Books and Authors.

RUSSIAN LITERATURE[1]

The present phenomenal appetite for Russian literature, and especially for Russian tales, is accounted for by some cynics as a protest and reaction against what they regard as the miniature and tin-type variety of American novels. Yet Mr Howells, the head of what we prefer to call the reformed realistic school, the expurgated naturalists, is a cordial patron of the Russophilists. This ought to be enough to confound his cavilers. There is, or ought to be, a Spanish proverb that one is not obliged to despise beans because he likes beef. There is no reason why all of us who are pleased with novels calculated for the Boston longitude should not be at home in St Petersburg or Moscow. There is no reason why some passionate partisans of the new Southern literary movement should kiss their hands to Anna Karénina mainly to emphasize the faces they want to make at Lemuel Barker. When will people learn to set up a new idol without smashing an old one? It is in part because of the violent contrast between the placid workaday novels and such an elemental and highly energized novel as Fédor Dostoyevsky's "Crime and Punishment" that the American novels of naturalistic story-telling seem more commonplace than they really are. But, for our part, we declare ourselves, for purposes of illustration merely, equally pleased with cider and with *vodka*. The realism of Dostoyevsky is more powerful, more somber, than anything in contemporary novel-writing. Almost a contemporary of Tourguéneff, and to our mind of as original although not as fine a talent, he has been hitherto almost unknown in the United States. The present work is the first of a number of his novels which the publishers of this translation announce. It will be strange if Dostoyevsky's novels are not soon as familiar and as famous in this country as those of Tolstoi and Tourguéneff.

Born in Moscow in 1823, educated as a boy in the woods, and in Scott and Cooper, Dostoyevsky made himself familiar when a student at the engineering school in St. Petersburg with the misery of the poor and the degradation of great cities, a knowledge which he was afterward to use with profound effect. His first book, "Poor People," dealing with the miseries of the poorer official class, appeared about forty years ago, and had a great success. In 1850 he was sentenced to death for complicity in the work of a secret political society. His life was spared, but he was sent to Siberia. One fruit of his imprisonment was his "Recollections of a Dead-House," a master work. Journalism and literature occupied the rest of his life, which ended in 1881. He was an ardent Slavophilist, an opponent of the Western illumination movement, of which Tourguéneff was an exponent. Tourguéneff admired him greatly at one time, but not only did their political aims diverge, but to Tourguéneff there seemed to be something strained, morbid, and excessive in Dostoyevsky's pathological or psychological studies. Ernest Dupuy (Dole's translation) quotes Tourguéneff as saying apparently of "Crime and Punishment:" "God! what a sour smell; what a vile hospital odor; what idle scandal; what a psychological mole-hole!"

There was some truth in this bitterness, but a good deal more of prejudice. Tourguéneff abused Dostoyevsky's literature on account of his politics. That Dostoyevsky was a man of noble heart appears from this confession of humane faith which we take from Mr. Dole's appendix to Dupuy's "Great Masters of Russian Literature:"

"I never could understand the reason why one tenth part of our people should be cultured, and the other nine-tenths must serve as the material support of the minority, and themselves remain in ignorance. I do not want to think or to live with any other belief than that over ninety millions of people (and those who shall be born after us) will all be some day cultured, humanized, and happy."

Through whatever gloomy ways, what mysteries of crime, what wretchedness of vulgar nature, Dostoyevsky takes us, the faith in something better, a lingering and undegraded innocence, are still felt. He is the observer and recorder of many miseries, but not therefore a pessimist, as he has been called. Far from it. The light of humane hope glimmers in all the dark passages of guilt and suffering. As in this present book, crime brings punishment, but repentance, amelioration, regeneration, follow. "Crime and punishment" may be familiar to some of our readers in the German translation, "Verbrechen und Strafen," which appeared about a year after the author's death, and to more in the French translation, "Le Crime et Le Châtiment," of which our English translation was made in London not long ago. The translation is sometimes a little slangy, sometimes a little obscure, once in a while apparently inexact, but readable enough, and not without strength. The novel deals with the murder of two women by a poor student and his sufferings thereafter. The miseries of a drunken, discharged official and his family are powerfully painted. The daughter of this official, the gentle, timid Sonia, who sells herself to support the family, and afterward becomes, in spite of her position, the good angel of the student assassin, is a most affecting figure. To draw such a character to make it probable and natural, and even attractive, without ever exciting disgust, is in itself a mark of high talent. We are aware of the morbid possibilities which envelop the effort, but it has been made with delicacy and discernment. Dounia, the assassin's sister, and Razoumikhin, his friend, are two fresh and sane creations, who contrast vividly with the wild, distorted, or fantastic, diseased life which surrounds them. But the triumph of the book lies in the wonderful study of guilt which it contains in the person of Raskolnikoff, the assassin. Anything more subtle, penetrating, profound, terrible, is not to be found in all realistic literature. The study is a little too protracted, the psychology at times a little excessive, but all is original. It is a book of extraordinary power, a book of genius.

Mr. Nathan Haskell Dole has translated into very excellent English Ernest Dupuy's "Les Grands Maîtres de la Litterature Russe au XIXe Siècle," and added an appendix. M Dupuy is by no means an Edmond Scherer or a Paul Bourget. He is rather a commonplace critic, and in matter of dates and other facts frequently displays a characteristic French contempt which Mr. Dole has to correct. The book is valuable, however, for its studies of Gogol, Tourguéneff, and Tolstoi, and the analysis of and translations of passages from their principal works. Tolstoi and Tourguéneff are pretty well known in this country, but of Gogol too little has been known, and M. Dupuy gives an interesting sketch. The same may be said of his essay on Tourguéneff, whom he personally knew. The whole book will be a useful companion for students in Russian literature, of which, in translation at least, everybody must read something. Mr. Dole has supplied considerable biographical detail. We wish that he had added a bibliography of English and French translations of those authors considered by M. Dupuy. It is pleasant to be assured by Mr. Dole that Tolstoi is making short stories and not making shoes.

[1] *Crime and Punishment.* By F. M. Dostoyevsky.—*The Great Masters of Russian Literature.* By Ernest Dupuy. Translated by Nathan Haskell Dole. (New York: T. Y. Crowell & Co.)

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