I

MALCOLM V. JONES

Introduction

What does give the classic Russian novel its power over the imagination? There have been many attempts to define its unique features and to account for its rise to pre-eminence in such unpromising soil. Underlying most analyses is the perception that Russian literature achieved its stature in a dialectic (or dialogue) with Western European literary traditions. Bakhtin has provided a theoretical model for this process in a shift from regarding the Western tradition as “authoritative discourse” to regarding it as “inwardly persuasive discourse”; in other words from a mental attitude which saw Western traditions as providing unsurpassable achievements which could only be imitated or rejected, to one which assimilated them to native Russian experience as part of a process of growth-in-dialogue: a complex dance in which the partners now lightly touch, now embrace and now draw apart, at times melting into a common movement and at times loudly asserting their difference.

The double helix comes unbidden to the modern mind as a model of this process. And that is no doubt one of the major reasons for the extraordinary fascination which the Russian novel has exercised over the Western reader. It is not simply that Russian writers have always had the Western tradition at the back of their minds, and woven it into their own tradition, trying to overcome what Harold Bloom has famously called the anxiety of influence. It is that for the first time Russian literature is reflecting back to Western readers a profounder, broader, more complex and, it often seems, more authentic, view of themselves, a view which puts in question not only Western achievements, but also the Western literary heritage as embedded in the novel itself. To put it more simply, Russian novels force us to ask questions about ourselves, about novels, and more broadly about human discourse, as well as about the physical world they purport to convey.

A key role in this process – characterized by a profound inferiority complex and a countervailing impulse to discover and assert an authentic
national voice – was played in the last century by the Russian intelligentsia, for whom the novel was the primary medium of debate. The intelligentsia was both a channel for the assimilation of Western culture and a vehicle for the affirmation of Russia's own unique experience and values and (potential or presumed) contribution to world civilization. Educated Russians of all social classes were heirs both to Western cultural traditions, which they shared with their European and North American counterparts, and their own cultural and historical roots, which were uniquely theirs and which retained a strong sense of otherness. The novel appeared and achieved respectability in Western Europe just at the right moment to act as a vehicle for this ambitious programme. By the 1830s it had come of age in Russia too. Moreover, a more capacious and appropriate vehicle could hardly have been designed for the purpose. The novel was capable, as Bakhtin has famously argued, of absorbing all other genres. As Russians discovered, no field of contemporary human discourse – except perhaps the strictly technical or scientific – was debarrled. Imaginative fiction could be manipulated in all sorts of ways unavailable to more direct forms of discourse and, above all, it was capable of relating, as no other medium could, broad social, political, philosophical and religious questions to the existential experience of the individual through the medium of narrative, thus facilitating entry to these questions at a variety of different levels. Through the evolution of its narrative techniques, the novel had proved capable of engaging the interest of the reader simultaneously at the level of story and, as modern theory has it, at the level of “ideal author”.

The great novels of the nineteenth century could be, and often were of course, read simply for entertainment. The majority of readers, unlike the writers, were women and the novels often read aloud en famille. Richard Ware draws our attention to a contemporary account of the reception of Anna Karenina, according to which most readers regarded the novel simply as entertaining and absorbing reading, an opinion held not only by shortsighted aristocrats but even by some contemporary critics.1

Another account recalls that there was neither singing nor laughter on the days when a new issue of Russkii vestnik appeared with a fresh installment of Dostoevskii’s The Brothers Karamazov. When all were gathered, the family took their places round the table with a green shaded lamp in the middle, and the reading aloud began. Everyone took turns to read and there was no pause until they reached the final page. Faces alternately turned pale and burned with excitement; the voice of the reader shook. The reading was then followed by detailed discussion of every movement in the souls of the characters and by attempts to guess what would happen next.2 In a delightful essay on War and Peace, Nikolai
Introduction

Bakhtin (Mikhail Bakhtin’s brother) recalls how, like many Russian readers, he had, by dint of reading and rereading, come to know the characters in the novel like real-life friends and acquaintances. Then he confesses that actually he had never read the whole of Tolstoi’s great novel from cover to cover. He had just dipped into it again and again.  

But, whatever its primary appeal to the reading public, the significance of the nineteenth-century novel will not be fully grasped unless it is understood that each new volume to appear was part of the ongoing debates in the literary journals, the salons and the private apartments of the intelligentsia. Neither Tolstoi’s Anna Karenina (1875–78) nor Dostoevski’s The Brothers Karamazov (1879–80) can be appreciated as phenomena of their time apart from the discussions on marriage and the family inspired by Chernyshevski’s novel What is to be Done? (1863). No more, in a later period, can Bulgakov’s The Master and Margarita be wholly appreciated apart from its satire on the Soviet literary scene and, on a broader scale, on the Soviet system itself. The aim of literature was not merely to entertain, to instruct or even to reflect reality. It was to seek “the measure of life” in all its dimensions, together with an understanding (and this was a particular feature of its Russianness) of the limitations of the human mind in attempting to grasp its meaning. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Russian culture experienced two irresistible imperatives (both exemplified in Pushkin’s and Gogol’s work): to grasp and represent in imaginative literature the full range of contemporary reality, exemplified in such concepts as the narod (the Russian people), the rodnina “motherland”), the vast, primitive, anarchic Russian countryside, the history and the symbolism of her capital; and to understand their place in history. This latter quest sometimes embraced the idea of national historical mission, which at times, for example in Dostoevski’s hands, became messianic. Though most of the nineteenth-century intelligentsia lived and worked in the city, the two capitals of St. Petersburg and Moscow, and experienced all the strains of urban life, they were fully aware of the countryside, populated by the oppressed peasant classes, their lives lived out among the beasts they tended. Yet, some thought those same peasants were possessed of superior spiritual insights, often associated with ancient peasant beliefs and folk traditions, such as those celebrated in the novels of Leskov in the nineteenth century and the works of the “village prose” writers (Belov, Rasputin and others) in the twentieth. The liberal intelligentsia (Turgenev, Aksakov, Tolstoi) were themselves often landowners and experienced the tension between the landowner’s love of the rural idyll and guilt at the price others had to pay to preserve its semblance. Increasingly, as the nineteenth century wore on, the countryside was seen not just as the repository of Russia’s
spiritual heritage, but also as the setting for a social and moral degeneration in which all classes were caught up. Although overlaid by more recent historical events, two world wars, the Revolution and Civil War, the collectivization programme, the purges and the collapse of the Soviet Union, these dimensions have continued to dominate the Russian experience and its representation in fiction to the present day.

That the idyll of the Russian countryside was deeply flawed struck some (Saltykov-Shchedrin, Bunin) so painfully that it seemed to plunge them into a grotesque, nightmarish gloom. Others ( Goncharov, Aksakov) presented it more ambiguously. Turgenev and Tolstoy, perhaps, preserved their love of the Russian countryside best. What all the nineteenth-century novelists seem to be acutely aware of is the ultimate futility and hubris of Russia's repeated attempts to subject the vastness and majesty of nature to the human will, together with the inadequacy of human reason fully to comprehend life's meaning. The theme has its first memorable expression in Pushkin's great poem "The Bronze Horseman"; it is central to Tolstoy's philosophy of history in War and Peace; it underlies Dostoevskii and the long anti-rationalist tradition in Russian thought, the fate of Bazarov in Turgenev's Fathers and Children, the failure of the Bolshevik experiment in Pasternak's Doctor Zhivago, the collapse of Platonov's anarchic Che- vengur, and the tragic-comic depiction of a Moscow thrown into confusion by a visit from the devil in Bulgakov's The Master and Margarita.

And its source is to be found, like those of many of the other leitmotifs of Russian intellectual and spiritual life, in the uncompromisingly anti-rationalist traditions of the Orthodox Faith, traditions thrown into relief by its anti-Catholic and anti-Protestant stance. In his essay Jostein Bartnes shows the impact of Russian Orthodoxy on those major novels which most strikingly exemplify its influence, but its pervasive effect is very widely evident in Russian culture, in the structuring function of religious myths (for example the Easter myth or the Apocalypse), in the presence of folk religious types (for example the Holy Fool) and artefacts (the icon), as well as in a pervasive Anti-Rationalism and preference for apothetic (negative) theology. Elsewhere, John Garrard has reminded us that, for better or for worse, Russia was not a part of the Roman Empire, nor did it experience directly the fruits of the Renaissance; nor was it a part of the Roman Catholic tradition which the Roman Empire adopted and which embraced the Renaissance. This made the grafting on of European culture in the modern period all the more problematic and the attempt all the more fascinating. Even where Anti-Rationalism was not explicitly made a virtue, as with the progressive Westerners, its influence ran very deep, until in the twentieth century, in one of those periodic attempts by Russia's rulers to
seize history and nature by the scruff of the neck, the power of science and
technology to overcome all natural obstacles temporarily became Holy
Writ and gave rise to a completely new dominant in Russian culture.

It seems momentarily to have escaped Gerhardie’s attention that one
prominent feature of the Russian novel is its deep moral seriousness, its
uncompromising wrestling with seemingly intractable social and political
problems no less than with the “accursed questions” of philosophy and
religion, questions which, as Tolstoi was aware, professional philosophers
often consider to be unanswerable because misconceived and which the
great novels of Western Europe address only obliquely, if at all. It is a signal
characteristic of the Russian novel that it takes seriously (i.e. as indicative
of what is essential in life) aspects of human experience frequently banished
to the fringes of the secular European novel, to the extent that they may
actually become organizing principles of the narrative, and hence, by
implication, of that everyday experience which the narrative seeks to
express. Not only does religion sometimes play this organizing role, but so
do folklore, the dream, the supernatural, metaphysics, and that peculiarly
Russian state of mind which critics call poshlost’ (“self-satisfied medioc-
rrity”) and which, in Gogol’s work, facilitates that strange slippage between
the material and the surreal (and/or supernatural) which is his hallmark.

This deep seriousness is in part a consequence of the vastness of Russia
and of its searing historical experiences, some self-inflicted, some inflicted
by external enemies. It is in part a consequence, according to some, of the
passion, the complexity, the breadth of the “Russian soul,” combining
the spirit of Europe with the spirit of Asia, with a tendency to seek extreme,
maximalist solutions to the problems of keeping both individual soul and
political body under some sort of control. Undoubtedly it is also in part
the consequence of working within the context of an oppressive political order,
says Gareths Jones explains. As Alexander Herzen wrote, in his “Open letter
to Michelet” (1851), the ghastly consequences that attended the written
word in Russia inevitably increased its effectiveness:

The word is listened to with love and veneration, because in our country,
it is uttered only by those who have something to say. The decision to publish
one’s thoughts is not lightly made when at the foot of every page there looms
a gendarme, a troika, a kibitka, and the prospect of Tobolsk or Irkutsk.3

It is as if throughout the history of the Russian novel there was always a
third, silent participant in the dialogue, alongside the writer and the reader,
the oppressive presence of the Russian state and its apparatus of censorship
and repression. Just as in Soviet Russia free conversation on politically
sensitive issues was inhibited by fear of being overheard by an agent of the
KGB, so throughout the history of Russian literature the spectre of imprisonment, exile, execution or psychiatric supervision played its role in fashioning what was thought, felt, written and said, and how it was expressed. The frequency with which Russian literature actually deals explicitly with these themes, or some metaphorical equivalent, is therefore hardly surprising. Such a predicament gave rise to ingenious, Aesopian techniques for fooling the authorities, to saying what had to be said metaphorically rather than directly, for cultivating what Bakhtin called “the word with a sideways glance.” Most notably it gave rise to the tradition of the satirical novel, to which Lesley Milne’s essay is devoted. Of course there were sunny interludes, periods when the censorship was relaxed. But they could never be relied upon to last.

Partly in spite of and partly because of this situation, the imaginative world of the Russian novel seems to stretch out endlessly in space and time and at the same time is capable of focusing on the subtlest movements of the inner world of the individual psyche, from the historical vastness of Tolstoy’s War and Peace and Sholokhov’s The Quiet Don, to the tense psychological and physical enclosure of a Dostoevskian novel, from the daylight naturalism of Turgenev’s Fathers and Children, to the apocalyptic fantasy of Bulgakov’s The Master and Margarita, from the unremitting satirical gloom of Shchedrin’s The Goloslev Family to the tragic lyricism of Pasternak’s Doctor Zhivago.

Each Russian writer mapped out the territory in his own way and although their works certainly echo each other and develop each other’s achievements, rarely could the work of one be mistaken for that of any other. There has been much discussion of various categories of “realism” in Russian literature (Critical Realism, Romantic Realism, Fantastic Realism, Revolutionary Realism, Socialist Realism). One could equally well discuss categories of “Russianness” and indeed, though scorn is nowadays often poured on the idea of the “Russian soul,” such terms may still focus discussion of similarities and differences. The point is that, in spite of their pervasive adherence to the principle of “realism,” none of the great Russian novelists was a naïve Realist, or even a Naturalist in the French sense. Each of them, as we have noted and as several of the essays demonstrate, sought and discovered organizing principles for their perception of experience in realms beyond the material and the immediate. They all understood the limitations of language in expressing human experience. Some, like Gogol, exploited these for satirical and comic purposes. Others, like Dostoevskii, turned them into a structural principle of their fictional world. As Victor Terras argues, Realism was in some measure a negative conception, a move away from Romanticism.
Introduction

But it was also a sustained attempt by a series of highly gifted writers of fiction to redraw the parameters of human experience, to capture, through their own personal sensibilities, the essence of Russian humanity. This essential Russianness would be recognized by readers in all its splendor and misery and would subsequently stand in for Russia in the minds of generations of foreign admirers and color their perceptions of it. Each novelist absorbed those narrative techniques which the European novel had developed and which suited him best and went on to push those techniques in new directions, sometimes stretching them to their limits and sometimes, as with Gogol and Leskov, importing features of the Russian (or Ukrainian) folk tradition which gave their works new and surprising twists. The traditions of European Romanticism were grist to their mill. The pervasive influence of Rousseau on the widely read Tolstoi is generally conceded. Turgenev drew inspiration from his contacts, literary and personal, with the great French writers of his day, Flaubert, Maupassant, Sand, the GoncourtS, Merimee. Among Dostoevskii’s favorite novelists were George Sand, Victor Hugo, Balzac and Dickens (the “Romantic Realists”). He even learnt from the French Gothic novelist Eugène Sue, and from Rousseau.

One aspect of their “realism” is the attention Russian novelists pay to the experience of the everyday (byt as it is called in Russian), the social reality round about. The popularity of the “physiology” (“fiziologia”) and the feuilleton (fel’ton) among the writers of the Natural School, fostered by Belinskii in the 1840s, was an important formative influence, as were the novels of Dickens, Sue and Balzac. This surfaces in Bakhtin’s theory of the novel in what Morson and Emerson call his conception of the “prosaic,” a theme which Gary Saul Morson takes up in a different context in his contribution to this volume. The feel for the physicality of the experienced world is to be found in all the great Russian prose writers, from Pushkin to Platonov, from Pasternak to Petrushevskaya. It is not, as I have hinted, a naturalistic accumulation of minutiae, but a sense of the telling detail. It is true even of Dostoevskii, whom Merezhkovskii contrasted to Tolstoi as the “seer of the spirit” to the “seer of the flesh”. Many of the images we take away from Russian novels are in fact physical details: Akakii Akakievich’s overcoat, the smell and the sounds of the Haymarket in Raskolnikov’s St. Petersburg, Anna Karenina’s unruly little curls, Rusanov’s cancer, Zhivago’s rowan tree and flickering candles, Pilate’s attar of roses. Such examples find parallels in Western realist novels. But in Platonov, whose Chevengur is belatedly becoming recognized as one of the most significant Russian novels of the Soviet period, material reality even takes on metaphysical significance. Thomas Seifrid has written that if Platonov portrays man’s
existence as a tragic subordination to corporeality, then the ultimate fear troubling this vision is that nothing but matter truly exists.  

If the material, whether of the town or the countryside, plays a notable part in Russian realism, so too does a characteristic which Marshall Berman has ascribed to “the modernism of underdevelopment,” a tendency in one powerful tradition of the Russian novel, represented in both the Gogolian and the Pushkinian lines, to question the reliability of our perceptions and to stand nervously on the threshold of an abyss which opens up as soon as confidence in the solidity of the prosaic world is eroded. Beyond the abyss is a world which seems to be structured by the arbitrariness of the dream rather than the solidity of common sense and reason. It is as if “all that is solid melts into air,” Berman tells us, quoting, of all people, Karl Marx. It is the ability of the Russian novel to render the sensation of life in the no man’s land between the prosaic, everyday, common-sense world and the world of fantasy, dream, folklore, madness, that is one of its hallmarks. Of course the focus on minute physical detail is as much a feature of the dream life as it is of waking experience, perhaps more so. Those critics who tell us that the Jerusalem sections of Bulgakov’s The Master and Margarita are more realistic than the Moscow chapters sometimes forget that. This sensation is enhanced for Western readers by the fact that, aside from the deployment of narrative techniques, the subject matter itself hovers on the brink of the familiar and the unfamiliar, “one’s own world” and “an alien world.”

The Modernism of underdevelopment is closely allied to the tendency in Russian literature which is often called – somewhat misleadingly perhaps – “Fantastic Realism.” Ranging from the grotesquerie of Gogol’s “The Nose,” through the frankly supernatural of a small number of Turgenev’s and Chekhov’s tales and the diablerie of Bulgakov’s novel, but also including Dostoevskii’s masterpieces, Fantastic Realism in the Russian tradition places a huge question mark against the reliability of common sense, the healthy, the self-evident, the reasonable, and the rational in human experience, and the ability of logic and science to contain it and plumb its depths. It also raises profound questions about our ability ever to discern the boundaries between a world apparently governed by these principles and the realms of dream, fantasy, the supernatural, poetry, the spirit. It is of course in these respects heir to the Romantic and precursor of the modern and post-modern, of Freud, Kafka and the Existentialists. But it is positivistic realism – all that is solid – that it explicitly takes as its point of departure, and our confidence in it which it seeks subtly, by one means or another, to subvert. There is a degree of play in this. There is also an intense seriousness. How could it be otherwise in a country which was
Introduction

required for seventy-five years to subscribe to systematic, state-sponsored fantasy; in which science itself was put at the service of ideology, where statistics almost always meant lies, and where the outcome, far from being playful and escapist, was the kind of experience expressed by Solzhenitsyn in his First Circle or Zinoviev in Yawning Heights? Solzhenitsyn’s works internalize the principle of institutionalized fantasy and it becomes the structural principle which dominates and distorts the everyday experience of millions of people in his world. The twentieth century, no less than earlier epochs, can furnish many horrific examples of societies being fashioned to accord with systematic fantasies. Perhaps the Russians foresaw this and sensed the danger more clearly than most. If so, it did not prevent them from experiencing it as cruelly as any.

Fantastic Realism, then, which both celebrates the non-rational and warns against the terrifying abyss to which it may be the gateway, turns out to be an obsessive fascination of the Russian imagination. It takes many forms, from the appeal of extreme ideological positions – an appeal experienced no less by Tolstoi than by Fedorov, Dostojevskii, Bakunin or Lenin – to fascination with the folkloric, the demonic and the grotesque – Gogol or Bulgakov – an awareness of being part of powerful, impersonal, irresistible historical processes – Tolstoi again, Sholokhov, Bulgakov – or a sense that the patterns of history and personal experience find their meaning in religious categories, for instance, the motifs of death and resurrection (the Easter myth), of crisis, judgment and vindication (the myth of the Apocalypse).

It is perhaps significant that it was a Russian, Mikhail Bakhtin, who introduced into literary theory the term “chronotope,” a term which constantly reminds us of the fourth (temporal) dimension of what traditional criticism was wont to call “setting.” In theory, all narrative has its own chronotope, just as it has its own setting. But in practice Bakhtin is particularly interested in a relatively small number of particularly striking or recurrent chronotopes for which he found convenient labels, for example, the chronotopes of the carnival, the provincial town, the salon, biographical time, the road, the threshold, each with its own characteristic space-time coordinates and modes of narrative.

One chronotope which does not figure in Bakhtin, and not at all prominently in writing about him – this may incidentally be a key to the dissatisfaction many have felt with his treatment of Dostojevskii – is the apocalyptic. But given the nature of the Russian historical experience it is not surprising that the apocalyptic tradition should have exercised such a hold on the Russian imagination. David Bethea recently published a book on this subject9 in which he analyzed the way in which the apocalyptic
tradition is handled in Dostoevskii’s *The Idiot*, Belyi’s *Petersburg*, Platonov’s *Chevengur*, Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita*, and Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago*. The book is remarkable as much for the idea as for the realization, for it throws into relief a facet of the Russian novelistic tradition, the importance of which, though now obvious, had somehow eluded literary criticism, except when dealing with individual writers. In passing, Bethea draws attention to a number of features of this tradition which demonstrate that far from being a minor feature of the Russian imagination, it turns out to be a major organizing principle. For example, he links it with both the revolutionary and the utopian traditions. The real-life visions of such revolutionary activists as Mikhail Bakunin were imbued with apocalyptic motifs, in which a secular Revolution replaces the Second Coming and an earthly utopia replaces the “new heaven on earth” to come. As Tolstoi’s narrator says in “The Kreutzer Sonata,” “According to the doctrine of the Church the world will come to an end, and every scientific doctrine tells us the same thing” (chapter 11). The Second Coming and the coming of the Revolution merge in the writings of the Symbolists, most memorably in Blok’s poem, *The Twelve*, where the figure of Jesus appears in the snowstorm to lead the revolutionary band. They merge again in expectations of a glorious life built on completely new lines in which humanity will be free from oppression and conflict, in which the righteous (the proletariat) will be vindicated and the sinners (the bourgeoisie) eternally damned. In Pasternak’s novel, all, Marxists and non-Marxists alike, experience a sort of elemental upsurge of energy, interpreted by some in a poetic, Schellingian sense, by others according to the Bolshevik creed. The sense of history moving at breakneck speed towards a final and catastrophic dénouement was foreshadowed in Gogol’s image of the troika. With hindsight it is possible to see that Russian history actually was rushing towards such a catastrophe, that those Russian writers who sensed it were right in their intuitions, though in most cases wrong in the way they characterized it. The apocalyptic mode of interpreting history had a long pedigree in Russian culture, linked to the notion that Moscow was the Third Rome and that there would be no fourth, and surfacing even in the thought of such disparate thinkers as Nikolai Berdiaev and Fyurii Lotman. The tendency for Russia to define itself by radical breaks and maximalist strategies is all part of the apocalyptic package. What some Western critics have seen as a lack (the failure of Russia to garner the fruits of the Graeco-Roman classical tradition) is seen in this perspective as an irresistible organizing principle of historical experience, by no means unique to Russia, but unusual in its pervasive influence on the shape of narrative fiction.