

Dostoievsky's Prince Myshkin, “The Idiot,” in Our Time and Counterrevolution

(This essay by Professor Robert Hickson has been posted on the *Apropos* website:
www.apropos.org.uk)

Epigraph

“Those qualities which are peculiar to his [Dostoievsky's] genius [are] more characteristic still in *The Idiot*, **in the main character** of which [i.e., Prince Myshkin] **the very soul and spirit of Dostoievsky breathe and live.** The hero of *The Idiot*, Prince Mwishkin, is the type of Ivan Durak [of Russian Folklore], the simple fool who by his simplicity outwits the wisdom of the wise [and cynically cunning].” (Maurice Baring, *Landmarks in Russian Literature* (London: Methuen & Co LTD, 1960—first published in 1910), p. 126—my emphasis added)

“I have quoted this episode [with General Epanchin at his house], which occurs in the second chapter of the book [*The Idiot*], in full, because in it **the whole character of the prince is revealed.** He is the wise fool. He suffers from epilepsy, and **this 'sacred' illness** which has fallen on him **has destroyed all those parts of the intellect out of which our faults grow, such as irony, arrogance and egotism.** He is absolutely simple. **He has the brains of a man, the tenderness of a woman and the heart of a child.** He knows nothing of any barriers, either of class or character. He is the same and absolutely himself with everyone. And yet his **unsuspicious naïveté, his untarnished sincerity and simplicity, are combined with penetrating intuition,** so that he can read other people's minds like a book.” (Maurice Baring, *Landmarks in Russian Literature* (1910, 1960), pp.129-130—my emphasis added)

“[Prince Myshkin said:] ‘And how could he [that father] envy me and slander me when he himself lived with children? **Children heal the soul.**’ Into the character of the hero of this book Dostoievsky has put all the sweetness of his nature, all his sympathy with the unfortunate, all his pity for the sick, **all his sympathy and love of children. The character of Prince Mwishkin reflects all that is best in Dostoievsky.** He is a portrait not of what Dostoievsky was, but **what the author would like to have been....**All through Dostoievsky's books, **whenever children are mentioned or appear, the pages breathe a kind of freshness and fragrance like that of lilies-of-the-valley. Whatever he says about children or whatever he makes them say, has the rare accent of truth. The smile of children lights up the dark pages of his books, like spring flowers growing at the edge of a dark abyss.**” (Maurice Baring, *Landmarks in Russian Literature* (1910, 1960), pp. 131-132—my emphasis added; there are variant spellings of “Dostoievsky,” especially the transliterated “y”s and “i”s, and inconsistently so, both in the cited books and in this essay.)

“Dostoievski... **sees the soul of man whole, and perhaps he sees more deeply into it than any other writer has done.** He shrinks from nothing. **He sees the 'soul of goodness in things evil':** not exclusively the evil, like Zola [the French author, Émile Zola (d.1902)]; nor does he evade the evil like many of our [English] writers.” (Maurice Baring, *A Year in Russia* [in 1905-1906](London: Methuen & Company, 1907 p. 126—my emphasis added)

Prince Myshkin – a consoling balm

After reading together with my wife last night our Austrian friend Friedrich Romig's carefully crafted and profound review of a 2013 book in German by Botho Strauss,¹ we even started to consider, in light of Dostoevsky's presentation of Prince Myshkin, a rather unexpected theme, namely (in my wife's own words) "**holiness as counterrevolution.**"²

We also then continued—though it was very late in the evening—to talk a little of Fyodor Dostoevsky himself and of Maurice Baring's own special appreciation of *The Idiot* and of its deep-souled Russian author. (Dostoevsky died in 1881 and Maurice Baring wrote deeply of him and his writings in the early twentieth century. Baring was himself then traveling widely in Russia, first during the 1904-1905 Russo-Japanese War and then for almost a decade afterwards, that is, up until the mid-summer of 1914, just before the outbreak of World War I; and, moreover, because Baring knew the Russian language so well, he also learnedly introduced Russian literature to the West, especially to an English-speaking audience, to include the then-little-known resonant poetry of Alexander Pushkin (d.1837), both his lyrics and his *Eugene Onegin*.)

The very fact that both Botho Strauss (b. 4 December 1944) and Friedrich Romig (b. 21 September 1926) have now distinctively re-discovered and reinforcingly written about such a profound Russian novel and its hero of purity and integrity is not only inspiring and immediately nourishing to our own souls, but it is, when more fully considered, an external channel of Grace for others, too. We should, therefore, now consider Prince Myshkin not only in his time in the later nineteenth century (1868-1869), but in our own time in the twenty-first century. The ideal and character of Prince Myshkin may even be an example and consoling balm for us, as well as a further aid to our own moral resistance to cultural disorder (and vice) as part of a larger counterrevolution: **a counterrevolution that is also a spiritual affirmation.**

Seeing the soul of goodness in things evil

Botho Strauss is now almost seventy years of age and Professor Romig is almost eighty-eight years of age, and still a lucid-minded and articulate writer (and even still a vivid glider pilot or co-pilot over the Alps!). Yet, both of their uncommonly appreciative and attentive hearts are still so open to be deeply touched by Dostoevsky himself; and even to see our true need for more examples of Prince Myshkin's qualities today—even perpetually seeing “the soul of goodness in things evil”—in part, in order to fortify us against the subversive cunning and greed and sensuality and prideful, often perfidious, cynicism drifting afloat and moving about today in our revolutionary, increasingly dissolving, and restless and rootless society. As the long lines of sincere mourners so eloquently demonstrated at his January 1881 funeral in St. Petersburg, Dostoevsky had even then deeply touched and consoled the hearts of all levels of people from all over Russia, from high estate to low, and so did the special character of Prince Myshkin. May it be so once again today, and always.

1 Friedrich Romig, “Botho Strauss—*der Idiot in Unserer Zeit: Heute ist Idiot, wer sein Leben hingibt für seine Freunde*” (vgl. Joh 15,13) [“Botho Strauss—the Idiot in Our Time: Today is an Idiot whoever sacrificially gives his life for his friends” (cf. John 15:13)—a Review Essay (4 pp.) of Botho Strauss' book, *Lichter des Toren—Der Idiot und seine Zeit*” (München: Diederichs-Verlag, 2013), 175 pages. [*Lights of the Idiot (or The Idiot's Lights): The Idiot in His Time*]

2 As a consequence of our late-evening discussion **on this theme of loyal holiness and faithful resistance**, my German wife Maike, I am happy to report, also now intends to write an essay on another vivid example of this same theme, which is to be seen in the Austrian author, Enrica von Handel-Mazzetti's historical novel, entitled *Stephana Schwertner*—a trilogy published in 1913-1914, just before the outbreak of World War I, and set in Austria in 1615, three years **before** the outbreak of the terrible Thirty Years' War (1618-1648). Handel-Mazzetti's earlier, somewhat famous, historical novel, *Jesse und Maria*, was published in 1906, but takes place some three years **after** the Thirty Years' War; and it takes place along the Danube (Donau) west of Vienna, in and around the village of Dürnstein in Austria and its Catholic Shrine of Maria Tafel.

A power that only music has

In his 1914 book, entitled *An Outline of Russian Literature*, Maurice Baring wrote the following poignant and manifoldly revealing words about Dostoevsky's death and funeral and the mysterious balm of his literature:³

*He died in January 1881; the crowds of men and women of all sorts and conditions of life that attended his funeral, and the extent and sincerity of the grief manifested, gave it almost mythical greatness. The people gave him a funeral such as few kings or heroes have ever had. Without fear of controversy or contradiction one can now say that Dostoyevsky's place in Russian literature is at the top, equal and in the opinion of some superior to that of Tolstoy in greatness. **He is also one of the greatest writers the world has ever produced**, NOT because, like Tolstoy, he saw life steady and saw it whole and painted it with the supreme and easy art of a [great Spaniard,] Velasquez; NOR because, like Turgenev, he wove exquisite pictures into musical words. Dostoyevsky was NOT an artist; his work is shapeless; his books are like quarries where granite and dross, gold and ore are mingled. He paid no attention to style, **and yet so strong and vital is his spoken word** that when the Moscow Art Theatre put some scenes in *The Brothers Karamazov* and *Devils* [i.e., *The Possessed*] on the stage, **they found that they could not alter one single syllable; and sometimes his words have a power beyond that of words, a power that only music has.**⁴*

A light on the Russian character

Before we concentrate on the character of Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot*, it is fitting to continue to savor Maurice Baring's own 1914 perceptions and deeper insights about Dostoevsky's complete work, to include his publication of *Letters from a Dead House*, which has "a far more universal interest," because:

*It is the record of prison experiences, which is of **priceless value, not only on account of its radiant moral beauty, its perpetual discovery of the soul of goodness in things evil, its human fraternity, its complete absence of egotism and pose, and its thrilling human interest, but also on account of the light it throws on the Russian character, the Russian poor, and the Russian peasant** [indeed, at times, "his almost intolerable pathos" because of "his love of the disinherited and of the failures of life"].⁵*

Moreover, Dostoevsky's later great work, *The Brothers Karamazov* (1866) was, regrettably, to be left unfinished or, rather, incomplete. In Baring's words:

*At the end of the seventies [the 1870s], he returned to a work already begun, *The Brothers**

3 Maurice Baring was actually present in person in St. Petersburg, Russia on 24 February 1906 for the twenty-fifth anniversary of the death of Dostoevsky. He records that experience in his 1907 book, *A Year in Russia* (London: Methuen & Company, 1907), page 121, where he says, in part: "They are celebrating [on the adjusted calendar] the 25th anniversary of the death of Dostoevski, and the fact has brought back to my mind, with great vividness, a conversation I had with the [Cossack and other] officers of the battery at Jen-tzen-tung [in Manchuria] last September [1905], and which I have already noted in my diary [p.18]." Baring's entire vivid Chapter XI (pp. 121-127) is on Dostoevsky, and is unassumingly entitled "Dostoevski's Anniversary—St. Petersburg, February 24th [1906]." We shall return to this Chapter XI later, for Baring's own germinating insights, and the informed good literary insights of the military officers.

4 Maurice Baring, *An Outline of Russian Literature* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1914), pp. 221-222—my emphasis added

5 *Ibid*, p. 214—my emphasis added.

*Karamazov, which, although it remains the longest of his books, was never finished...The book [in its fullness] was [to be] called the History of a Great Sinner, and the sinner [surprisingly!] was to be Alyosha. But Dostoyevsky died before this part of the subject is even approached.*⁶

Reflecting the divine aura of love

In his larger commentary of Dostoyevsky's writings, Baring, with the help of contrasts, so discerningly says:

*There are pages where Dostoyevsky expresses **the anguish of soul** in the same manner as [Richard] Wagner expressed the delirium of dying Tristram [in *Tristan und Isolde* (1865)]. I should indeed put the matter the other way round, and say that in the last act of *Tristram*, Wagner is as great as Dostoyevsky. **But Dostoyevsky is great because of the divine message he gives, not didactically, not by sermons, but by the goodness that emanates, like a precious balm, from the characters [like the humble Prince Myshkin] he creates; because more than any other books in the world his books reflect not only the teaching and the charity, but the accent and the divine aura of love that is in the Gospels.***⁷

May we continue to reflect upon these last words.

Bless life and cause others to bless life

Moreover, as to “what Dostoyevsky's books do,” Baring adds:

*His spirit addresses our spirit. “Be no man's judge; **humble love is a terrible power** which effects more than violence. **Only active love can bring out faith.** Love men, and do not be afraid of their sins; love man in his sin; love all the creatures of God, **and pray God to make you cheerful. Be cheerful as the children and as the birds.**” This was Father Zosima's advice to **Alyosha**. And that is the gist of Dostoyevsky's message to mankind. “Life,” Father Zosima also says to Alyosha, “will bring you misfortunes, but you will be happy on account of them, **and you will bless life and cause others to bless life.**” Here we have **the whole secret of Dostoyevsky's greatness. He blessed life, and he caused others to bless it.***⁸

Cast in the nethermost circle of life's inferno

In his integrity, Baring first presents the objections to Dostoyevsky—as they were forcefully articulated **before** World War I—and he then attempts to answer those understandable objections:

*It is objected that his characters [even his Prince Myshkin] are abnormal; that he deals with the diseased, with epileptics, neurasthenics, criminals, sensualists, madmen; **but it is just this very fact which gives so much strength to the blessing he gave to life; it is owing to this fact that he causes others to bless life;** because he [like the later Dostoyevsky-admiring and affirming Solzhenitsyn in the Gulag] was cast in the nethermost circle of life's inferno; he was thrown together with the refuse of humanity, with the worst of humanity and with the most misfortunate; **he saw the human soul on the rack;** he [unlike Tolstoy] **faced the evil** without fear or **blinkers;** and there, in the inferno, in the dust and the ashes, **he recognized the print of divine footsteps and the fragrance of goodness;** he cried from the abyss: “Hosanna*

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 220-221.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 222—my emphasis added.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 223—my emphasis added.

to the Lord, for He is just!" **and he blessed life.** It is true that his characters are taken almost entirely from the *Despised and Rejected*, as one of his books was called, and often from the ranks of the abnormal; **but when a great writer wishes to reveal the greatest adventures and deepest experiences which the soul of man can undergo,** it is vain for him to take the normal type; it has no adventures. The adventures of the soul of Fortinbras [in Shakespeare] would be of no help to mankind; but the adventures of Hamlet [in the same play] **are of help to mankind, and the adventures of Don Quixote [!];** and neither Don Quixote nor Hamlet are normal types.⁹

A message of hope

By way of conclusion to his spiritual assessment of Dostoevsky's life and intimate writings, Maurice Baring will have us consider this formative insight, as well:

Dostoyevsky wrote **the tragedy of life and of the soul,** and to do this he chose circumstances as terrific as those which unhinged the reason of King Lear, shook that of Hamlet, and made [Sophocles'] *Œdipus* blind himself. His books resemble Greek tragedies **by the magnitude of the spiritual adventures they set forth;** they are **unlike Greek Tragedies in the Christian charity and the faith and the hope which goes out of them; they inspire the reader with courage, never with despair,** although Dostoyevsky, **face to face with the last extremities of evil,** never seeks to hide it or to shun it, **but to search for the soul of goodness in it. He did not search in vain,** and just as, when he was on his way to Siberia, a conversation he had with a fellow-prisoner inspired that fellow-prisoner with the feeling that he could go on living and even face penal servitude, **so do Dostoyevsky's books come to mankind as a message of hope from a radiant country.** This is what constitutes his peculiar greatness.¹⁰

How to read Dostoevsky

In his slightly earlier book, *Landmarks in Russian Literature* (1910), Baring had also spoken modestly about the special place of *The Idiot* in Dostoevsky's writing:

Should such a one [should such a "reader" on "a voyage of exploration"] decide that the exploration [of Dostoevsky] is to him attractive and worth his while, I should advise him [despite a slight change in the strict chronology] **to begin with** *The Letters from a Dead House*, and to go on with *The Idiot*, *Crime and Punishment*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*; and to read *The Possessed* [also called *The Devils*] last of all. **If he understands and appreciates *The Letters from a Dead House*, he will be able to understand and appreciate the character of Dostoevsky and the main ideas which lie at the root of all his books. If he is able to understand and appreciate *The Idiot*, he will be able to understand and appreciate the whole of Dostoevsky's writings.**¹¹

Baring's analysis of Prince Myshkin

What does Maurice Baring himself say—what would he now have us especially know—about *The Idiot*, more specifically—to include his further insights about Prince Myshkin and his qualities? For, he says, more specifically:

9 *Ibid.*, pp. 223-224—italics in the original; my bold emphasis added.

10 *Ibid.*, pp. 224-225—my emphasis added.

11 Maurice Baring, *Landmarks in Russian Literature* (1910, 1960), page 156—my bold emphasis added.

The Idiot **may not be** the most artistic of all his books, in the sense that it is not centralized and is often diffuse, which is not the case with *Crime and Punishment*, **but it is perhaps the most characteristic, the most personal, for none but Dostoevsky could have invented and caused to live such a character as Prince Mwishkin [Myshkin], and made him positively radiate goodness and love.**¹²

Earlier in his brief treatment of *The Idiot*, Maurice Baring compactly and memorably describes Prince Myshkin [Mwishkin] by way of a fuller introduction to his character and conduct:

We make his acquaintance in a **third-class** railway carriage of the train which is arriving at St. Petersburg from Warsaw. **He is a young man about twenty-six years old**, with thick fair hair, sloping shoulders and a very slight fair beard; **his eyes are large, light-blue, and penetrating**; in his expression there is **something tranquil but burdensome**, something of that strange look which enables physicians to recognise at first glance a victim of falling sickness. **In his hand he is carrying a bundle** made of old foulard [scarf-material] **which is his whole luggage**. A fellow-traveller enters into conversation with him. **He answers with unusual alacrity**. Being asked whether he has been absent long, he says that it is over four years since he was in Russia, that he was sent abroad on account of his health—**on account of some strange nervous illness** like St. Vitus' dance. As he listens, his fellow-traveller **laughs**, and **especially** when to the question, "Did they cure you?" the fair-haired man answers, "No, they did not cure me." The dark-haired man is Rogozhin, a merchant [himself a rogue and, later, also a passionate murderer of what he loved, purportedly]. These two characters are the two figures round which the drama centres and is played.¹³

His simplicity conquers

One of Prince Myshkin's purposes in coming to St. Petersburg is to find the wife of General Epanchin, a charming woman with three daughters who is a distant relation of the Prince, and thus directly, and with his becoming simplicity, "he presents himself at the general's house with his bundle."¹⁴ Baring gives us some further words to savor, which disclose a little more Prince Myshkin's qualities:

The general receives him, and he is just as frank and simple with the general as he has [just] been with the servant. He is entirely without means, **and has nothing in the world save his little bundle.** The general inquires whether his handwriting is good, and resolves to get him some secretarial work; he gives him 25 roubles, and arranges that that the prince shall live in his [nearby male] secretary's ["Ganya's"] house. The general makes the prince stay for luncheon, and introduces him to his family. The general's wife is a charming, rather childish person, and she has three daughters, Alexandra, Adelaide, and Aglaia [!]. **The prince astonishes them very much by his simplicity. They cannot quite understand at first whether he is a child or a knave, but his simplicity conquers them.** After they have talked of various matters, his life in Switzerland, the experiences of a man condemned to death, which had been related to him..., [i.e., about] an execution which he [the teller of the tale] had [himself] witnessed, one of the girls [suddenly] asks him [the Prince] if he was ever in love. "No," he says, "I have never been in love...I was happy otherwise."¹⁵

¹² Maurice Baring, *Landmarks in Russian Literature* (1910), p. 134—my emphasis added.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 126-127—my emphasis added.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 130—my emphasis added.

An icily terrible piece of writing

By way of clarifying counterpoint, we may now glimpse a little more about the rogue, Rogozhin, as seen by Maurice Baring:

*In strong contrast to the character of the prince is the merchant Rogozhin. He is **the incarnation** of the second type [of Russian propensities I, Baring, earlier noted], that of **the obdurate spirit**, which I have already said dominates Dostoevsky's novels. He is, perhaps, less proud than Raskolnikov [in *Crime and Punishment*], but he is far stronger, more passionate and more vehement. His imperious and unfettered nature is handicapped by no weakness of nerves, no sapping self-analysis. He is undisciplined and centrifugal....Rogozhin loves Natasia, a hetaira [a cultured courtesan, or concubine], who has likewise unbridled passions and impulses. He loves her with all the strength of his violent and undisciplined nature, **and he is tormented by jealousy** because she does not love him [but, rather, Prince Myshkin], although she cannot help submitting to the influence of his [Rogozhin's] imperious personality. **This jealous poison** in him takes so complete a possession of his body and soul that he ultimately kills Natasia almost immediately after she has married him and given herself to him....The description of the night that follows this murder, when Rogozhin talks all night with the prince in front of the bed where Natasia is lying dead, is by its absence of melodrama and its simplicity **perhaps the most icily terrible piece of writing that Dostoevsky ever penned**. The reason why Natasia does not love Rogozhin is that **she loves Prince Myshkin, the Idiot, and so does the third daughter of the general, Aglaia**, although he gives them nothing but pity, and never makes love to them.¹⁶*

Revealing bared souls

After this incisive presentation of part of the plot, Baring will invite us now to consider some implications of Prince Myshkin's somewhat haunting and alluring character, even amidst grim and degraded surroundings:

***And here we come to the root-idea and kernel of the book, which is the influence which the Idiot exercises on everybody with whom he comes in contact.** Dostoevsky places him in a nest of rascals, scoundrels and villains, a world of usurers, liars and thieves, interested, worldly, ambitious and shady. **He not only passes unscathed through all this den of evil, but the most deadly weapons of the wicked, their astuteness, their cunning and their fraud, are utterly powerless against his very simplicity,** and there is not one of these people, however crusted with worldliness, however sordid and bad, who can evade his magical [and perhaps holy?] influence. The women at first laugh at him; but in the end, as I have already said, he becomes a cardinal factor [like a channel of Grace] in the life of both Natasia the unbridled and passionate woman, and Aglaia the innocent and intelligent girl [daughter of the general]: so much so that they end by joining in a battle of wild jealousy over him, although he himself [in his purity and radiant goodness] is naively unconscious of the cause of their dispute.¹⁷*

Baring adds: "We seem to see right inside of these characters as though they had been **stripped of everything which was false and artificial** about them, **as though they were left with nothing but their bared souls, as they will be at the Day of Judgment.**"¹⁸

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 132-133—my emphasis added.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 133—my emphasis added.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*—my emphasis added. The purifying instrument, Prince Myshkin, the innocent "channel of grace" and revealer

CODA

Two distinctive paths of literary tradition

While giving his own memorable and manly lecture on Alexander Solzhenitsyn himself and on his attempt “**to give a true memory to his people,**” the learned Orthodox Christian Priest, Alexander Schmemmann (d. 1983) mentioned—it was in the late 1970s in Washington D.C.—that there were two fundamental and distinctively different paths of the literary tradition in Russia: **that of Tolstoy and that of Dostoevsky**—the former being, in general, more impersonal with its sweeping depictions of society and geography, and dealing with larger **impersonal forces** of history before which man seems so small and so feckless; and the latter being more intimate and going to the roots of a soul, and showing the inescapable personal decisions that a soul must responsibly (hence freely) make, even to say in the face of a mortal threat to one's innermost integrity: “rather death than such capitulation, much less a surrender to such an untruth or such an evil.”

In the tradition of Dostoevsky

Father Schmemmann said that Solzhenitsyn was in the tradition of Dostoevsky. For in the forged conviction of Solzhenitsyn, Father Schmemmann's personal friend, man must at least freely chose not to live the lie—and must, despite the fearsome consequences, finally and intimately refuse to live the lie. Even if it means to take but one step at a time and thus to come out from under the rubble and go far apart from the asphyxiation of untruth.

When I shortly afterwards, in 1980, discovered Maurice Baring's own writings on pre-Revolutionary Russian literature and culture—especially his contrasting comparisons of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, both in their lives and in their writings—I gratefully and warmly recalled Father Schmemmann's profound and incisive words.

The greatest, deepest and weakest in the Russian soul

Writing in 1914 in his *An Outline of Russian Literature*, Maurice Baring says:

*With Tolstoy [d.1910] and Dostoyevsky [d.1881], we come not only to the two great pillars of modern Russian literature which tower above all others like two colossal statues in the desert, but two of the greatest figures in the literature of the world....**And between them** [as “a part of the universal inheritance of all nations”] **they sum up in themselves the whole of the Russian soul, and almost the whole of the Russian character; I say almost the whole of the Russian character, because although between them they sum up all that is greatest, deepest, and all that is weakest** in the Russian soul, there is perhaps one element of the Russian character, which, although they understood it well enough, their genius forbade them to*

of souls is, for sure, distinctively very different from the main and eponymous character in Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* (1955), Alden Pyle (i.e., “the quiet American”), about whom the worldly British narrator of the novel, Fowler, memorably said: “*I never knew a man who had better motives for the trouble he caused.*” With “the Third Force” and with a beloved Vietnam woman. It seems doubtful, however, although the Catholic author Greene himself was a somewhat (and increasingly) cynical man, that Graham Greene was herein actually remembering and subtly evoking Dostoevsky's Prince Myshkin. But it is indisputable that Graham Greene was certainly attentive to other kinds of negligent “idiots”—especially the unmistakably sabotaging ones and delusively self-sabotaging ones. Not only in Vietnam. By way of contrast, and almost twenty years before *The Quiet American* (1955-1956), Georges Bernanos first published the also profoundly moving, *The Diary of a Country Priest* (*Journal d'un curé de campagne*) (1936), where the humble, holy Curé of Ambricourt, himself a channel of grace, has a purifying (even sanctifying) “*influence which [he, like the Idiot] exercises on everybody with whom he comes into contact.*” (M. Baring, Footnote 17, above) The Curé of Ambricourt and Prince Myshkin mutually enhance and echo one another **also** in their radiant goodness, despite their distinctive temperaments and historic cultures and freely chosen states of life.

possess. If you take as ingredients Peter the Great, **Dostoyevsky's Mwyshkin—the idiot, the pure fool who is wiser than the wise**—and the hero of Gogol's *Revisor*, **Hlestyakov the liar and wind bag**, you can, I think, out of these elements constitute any Russian who has ever lived. That is to say, you will find that every single Russian is compounded of one or more of these elements.¹⁹

Tolstoy

As specifically applied to the two authors we now consider, Baring later says:

Now in Tolstoy, the [Czar] Peter the Great element dominates, with a dose of Mwyshkin, **and a vast but unsuccessful aspiration towards the complete characteristics of Mwyshkin**; while in Dostoyevsky the Mwyshkin predominates, blent with a fiery streak of Peter the Great; **but in neither of them is there a touch of Hlestyakov** ["the liar and wind bag"]. (198—my emphasis added)

The antithesis of Tolstoy

Sharpening the contrast between the two great writers, Baring searchingly adds:

To say that DOSTOYEVSKY is **the antithesis of Tolstoy**, and the **second** great pillar of Russian **prose** literature, will surprise no one now [in 1914]. Had one been writing ten years ago [in 1904-1905, during the Russo-Japanese War], the expression of such an opinion would have met with **an incredulous smile** amongst the majority of English readers of Russian literature, for Dostoyevsky was practically unknown save for his *Crime and Punishment*, and to have compared him with Turgenev would have seemed sacrilegious. (219—my emphasis added)

After a few further analogies to Western literature and other arts, Baring makes a concession as he sharpens his meaning:

Let us say he [Dostoyevsky] is his [Tolstoy's] equal and complement. **He is in any case, in almost every respect, his antithesis.** Tolstoy was the incarnation of health, and is above all things and pre-eminently **the painter of the sane and the earthly.** Dostoyevsky was an epileptic, the painter of the abnormal, of criminals, of madmen, degenerates, mystics. Tolstoy led an even, uneventful life, spending the greater part of it in his own country house. Dostoyevsky was condemned to death, served a sentence of four years' hard labor in a convict settlement in Siberia, and besides this spent six years in exile; when he returned and started a newspaper, it was prohibited by the Censorship; a second newspaper which he started came to grief; he underwent financial ruin; his first wife, his brother, and his best friend died; he was driven abroad by debt, harassed by the authorities on the one hand, and attacked by the liberals on the other; abused and misunderstood, almost starving and never well, working under overwhelming difficulties, always pressed for time, and ill requited for his toil. That was Dostoyevsky's life. (210-211—my emphasis added)

The essence of Tolstoy – magnificent intolerance; Dostoiievsky – sweet reasonableness

Who could forget this summary of his life—especially after knowing of the balm he so generously gave to others in his writing (when it was finally and adequately understood “from the heart”)?!

¹⁹ Maurice Baring, *An Outline of Russian Literature*, pp. 196-197—italics in the original, my bold emphasis added. All further references to this text of Chapter VI, pages 196-225, will be above in the essay's main text in parentheses.

Baring then fittingly gives us a further glimpse of Tolstoy, and of the contrast:

Tolstoy was a heretic; at first a materialist and then a seeker after a religion of his own; Dostoyevsky was a practicing [Russian Orthodox Christian] believer, a vehement apostle of orthodoxy, and died fortified by the Sacraments of the Church. Tolstoy with his broad unreligious opinions was narrow-minded. Dostoyevsky with his definite religious opinions was the most broad-minded man who ever lived. **Tolstoy hated the supernatural, and was alien to all mysticism.** Dostoyevsky seems to get nearer to the unknown, to what lies beyond the flesh, than any other writer. In Tolstoy the Peter the Great element of the Russian character predominated; in Dostoyevsky that of Mwyshkin, the pure fool. **Tolstoy could never submit and humble himself. Submission and humility and resignation are the keynotes and mainsprings of Dostoyevsky.** Tolstoy **despised art, and paid no homage to any great names in literature....** Dostoyevsky was catholic and cosmopolitan, and admired the literature of foreign countries—Racine as well as Shakespeare, Corneille as well as Schiller. **The essence of Tolstoy is a magnificent intolerance. The essence of Dostoyevsky is sweet reasonableness.** Tolstoy **dreamed** of giving up all he had to the poor, and of living like a peasant. Dostoyevsky had to share the hard labour of the lowest class of criminals. Tolstoy **theorized** on the distribution of food; **but Dostoyevsky was fed like a beggar.** Tolstoy wrote in affluence and at leisure, and re-wrote his books; **Dostoyevsky worked like a literary hack for his daily bread, ever pressed for time and ever in crying need of money.** (211-213—my emphasis added)

The humble Dostoiievsky

After this compact contrast, Maurice Baring shows his magnanimity, as well as his profound and searching truthfulness, once again:

These contrasts are not made in disparagement of Tolstoy, but merely to point out the difference between the two men and between their circumstances. Tolstoy wrote about himself from the beginning of his career to the end; nearly all his work is autobiographical, and he almost always depicts himself in all his books. We know nothing of Dostoyevsky from his books. He was an altruist, and loved others better than himself. (213—my emphasis added)

Humble but the greatest

Now we may understand even more, perhaps even coming to cherish our Dostoiievsky. Already in 1904-1905, during his time as a Foreign Correspondent in the Far East during the Russo-Japanese War, Maurice Baring endorsed the contested opinion of a Cossack officer about the greatness of Dostoiievsky. On 19 September 1905, Baring records the following incident during the War:

I had tea with a Chinese Mandarin. I do not know which was the more exquisite, his tea or his manners. In the evening we discussed writers of books. Hliebnikov [the Cossack officer] said he knew who was the greatest writer in the world, and when some one else asked who, he answered Dostoiievski of course. The [Russian medical] doctor [another officer] vehemently [and rather coarsely] disagreed with this. Hliebnikoff [politely] went out of the room in disgust [into the fresh air and to avoid a passionate altercation!].²⁰

²⁰ Maurice Baring, *A Year in Russia* [1905-1906], p. 89—my emphasis added. Further references to this book will be, as before, placed in parentheses in the main body of the essay above. Parts of Chapter XI (pages 121-127), entitled “Dostoiievski’s Anniversary” will now be considered, especially for its greater detail and revelation of Baring’s heart, too.

In his later and more extended passage, which also discloses the literacy and articulate cultivation of an earlier military society (seldom seen anymore), Baring tells us:

*We were sitting in the ante-room of the small Chinese house which formed our quarters....Across the courtyard from the part of the dwelling where the Chinese herded together, we could hear [just after dinner] the monotonous song of a Chinaman or a Mongol singing over and over to himself the same strophe, which rose by the intervals of a scale more subtle than ours and sank again to die away in vibrations of one prolonged note, to the accompaniment of a single-stringed instrument. The conversation [among the officers] had languished....We were talking of books in a vague, desultory fashion, when suddenly Hliebnikov, **a young Cossack officer**, said: "Who is the greatest writer in the world?" Vague answers were made as to the comparative merits of Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, and Molière, but Hliebnikov impatiently waived [sic] all this talk aside. Then turning to me [M. Baring!] he said: "He knows; there is one greater than all of them, and that is Dostoievski."*

*"Dostoievski!" said the doctor, "Dostoievski's work is like a **clinical** laboratory or a **dissecting-room**. There is **no sore spot in the human soul** into which he does not poke **his dirty finger**. His characters are either mad or abnormal. **His books are those of a madman, and can only be appreciated by people who are half-mad themselves.**"*

*The young Cossack officer did not bother to discuss the question. **He went out into the night in disgust**. We continued the argument for a short time....The doctor was a cultivated man, and seeing that we differed **we agreed to differ**,...**but I was left wondering why Hliebnikov was so convinced that Dostoievski was the greatest of all writers, and why he knew that I should agree with him.** (121-122—my emphasis added)*

After this incident and matter of wonder, Maurice Baring admits:

*I have been thinking of this ever since [even in 1905-1906, over a century ago now, and yet not long before World War I and the Bolshevik Revolution], and **in a sense I do agree with Hliebnikov. I think that Dostoievski is the greatest writer who has ever lived, if by a great writer is meant a man whose work, message, or whatever you like to call it, can do the greatest good, can afford the greatest consolation to poor humanity**....I mean that **if the Holy Scriptures were destroyed and no trace left of them in the world, the books where mankind, bereft of its Divine and inestimable treasure, would find the nearest approach to the supreme message of comfort** would be the books of Dostoievski. (122-124—my emphasis added)*

We may now re-consider *The Idiot* and Prince Myshkin himself in this concluding context—and consider them not only as a consolation, but even as an external Channel of Grace to us.

Holiness as counterrevolution

Inasmuch as we may now (in this August of 2014) be on the verge of another portion of ongoing revolutionary war—now even against Russia herself—let us consider, also, the more unexpected channels of counterrevolution, to include the consoling balm of Dostoievsky's channels of Grace and depictions of actual or near Holiness. Then we could better understand—and not only through the purifying integrity and goodness of "The Idiot" Prince Myshkin—how and why there can be "**a counterrevolution that is also a spiritual affirmation.**" We may thereby even come to understand the realistic (and unsentimental) meaning of "**holiness as counterrevolution.**"

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