



Tolstoy or Dostoevsky: An Essay in the Old Criticism

George Steiner

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George Steiner's *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky* has become a classic among scholars of Russian literature. An essay in poetic and philosophic criticism that bears mainly on the Russian masters, *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky* deals also with larger themes: the epic tradition extending from Homer to Tolstoy; the continuity of a "tragic world view" from Oedipus Rex to King Lear and The Brothers Karamazov; the contrasts between the epic and dramatic modes, between irreconcilably opposed views of God and of history.

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"This is a book that provides new and stimulating insight into the literary masterpieces and thought of the great Russian novelists. Moreover, in this work Steiner shows a great depth and breadth of literary knowledge and criticism that is not limited alone to the Russian writers under discussion but to writers of all genres and all literary periods."—*Journal of Religion*

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Tolstoy or Dostoevsky: An Essay in the Old Criticism Details

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From Reader Review Tolstoy or Dostoevsky: An Essay in the Old Criticism for online ebook

Danny Byrne says

Classic essay comparing the two giants of C19th Russian realism. For Steiner, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky are the two greatest novelists of all time, and the spate of Russian C19th realist doorstoppers (the vintage of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Turgeniev, Gogol, Gorky and Goncharov) constitutes one of the three major pinnacles of western culture - alongside Periclean Athens and Elizabethan and Jacobean England. One doesn't have to subscribe to this view to admire Steiner's brilliantly lucid, wide-ranging analysis.

Steiner's book is subtitled 'An essay in the old criticism'. This is a reference to the New Criticism prevalent at the time, which broadly speaking approached the text as an autonomous construct whose nature lay beyond the explicatory scope of historical, biographical or ideological discourse, which regarded the intention of the author as largely irrelevant, and according to which the role of the critic lay primarily in formal analysis. While Steiner does employ formal analysis insofar as it serves the purposes of his broader thesis, more generally he is guided by Sartre's view that "the technique of a novel always refers us back to the metaphysic of the novelist". As he notes in the preface, the fact that a version this view has since become resurgent in literary criticism may account in part for the longevity of Steiner's essay.

For Steiner, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky's novels are manifestations of contrasting and mutually irreconcilable world-views, which account for their contrasting character as artists. Essentially, Tolstoy is Homer, Dostoevsky is Shakespeare. Tolstoy has a Hellenic world-view, Dostoevsky's is tragic. Tolstoy's novels employ the techniques of the epic poet, Dostoevsky's those of the tragic dramatist. Whereas Tolstoy's 'metaphysic' is humanistic, rationalist and Pagan, Dostoevsky's tortured Christianity paves the way for existentialism, steeped in a belief in mankind's tragic freedom and the inevitability of human suffering. Whereas Tolstoy believed the good society could be created here on earth through reason, Dostoevsky believed salvation could only be attained through irrational faith. Whereas Tolstoy's genius lay in the passionate pursuit of truth at all costs, for Dostoevsky the truths of rationalism are an illusion and potentially an obstacle to faith.

George says

Ε?ναι Στ?ινερ, που και το πιο απλ? θ?μα μπορε? να το αναβιβ?σει σε αντικε?μενο αναγνωστικ?ς απ?λαυσης. ?ταν το θ?μα του, τ?ρα, ε?ναι ?δη απ? σπουδαι?τερα στη νε?τερη λογοτεχν?α (για δ?ο κορυφ?σεις αντικρυστ?ς και σπ?νιες), απλ?ς καθ?μαστε και απολαμβ?νουμε την πρ?ιμη γραφ? του Στ?ινερ να αναλ?ει δοκιμιακ? το ?ργο του Τολστ?ι και του Ντοστογ?φσκι, φ?ρνοντ?ς τα σε δι?λογο ?χι μ?νο με το κλασικ? γαλλικ? μυθιστ?ρημα και ?λλους μυθιστοριογ?φους, αλλ? εντ?σσοντ?ς τα στη χορε?α που ακολουθο?ν, δ?πλα στον ?μηρο ? τον Σα?ξπηρ. Και, χωρ?ς προκατ?ληψη, ανατ?μνει το ιδεολογικ? περιεχ?μεν? τους. Το κε?μενο του Στ?ινερ πιστοποιε? την εναρκτ?ρια διατ?πωσ? του ?τι "η λογοτεχνικ? κριτικ? πρ?πει να γεννη?ται απ? ?να χρ?ος αγ?πης" -παρ?τι και το "πρ?πει" και το "χρ?ος αγ?πης" ?ρουμε πως δ?σκολα τα υπερασπ?ζεται ο σημεριν?ς 'υποψιασμ?νος' αναγν?στης. Μια υπ?ροχη εισαγωγ? σε ?ναν ολ?κληρο κ?σμο! Σαν να μας κ?νει να αναρωτηθο?με ποιος νομ?ζει ?τι μπορε? να διαβ?ζει τα μυθιστορ?ματα της τελευτα?ας, κ?θε φορ?, εσοδε?ας, χωρ?ς να ?χει βυθιστε? κ?ποια στιγμ? στη ζω? του Πιερ ? στον μ?θο του Μ?γα Ιεροεξεταστ?, χωρ?ς να αγ?ζει το θε?ο και δαιμονικ? υποσυνε?δητο των βασανισμ?νων ρ?σων

ηρ?ων της π?λης και της υπα?θρου, χωρ?ς να γ?νει Σ?νια ? Αλι?σα, αρνητ?ς ? πιστ?ς, λογικ?ς ? δραματικ?ς, χωρ?ς να κρατ?σει ποτ? σημει?σεις απ? το δικ? του υπ?γειο;

Matt says

A wonderful book. As weird and nerdy as it may sound, I enjoyed this book as a portable conversation. I carried it in my pocket on the T (for me, like a lot of readers, there's just no excuse for empty time) and read it intermittently over the course of a couple months. It got so I'd look forward to a little tete-a-tete with Professor Steiner amid the din of the trolley cars, heading to my girlfriend's place after a long day of work.

Steiner's prose is genteel, measured, with odd Englishy flourishes. He knows his stuff, zeroes in on what he's after, and has a wide range of referential material to support his case. I'm a sucker for any form of comparative literature, especially (but not only) when I have a sufficient bit of history with the authors in question. Either/or juxtapositions might be a little philosophically dubious, of course, and could arguably be seen as essentially reductive but I'm more prone to thinking in this kind of symbolic, quasi-Hegelian way myself so I generally ignore the naysaying argument and dive right in.

I think the juxtaposition is a fine one- Tolstoy and Dostoevsky have quite a bit in common on their own merits (tormented existential doubts, political obsessions, large canvases, epiphanies, a tendency to didacticism and allegory, "Russian-ness") but the really interesting part is not so much where they differ but where they sort of interweave with each other: stylistically, philosophically, politically. Steiner is fascinated by the dialectic between the two writers' *pas de deux* and wisely decides to gently wind them up and let them go.

Here's the next-to-last paragraph, a gloriously architected run-on sentence which serves as summation and precis. It's not a spoiler, don't worry, since the basic premise of the book is as easily found on the back cover as it would be pretty much anywhere else in the body of the text. I'm quoting it not only because I need to quote more in these things but because it's georgeous, spot-on, and powerfully imagined- antiphonal, really.

This is my idea of criticism- elegant, erudite, ironic, leaning just this side of lyricism. For contemporary readers (the book's from 1960, and Steiner himself says in a 1966 foreword that he would have phrased almost the entire book differently had he written it later) I don't know if it's outdated or fogeyish or what, but here it is:

"Thus, beyond their deaths, the two novelists stand in contrariety. Tolstoy, the foremost heir to the traditions of the epic; Dostoevsky, one of the major dramatic tempers after Shakespeare; Tolstoy, the mind intoxicated with reason and fact; Dostoevsky the contemner of rationalism, the great lover of paradox; Tolstoy, the poet of the land, of the rural setting and the pastoral mood; Dostoevsky, the arch-citizen, the master-building of the modern metropolis is the province of language; Tolstoy, thirsting for the truth, destroying himself and those around him in excessive pursuit of it; Dostoevsky, rather against the truth than against Christ, suspicious of total understanding and on the side of mystery; Tolstoy, 'keeping at all times', in Coleridge's phrase, 'in the high road of life' Dostoevsky, advancing into the labyrinth of the unnatural, into the cellarage and morass of the soul; Tolstoy, like a colossus bestriding the palpable earth, evoking the realness, the tangibility, the sensible entirety of concrete experience; Dostoevsky, always on the verge of the hallucinatory, of the spectral, always vulnerable to daemonic intrusions into what might prove, in the end, to have been merely a tissue of dreams; Tolstoy, the embodiment of health and Olympian vitality; Dostoevsky, the sum of energies charged with illness and possession; Tolstoy, who saw the destinies of men historically

and in the stream of time; Dostoevsky, who saw them contemporaneously and in the vibrant sense stasis of the dramatic moment; Tolstoy, borne to his grave in the first civil burial ever held in Russia; Dostoevsky, laid to rest in the cemetery of the Alexander Nevsky monastery in St Petersburg amid the solemn rites of the Orthodox church; Dostoevsky, pre-eminently the man of God; Tolstoy, one of His secret challengers."

Amen.

You could argue that this is antiquated thinking, and who knows but you might be right, but if this is high-blown critical language I for one am totally in favor.

The Millions has a wonderful essay up today wherein the author poses this question to several experts and writers. Your Humble Servant offered some blathering in the comments section. Read, enjoy, and comment!

<http://www.themillions.com/2012/04/to...>

Josef Del Processo says

NON SOLO DOSTOEVSKIJ vs TOLSTOJ

Magari esagero, ma questo saggio individua nei due giganti russi i prototipi, o forse meglio le massime espressioni, dei due possibili modi di fare letteratura, vale a dire dei due possibili modi di porsi dell'essere umano di fronte al mondo: l'uomo è "nella storia del mondo", oppure è solo di fronte allo "stupore del mondo"? L'esperienza dell'uomo è un'epica o una tragedia? Tutto nasce da qui, e in effetti è molto difficile che uno si possa sentire in sintonia con entrambi gli autori: la "o" del titolo è pienamente azzeccata!

Tim McIntosh says

Maybe the best book of literary criticism I've ever read. Steiner's thesis is that these -- the world's two greatest novelists -- have rival conceptions of not only the techniques of fiction, but also salvation, society, sin, God, and redemption. Tolstoy is in the epic tradition that descends from Homer. Dostoevsky, on the other hand, belongs within the bounds of the "tragic" writers descending from Oedipus Rex.

My friend Julie and I used to play "Tolstoy or Dostoevsky". It consisted of us talking about common friends and whether they were more Tolstoyan or Dostoevkian. Always fun at parties.

Joaquim says

O melhor livro de crítica literária que teve nas minhas mãos, sem dúvida. Steiner se mergulha na basta produção literária dos dois maiores romancistas russos, Leon Tolstoi e Fiodr Dostoiévski, analisando suas formas de narrar desde um ponto de vista filosófico e muito profundo. Um livro de leitura obrigada, que abre olhos e abre mentes e te cativa mais e mais a medida que avançam as páginas.

Tom Walsh says

The section on "The Idiot" (my favorite Dostoevsky novel) has so many new and thoughtful insights I had to get out the old index cards and make notes. I really enjoyed this book. He compares Tolstoy's "War and Peace" to the Iliad of Homer. I'm surprised and delighted by this analogy: the more I ponder it, the more clear it becomes! He also slices out Russian Literature as an anomaly, because it does not fit objective nor subjective criticism. Also, the effect of Flaubert is discussed on each author.

Stefania says

?να ερ?τημα που δεν απαντ?θηκε απ? τον ?διο αλλ? το υπ?ροχο αυτ? βιβλ?ο-δοκ?μιο βοηθ?ει εμ?ς να δ?σουμε τη δικ? μας απ?ντηση. Τολστ?? δι?βασα αρκετ? μικρ? (Π?λεμος και Ειρ?νη και ?ννα Καρ?νινα), παρ?τι αναγν?ρισα το μεγαλε?ο του δεν μπ?ρεσε ποτ? να με συνεπ?ρει. Το πρ?το βιβλ?ο που δι?βασα απ? Ντοστογ?φσκι ?ταν ο Ηλ?θιος ?ταν ?μουν φοιτ?τρια, αγ?ρασα μετ? απ? αυτ? σχεδ?ν ?λα τα βιβλ?α του. Ο Ηλ?θιος παρ?μεινε π?ντα το αγαπημ?νο μου.
Ο Σταινερ σε μια παρ?γραφο του αιτιολογε? τη δικ? μου προτ?μηση: "Σε αντ?θεση με τον Τολστο? , ο ?τεγκτος ?λεγχος του οπο?ου επ? των ηρ?ων του και η παντογνωσ?α του δεν ε?ναι παρ? μια μεταφορ? για τον τρ?πο με τον οπο?ο κυβερν? ο Θε?ς τις τ?χες των ανθρ?πων, ο Ντοστογ?φσκι, ?πως κ?θε γν?σιος δραματουργ?ς, μοι?ζει να ακο?ει μ?σα του την ανεξαρτησ?α και απρ?βλεπτη δυναμικ? της δρ?σης".
Επ?σης ο Τολστ?? ?ταν γεμ?τος φ?ση , φως και δ?ναμη , ο Ντοστογ?φσκι γοτθικ?ς , χωρ?ς να φοβ?ται ποτ? την αρρ?στια , τα υπ?γεια, τις αδυναμ?ες και το σκοτ?δι, ?σα ?σα π?στευε ?τι αυτ? κ?ποια στιγμ? μπορο?ν να οδηγ?σουν στο φως.
Ευχαριστ? επ?σης τον Σταιν?ρ , ?χι μ?νο γιατ? με βο?θησε να αιτιλογ?σω τη προτ?μηση μου αλλ? και γιατ? με βο?θησε να καταλ?βω γιατ? ακριβ?ς αγαπ? τον Nick Cave, ε?ναι ο Ντοστογ?φσκι της μουσικ?ς και των στ?χων!

John Pistelli says

This is a superb book. It abounds in literary-historical insight; it goes to the heart of these authors' achievements. The title is a bit misleading in that it's not really about deciding whether Tolstoy or Dostoevsky is "better" but about contrasting their literary modes: the point of the book, in fact, is that these two figures represent poles of thought and value between which western culture has been torn since its beginnings. Steiner's thesis is that, despite the many dislocations of modernity, western culture is still comprehensible as a unity, and the two Russian masters of the novel are best understood as carrying on ancient traditions: Tolstoy as the modern master of epic, the legatee of Homer, and Dostoevsky as our great tragedian, inheritor of the Athenian playwrights and of Shakespeare.

But Steiner has a bigger point to argue, namely, that these modes--epic and tragedy--are not merely aesthetic but metaphysical, ethical, and political, bearing within themselves two very different attitudes toward life. In the Homeric-Tolstoyan epic, we find a land-based evocation of natural rhythms, of the vast movements of the seasons, an ultimately hopeful sense that vitality surges on through and past the individual, who would do well to join him- or herself to the motions of the earth. In the Shakespearean-Dostoevskian tragedy, on the

other hand, we see a deracinated court-and-city world of mistrust, suspicion, demonic urges, weird passions, perverse convictions, pervasive violence, cruel comedy, an underground perspective that ends in chastened humility before the suffering mystery of things. Therefore, Tolstoy's pagan-Christianity demands that we realize the Kingdom of God on earth and leads to such utopian political ideologies as communism, anarchism, and possibly national socialism. For Dostoevsky, on the other hand, free will in the face of the divine and of evil is paramount, is the essence of the holy in humanity; though the far less secular and far more reactionary of the two, Dostoevsky therefore has the metaphysical outlook more amenable to a free society. Steiner implies all this in a concluding allegorical re-write of the "Legend of the Grand Inquisitor" as a debate between the Inquisitor (Tolstoy) and Christ (Dostoevsky), as if replying in advance to this article that made the rounds a few months ago.

Steiner insists that the New Criticism reigning in the 1950s when he wrote--with its focus on the well-wrought urn, the formally balanced lyric poem, the necessity of cool irony, the functionally authorless text--can't handle Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, can't address their old-fashioned creation of fiercely passionate religious/philosophical novels bursting with a moral urgency that can hardly be contained by the slyly ironic indirections of a T. S. Eliot or Henry James. Thus, he turns to an older and more holistic critical approach:

[New Criticism's] concentration on the single image or cluster of language, its bias against extrinsic or biographical evidence, its preference for the poetic over the prosaic forms, are out of tune with the governing qualities of Tolstoyan and Dostoevskyan fiction. Hence the need for an "old criticism" equipped with the wide-ranging civilization of an Arnold, a Saint-Beuve, and a Bradley. Hence also the need for a criticism prepared to commit itself to a study of the looser and larger modes. In his *Quintessence of Ibsenism*, Shaw observed that "there is not one of Ibsen's characters who is not, in the old phrase, the temple of the Holy Ghost, and who does not move you at moments by the sense of that mystery."

When we seek to understand *Anna Karenina*, such old phrases are in order.

This book abounds in quotable passages--on the reasons America and Russia produced the weirdest and most intense nineteenth-century novels, on why *Anna Karenina* is better than *Madame Bovary*, on the function of Homeric metaphor, on the Gothic sources of Dostoevsky's manner and matter, on the two authors' varying fates under communism and liberalism, and more. A brilliant work of criticism.

Bookfreak says

Κλασικ? (δηλαδ? ερμηνευτικ? κρ?σιμη) μελ?τη απ? ?ναν μεγ?λο για δ?ο συγγραφε?ς που καθ?ρισαν την Λογοτεχν?α.

must read που λ?με και στο χωρι?.

Erik Graff says

Having a girlfriend devoted to Russian literature I endeavored to read everything by Dostoevsky and

Tolstoy. She preferred the former, so I almost finished him. I preferred Tolstoy and only read a portion of his work. Such is love.

I approached Steiner with the naive expectation that he would provide me with arguments pro and con our respective preferences, maybe helping me understand and appreciate both my girlfriend and Dostoevsky better. He didn't, though I cannot fault his erudition or writing style for that.

Sara says

Maravilloso. Increíble. Creo que no he disfrutado nunca tanto de un ensayo, así que estoy preparadísima para seguir leyendo a Steiner. (#TeamTolstoy, por cierto).

Yousef Nabil says

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Nikos Tsentemeidis says

Κατ' αρχ?ς δεν ε?ναι μια "μ?χη" που αναδεικν?ει νικητ?, ?σως δεν βρισκ?ταν καν στην πρ?θεση του Steiner. Το μεγαλ?τερο κ?ρδος για μ?να ?ταν ο Tolstoy, τον οπο?α ε?χα υποτιμ?σει. Β?βαια, αντ? ?σχυε μ?χρις ?του δι?βασα την ?ννα Καρ?νινα.

Επειδ? κ?θε ?νθρωπος απ? κ?που επηρε?ζεται, ο Steiner επιμ?νει ?χι απλ?ς να μιλ?ει για τις πηγ?ς επιρρο?ς του καθεν?ς, αλλ? να συγκρ?νει τον Tolstoy με τον ?μηρο και τον Dostoyevsky με τον Shakespeare. Τους θεωρε? τ?σο σπουδα?ους, που δεν βρ?σκει αν?λογ? τους σε χ?ρες με μεγ?λη παρ?δοση στη λογοτεχν?α ?πως η Γαλλ?α.

Στα πρ?τα κεφ?λαια μιλ?ει περισσ?τερο για τους μεγ?λους της λογοτεχν?ας, κυρ?ως, του 19ου αι?να, ?σον αφο? τον τρ?πο σκ?ψης κτλ. Κ?που εκε? διαβ?ζεται πολ? ευχ?ριστα και απ? κ?ποιον που δεν ?χει ξαναδιαβ?σει τους δ?ο P?σουνς. Στη συν?χεια ξεκιν?ει η αν?λυση των ?ργων ξεχωριστ?, και σε σ?γκριση μεταξ? τους. Κι εδ? ε?ναι το καλ?τερο σημε?ο του βιβλ?ου, γιατ? βοηθ?ει να αντιληφθο?με ακ?μα περισσ?τερο το μεγαλε?ο και των δ?ο.

Δεν ε?ναι βιβλ?ο που απευθ?νεται αποκλειστικ? σε μελετη?ς, αλλ? στον κ?θε αναγ?στη του Tolstoy και του Dostoyevsky. Το μ?νο σ?γουρο ε?ναι ?τι θα ξαναδιαβ?σω τα περισσ?τερα απ? τα μεγ?λα ?ργα και των δ?ο, ?χοντας πλ?ον στο μυαλ? μου την οπτικ? του Steiner, ο οπο?ος ε?ναι εξαιρετικ? ταλαντο?χος. Δε θυμ?μαι ?λλη φορ? να δι?βασα δοκ?μιο, σαν μυθιστ?ρημα.

Eduardo says

I've read this book 4 times since I bought back in the 90s, it provides what I think is an excellent overview of two of the greatest writers of the 19th Century as well as Russia, he clearly shows how different they were in their philosophical/artistic/theological outlook. The book read so well one tends to forget it is a literary critique, I highly recommend it to anyone who is interested in a wonderful study of two great minds and writers.
