

DOSTOEVSKY'S CHARACTERS

By Alexander Kaun

THE gallery of Dostoevsky's characters, like the musical characters of Mussorgsky, epitomizes Russia with its extremes, conflicts, contradictions, rebelliousness and abandon. Yet to regard these characters as exclusively

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Russian would be as narrow as to paste national labels on Hamlet and Tartuffe; they are omnihuman, to use a Dostoevsky word. The artist sublimates the genuinely national to an international, universal significance. What makes the world created by Dostoevsky so intensely impressing and unforgettable to the reader of any race and clime, is the uniqueness of the men, women, and children who people this world. Despite their huge number there are not two who are alike, because the author endows each one of them with a personality, and personalities, like works of art, cannot be duplicated. Though every portrait reflects in a measure the painter, the characters of Dostoevsky are not merely so many variants of the author's self, as we find it in the case of Tolstoy, but possess a Shakespearian unicity of physical and mental make-up.

Dostoevsky's theme, musically speaking, is a personality in the effort of self assertion. This effort spells conflict with the herd, with established tables of value and moral codes, with the all powerful, all leveling Sereda, if one may borrow from Jurgen's Walhalla. Hence Dostoevsky's individuals are at war with God or with society or with the state or with reason, always at war, the kind of war which, to Nietzsche, hallows any cause. Hence, too, Dostoevsky is indifferent and even hostile to normal beings, for to him the normal and healthy are synonymous with the quiescent and complacent, with the impersonal herd. He seeks out the pathologic, the transgressors, the enemies of society, for these have manifested their personalities through the very fact of deviating from the trodden path. Dostoevsky draws the callous murderers of the "House of the Dead" with a

sympathy which is not condescending pity but rather savors of astonishment and respect for those who have dared to translate impulse into action, to assert their selves, however low and beastly these selves be. He abhors the crimes committed by his fellow convicts, but he does not place much value in them, since the doers of the murderous deeds are for the most part not aware that these are crimes; they are unconscious sinners. Dostoevsky's chief concern is with the deliberate offenders of some universally accepted law, the conscious trespassers corroded by self analysis and torn by contradictions. For these the commission, in deed or in thought, of what they regard as a crime becomes an act of transvaluation, of defiance against the herd, and signifies an effort to take nothing for granted, to question and test everything in the crucible of personal experience. Raskolnikov murders the old pawnbroker in order to prove to himself that he is of the stuff that Napoleons are made of, and not a "trembling creature". The test shows that he belongs to the latter category, to the slaves and not to the masters, and his "punishment" lies in the fact of his regarding his action as a "crime". Dostoevsky succeeds in making us forget the murder of the pawnbroker while we watch breathlessly the battle waged within Raskolnikov between his reason and his conscience for the assertion of his personality. The same motive, self assertion, prompts Kirillov ("The Possessed") to commit suicide when in his prime and while loving passionately life and nature. In asserting his will over life and nature by destroying himself, Kirillov acquires the freedom of a god, an abysmal freedom. Self destruction is the fate of nearly all Dostoevsky's characters who venture

to accentuate their non-conforming individuality. Society cannot endure transgressors against God or man made laws, and spews them out of its bowels as alien and hostile elements. This is the inevitable penalty for the sin of rebellious self assertion.

Sin is the essence of Dostoevsky's characters, if by sin we mean a sick conscience. Sin permeates Dostoevsky's world and its inhabitants — Raskolnikov, Svidrigailov, Versilov, Stavrogin, Rogozhin, the Karamazovs, the malodorous Smerdyakov, the subtle Katerina Ivanovna, the diabolic Gru-shenka, and the satanic child, Liza Hohlakov. They all suffer from inner discrepancies, from inner clashes with a "devil", a "double". Even the few "good" characters of Dostoevsky dwell on the brink of sin. Prince Myshkin, the "idiot", lives his Jesuslike life among the base and criminal, Zosima the hermit tells his hearers of his former sinful existence and exhorts them to love sinners, and Alexey Karamazov, the one perfect man whom death prevented Dostoevsky from completing, emerges from the Karamazov nest of sin. Zosima, the author's mouthpiece, knows that the best among men are tormented by sin, by contradictions; and instead of preaching non-resistance, mortification of the flesh, isolation from the world, he commands his disciples to "kiss the earth". He enjoins Alexey Karamazov from entering a monastery, because he wants him to be an "earthly monk", to live in close contact with sin and crime. To Dostoevsky sin purges man, raises him above the level of mediocrity, stamps him with the dignity of a personality, and crowns his destruction with the halo of crucifixion.

Novels and Stories by Fyodor Dostoevsky.
Translated by Constance Garnett. Twelve
volumes. The Macmillan Co.