capitalism made significant inroads into Russian economic development in the decades preceding the revolution, Russian society consisting not only of the Intelligencia, but also of merchants, businessmen and entrepreneurs, open to informal outside influence, going on outside the control of the very Intelligencia who so fervently was discussing its feasibility.

Intellectual schemes constitute one thing, the multitudinous sensual reality quite another. It is symptomatic that such a fervent Westerner as the critic Belinsky, knew no western language, and felt oppressively out of home during his brief visits to the West. Ironically his emotional attachment to Russia was no doubt much stronger than that of many a Slavophil with personal habits of a cosmopolitan nature. One may speculate as to what such an attachment really consists in, and one may be forced to acknowledge that it is truly and genuinely irrational. In fact every intellectual belongs to a physical and also spiritual environment, involving the unfolding of untold habits, each of which trivial and insignificant by themselves, but adding up to a web that not only binds a man to his surroundings but in a deeper sense defines and delineates him. Our most genuine intimacies are with our habits and by implication the severance of which affects us deeper than anything else. A man may go through a succession of different wives, expressing his serial attachments with a lot of ado, while being unaware of his true allegiance to say an enduring habit like smoking his pipe. And it is in fact the reconstitutions of habits into a seamless continuous whole that allows the individual to recover from personal bereavements, be they of spouses or children, and carry on. To us later observers, the lives of the Russian 19th century Intelligencia may strike us as fascinating, not so much their ideas and endeavours, which may have meant everything to them, but because of the quotidian background against which they were played against. Russian society of the 19th century was dominated by the great gulf between an illiterate mass and a narrow elite. This gulf no matter how objectionable in principle, provided an unacknowledged comfort to those in the condition of benefiting from it. The revolutionary may have been committed to reform, after all a man need a mission and a goal in his life, yet he might personally enjoyed the privileges inherent in the situation, forming the essence of his personality, as such are

⁸ This naturally brings to mind Lenins infamous saying that you have to smash eggs in order to make an omelette

formed materially through the aforementioned web of habits. A man that truly eschews Platonistic ambitions, should be confined to a purely sensual reality, and as such enjoy existence at its purest. Although most of us are not able to abandon ourselves to such a goal, our most private and intimate relations with reality are precisely through such qualia of consciousness, perfectly amoral and incommunicable in themselves. There is indeed such a thing as a spirit of the times, which can never be so overwhelmingly experienced, as by those who have been severed from it, through the bitter-sweetness of nostalgia. Platonism is by its nature timeless, sensual reality, on the other hand, provides that flow of river, into which Heraclites could only step once. And this brings us back to the initial query, of the Russian thinker against the Russian novelist. The purpose of the novel is not to present a program, or a consistent piece of thinking. The Novel is not primarily about what lies behind, but is in fact a celebration of the very sensuality of life and existence. In that sense true art is immoral, it is not concerned with progress and justice, good or evil, because the most arresting figure in fiction is usually the villain. The logic of the unfolding of a story is intrinsic to the story, and thus far more satisfying when it leads to tragedy, thus at cross purposes at human ambitions. As the philosopher Simone Weil has remarked. To read about happiness and success is ultimately boring, while to read about misery and failure is exhilarating, while in real life it is the other way around.

The great novelists of the Russian 19th century were no thinkers. Or at least so it has been claimed. Turgenev is a case in point. His gentle manner, his desire to be loved and respected by the radicals as well as not antagonizing the established, earned him allegiances both from the left and the right, but such ambiguous sympathies also made him doubly suspect in both camps, as being ultimately unreliable. Maybe his most memorable piece of work, or at least the one that caused most controversy, was his 'Fathers and Sons'⁹, which highlights the fact that a true writer has only partial control over the fruits of his imagination, unlike that of a thinker, whose ultimate ambition it is to fully control his ideas¹⁰ In particular the main protagonist Bazarov, the nihilist, stands out in that novel, as a creation transcending its inception and plot. The author acknowledged that he was puzzled and fascinated by him, and learned to love him, and was attacked viciously both from the right and the left, the conservatives accusing him of making a nihilist and terrorist too much of an hero, the radicals censuring him from having made him into a caricature. It was indeed one of the first Russian novels I read, before Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, and it did make quite an impression on me, maybe mostly for that very reason. Life is famously claimed to imitate art, and the art of Turgenev has indeed, although he is by many considered a minor figure compared to the true giants of the Russian scene, survived, while those of most of his detractors (among which one should also, properly speaking, include the aforementioned giants, hence the qualification) have indeed faded away. Turgenev was indeed a cosmopolitan westerner, being quite at home in

⁹ The English literal translation of the Russian title is usually 'Father and Children', but one which I find puzzling and misleading, preferring the Swedish and the German

¹⁰ Thus, although Herzen tried his hand at writing novels, those attempts are now mainly forgotten, although the ideas that underpinned them were at least as developed as those of the major writers. But he simply obtruded too much in them. On the other hand his memoirs, according to Berlin, belong to the best which has ever been written.

Paris and London, enjoying the friendship and admiration of its literary luminaries, to a great extent no doubt because of his exotic not to say barbaric Russian provenance. As Berlin remarks, Turgenev may have been a man of the West, but his return as a corpse to be interred in Russian soil, proved his true allegiance. That gentle barbarian caused almost riots as he was brought to his grave, the proceedings watched by masses of spectators, uneasily held in control by the authorities.

But it is of course Tolstoy that fascinates Berlin the most, his thesis being that Tolstoy was not a second rate thinker, that his philosophical reflections in *War and Peace*, were not just add-ons, but reflected his deeply held convictions and as much of a manifestation of those as the novel itself. In the most well-known, but to my mind particularly badly written, essay in the collection, Berlin contrasts the fox with the hedgehog, the former knowing many things, the latter just one big thing. Obviously the Hedgehog is the symbol for the Platonist thinker, who looks for the unifying principle, and once having found it, letting all of reality diffract through that particular prism. While the fox is the Heraclitean sensualist, who marvels and enjoys at the confusing world of the senses, which must be taken in whole on its own, and not to be reduced to principles. Tolstoy, according to Berlin, was a fox by instinct, but tried to be a hedgehog by principle. Tolstoy, Berlin furthermore holds, was a child of the Enlightenment. His thinking was lucid and unsentimental, and he had thus deep down no sympathy for the Slavophiles and their exaltation of the Orthodox Church, although as he was not immune to the mysticism of the soil, or rather the soundness of the simple peasants, whose instincts were unsullied by education¹¹, he tended to be personally happier among them than among the westerners. To Tolstoy the conflict between nature and artifice is central. In particular he scorns everything that is 'made up' in literature¹². Thus he is no proponent of art for arts sake, and here he takes exception to the French. In fact Berlin chooses the contrast the so called French attitude to Art to the Russian. The former is compartmentalized, a persons moral character has not necessarily any influence on his artistic ability, different occupations calls forth different aspects of a personality, and there is no such thing as a general character, apart from a rather arbitrary averaging. The Russian, however, claims that a persons general character permeates everything he does. A defect person cannot be a great artist. The French is an attitude of sophistication, the Russian one of sincerity, and it is, according to Berlin, very important to keep that in mind when judging the Russian Intelligensia of the 19th century. Tolstoy is no exception. Furthermore he was obsessed by history and why it proceeds as it does, at the bottom of which lurks the perennial question of why things turn out the way they do. At the very foundation he believed in a deterministic mechanism, essentially

¹¹ Tolstoy, like all sincere philosophers, has a special animosity for sophists (or post-modernists as they are referred to nowadays). He is scathing in his critique of progressive education, and presents hilarious vignettes from his inspections from abroad.

¹² I recall from the early seventies a slim volume written by Gorki on his reminiscences of Ivanov, Chechov and Tolstoy, a book that for some reason was in the possession of my first wife. I read it many times, and one thing that particularly struck me was Tolstoys condemnation of some authors characters being 'made up'. I thought that imagination was at a premium, but in fact the greatest creative writers, I have later realise, make very few things up, but rather transform their own experience.

along the line of Laplace¹³, but he realised that such detailed knowledge was for ever beyond the capabilities of man, and thus the issue of determinism was moot. More famously he was adverse to the idea of individuals directing the flow of history, in particular the idea of a commander directing a battle and hence being able to take credit if it went his way. Tolstoy had taken part in battles in his youth and had very much appreciated the state of total confusion, thus the idea of somebody actually being in control he had found ludicrous.

As noted above, Tolstoy was no exception, he was unable as well as unwilling to separate his moral convictions from his artistic. Thus he lived out his moral persuasions repudiating his past life at an extreme age with predictably tragic results.

In hindsight it is easy to reject the core of the radical movement, that of forcing people to comply to your own view of their salvation, or rather that of future generations to which most of them would have no connection. The excesses of 20th century totalitarianism has convincingly shown the monstrous absurdity of such ambitions. Yet, as an intellectual ambition it is not unnatural. How would we react to a call for tolerance when it comes to the profligate lifestyles of modern western societies and its impact on the environment? Are we to allow shortsighted economical thinking to deprive future generations of their inheritance? Logically, a policy of toleration and a focusing on the here and now, would when ordinary means of persuasions would fail, condemn us to such an inactivity. How tempting would it not be to some of us, would we be endowed with sufficient power, to resort to draconic measures, in order to preserve the diversity of a natural world, which otherwise would be depleted beyond repair. Such an ambition would not, unlike the socialist utopias, be directed towards the material well-being of future humans, but intended to serve transhuman values, even more abstract¹⁴

Berlin has a reputation for being a sage. We need sages, and some people feel very comfortable stepping into the role. Yet, brilliant and erudite, as Berlin no doubt was, it is hard to avoid the suspicions that his expositions must have seemed far more brilliant and erudite at high table, than they subsequently did on page. When you talk, there is charm in being rambling and incoherent, and to which a mesmerizing voice no doubt can do wonders; but on the printed page, you are not so much looking for the rambling discourse as tight organization and lucidity. Berlin simply drones on, and as his essays eventually have to come to a point, they do so, but the actual truncation seems to be a matter more of exhaustion than climax. Thus his forte is not so much the exposition of ideas as the painting of portraits, in which indeed organization and sustained argument come second to vivid evocation and strong opinion. Thus his character sketches of people like Herzen and Belinsky prove to be the most enduring rewards of his essays. Jan 29, 2007

¹³ whom one probably should not take too literal, Laplace notion of an infinite intelligence, is probably no more than a 'mechanistic' provocation

¹⁴ Personally I must admit that I felt a certain satisfaction when I heard about the policy of shooting poachers at game reserves on sight. True, considering the circumstances we normally consider it to be reasonable to sacrifice lives, the protection of endangered species may seem to us eminently reasonable. Yet, once you allow violence to be perpetrated, you admit that other uses of violence may only be a matter of misjudgement, not one of principled monstrosity.