

Netochka Nezvanova

F.Dostoevsky

April 1-2, 2021

This was Dostoevsky's first attempt at a novel, but it was never completed. It is written in the first person of a young woman starved on affection and always looking for it insistently. The extant work can be divided into three sections quite independent of each other. The first recalls her unhappy childhood in poverty and squalor brought up by a mother and a step-father locked in a destructive and deeply unhappy marriage, based in the case of the wife on an illusionary love and idealization; and in the case of the man on financial calculation. The stepfather was a very talented violinist whose great illusion in his life was that he was a genius unrivaled by any other and who neglected his undeniable talent rather than risking testing it unless becoming deprived of his one justification for his life. It is noted that in the case of a true artist, art takes first place, then perhaps money and only thirdly fame. For the stepfather fame as such was paramount, the desire to be seen and admired, and his talent and his art, just a means thereof. His life turned out instead to be a relentless sequence of drinking, squandering and betrayal and abuse of his wife and step-daughter. Always complaining of his lot and alternating between pride and obsequiousness, losing all his true and supportive friends. Our young protagonist fastens her affections on her stepfather being taken by his helplessness and rejects as a consequence her mother (but will eventually revise her infantile priorities). Family life ends in a catastrophe, the mother weakened by abuse suddenly dies (maybe murdered by the husband) and the stepfather crushed by listening to a real violinist of world fame goes insane and disappears abandoning the child in the street and soon thereafter dying.

In the second stage, our Anna (Netochka) is taken up by a kindly Prince and brought up in his luxurious home together with his own young daughter Katja. Anna falls in love with Katja, who however is bored with her and finds her pitiful in view of her poverty. Her father admonishes his daughter for her haughty and prideful attitudes and she not only reforms but reciprocates the love and admiration which had been showered on her by Anna, resulting in an orgy of mutual tenderness and kisses with strong erotic over-tunes. Her mother does not look fondly on her involvement and the family moves on to Moscow.

In the third stage covering the eight years from nine to seventeen she is farmed out to an elder step-sister of Katja, by name of Aleksandra. With the former and her immediate family she loses contact. Aleksandra, trapped in an unhappy marriage with a cold and exacting official takes a motherly-sisterly interest in her, and for the first time Anna gets to enjoy a stable and constructive friendship and even an education, in which her friend takes a very active part. It is discovered that Anna not only is a capable singer, but even a talented one (and one is reminded of her stepfather), so good indeed that she is assigned a teacher and goes regularly to take lessons. The happiest she has ever been. The novel breaks up during a quarrel between husband and wife, having to do with a love letter accidentally found in a volume by Walter Scott in the library to which Anna once has sneakily acquired the key. The husband naturally attributes the letter of having

been addressed to Anna, while she knows of course that it was directed to his wife. In that quarrel the enraged husband threatens to throw her out. We do not know what will happen, because the story breaks off in mid-sentence and was never resumed. However, there is a hint of reconnecting with Katja.

The story is told with verve and is unexpectedly gripping making you quickly turn the pages. As always in Dostoevsky we are treated to a feverish imagination infecting all the characters who tend to act impulsively not to say theatrically yet engaging the reader rather than repelling him. There certainly is an element of the grotesque in the relentless emotionalism and the bizarre plot makes you think of Gogol. Still you care and regret that the novel was never completed. In fact external circumstances brought the rupture about, Dostoevsky was arrested in 1849 brought to trial and condemned to death, his sentence only commuted to Siberian exile in front of the gallows¹. It had a devastating effect on him, and changed his life deeply, and the concerns he had when writing the novel had by the time of his release faded away irretrievably and been replaced by other obsessions.

Maybe the strongest emotion depicted in the story, was that of the obsession with fame and recognition, which had deep roots in Dostoevsky's own psyche and experience. His 'Poor folks' his first story was a great success, that gratified him deeply and fueled his old dreams of greatness and the fame that clings to it. His second novel - the Double - was not such a resounding success, and it shattered his view of himself as successful, but rather than leading to acceptance and resignation, it led to a deep resentment of being a genius not recognized as such. Clearly it was on this resentment the character of the stepfather was nourished, but formed through the detachment which supposedly is the purpose of art.

In my copy there is a bookmark on page 72. I must have started it once but given up, which in retrospect seems a bit puzzling given my present reaction of excitement; but I was young then and maybe somewhat fed up by the theatracalism of the author. The bookmark is from 1977 and shows the spring program of the films shown at Brattle Theatre at Cambridge Mass, which served as a kind of film club showing mostly, but not exclusively, old movies. I recall that I went to the movies almost obsessively that spring, newly divorced and released. The book may have been bought many years before, its pages already jaundiced. In fact it was printed in a Prism paperback edition of 1971 and presented a translation by the actress Ann Dunnigan from 1970².

April 2, 2021 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se

¹ In fact he was sentenced to eight years of exile, but a sadistic element a mock death sentence was announced and the farce was carried very far, literally to the gallows, and then the sentence was commuted from eight to four years. Neverthelss the old autocratic Tsarist regime was far more humane than what the Revolution eventually would bring about

² In the Wikipedia article on the book, her translation is erroneously listed as 1972, and a newer translation by Jane Kentish is listed from 1985.