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Two Techniques of Hostile Criticism, Tolstoy's and Dostoevsky's?

Tolstoy and Dostoevsky wrote some of their finest prose while doing demolition jobs on writings that others honored. Tolstoy's distaste for Shakespeare is famous. It rests partly on his distrust for lyricism and for secularism, and partly, I think, on sheer perversity. It was a good way to shock the philistines. It also called forth a quality in Tolstoy that needs more attention, his humor. Today I will work with a passage from his 1904 essay "On Shakespeare and the Drama," using his analysis of the storm scene in *King Lear*, a play which is not usually treated as a barrel of laughs. Dostoevsky also enjoyed attacking the idolized. I will compare the Tolstoy passage with one of Dostoevsky's many assaults on the idols of Chernyshevsky and the radicals of his day, the Utilitarians. The Dostoevsky passage begins Chapter VII of Part One of the *Notes from Underground*.

The Tolstoy passage adopts the voice of an earnest, caring reader. "Lear walks through the heath and says words which must express his despair: he wishes the winds to blow until their (the winds') cheeks burst, the rains to flood everything, the lightning to set fire to his grey head, and the thunder to flatten the earth and wipe out all the seeds that make ungrateful man."

The contrast between this passage and Shakespeare's is one of the glories of world literature, a master of the novel ridiculing the highest reaches of a master of drama:

Blow, winds and crack your cheeks! rage, blow!
You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout
Till you have drench'd our steeples, drown'd the cocks!
You sulph'rous and thought-executing fires,
Vaunt-couriers of oak-cleaving thunderbolts,

Singe my white head! And thou, all-shaking thunder,
 Strike flat the thick rotundity o' th' world!
 Crack nature's molds, all germens spill at once,
 That makes ingrateful man! (Act III, sc. II)

Tolstoy's humor resides in the contrast between the speaker of his summary and King Lear. The earnest summarizer of Lear's speech worries that his reader may not realize whose cheeks Lear wishes to burst, and may even not have noticed that winds don't have cheeks, except perhaps in a kind of painting Tolstoy disliked. In thirty-seven words, Tolstoy has literalized Shakespeare's fifty-nine words, but he preempts our sophisticated rejection of his simplicity with a single clause, "which must express his despair;" he too is doing literary analysis, exploring either Lear's or Shakespeare's intention. One may question this reading, calling the mood rage, not despair, but doing so engages Tolstoy's earnest reader in a discussion between equals, and he is not our equal; Tolstoy has constructed a brilliantly stupid voice, and we ordinary mortals are neither that brilliant nor that stupid.

Dostoevsky's demolition technique is almost the opposite. In this passage, his victim is a serious doctrine underlying much of Plato's, John Stuart Mill's, and Twentieth Century Economics' understanding of the world. The doctrine of enlightened self-interest may be charmingly, brilliantly, or dismally presented, but the voice is normally as civilized as that of Tolstoy's earnest reader. Using accusatory anaphora, the Underground Man begins in a tone closer to Lear's than to Tolstoy's: "Oh, tell me, who first stated, who first pronounced that man does nasty things only because he does not know his own interests" He then moves a little closer to the earnest voice that elaborates an argument: "and that if he could be enlightened, his eyes opened to his real, normal interests, then man would immediately stop doing nasty things and would immediately become kind and noble" Except for slipping from exclamatory to expository prose, these two lines make no new point at all. But the next step begins with the promise of serious argumentation: "because, having been enlightened and understanding their own real interest, man would immediately see in goodness his own personal interest" The promise contained in the word "because" has gone unfulfilled; the reason being enlightened and having our eyes opened to our real interests would make us kind and noble turns out to be that being enlightened and understanding our real interest would make us see in goodness our personal interest. But, undiscouraged, the Underground Man continues his

exposition of the reasoning he is summarizing: “and it is well known that not a single human can act knowingly against his own interest” Again, this repeats the statement that has already been made three times, first as an attack, second as an authoritative point and third, as an explanation. The conclusion of this fourfold repetition, marked with all formality by the word “consequently,” makes the same statement a fifth time: “consequently, so to speak, of necessity, he would start doing good?” The question mark reminds those of us who have forgotten (almost all), that we have just read a ninety-word interrogative sentence.

At our session I argued from these two passages that Tolstoy used the dullness of a literal reading to demolish Shakespeare's depiction of rage, while Dostoevsky used the voice of an hysterical obsessive to make a community of reasonable philosophers and rationalistic journalists into dull reiterators of a circular argument. In the question period, Tetsuo Mochizuki pointed out that my point about Tolstoy had been made by Shklovsky three quarters of a century ago, in his analysis of *ostraneniie*, or defamiliarization. A look at the notes of Robin Feuer Miller and Ellen Chances, who saw these pages before the panel, suggests that both of them connected my earnest reader with that other good-hearted innocent, Natasha, who led Shklovsky to his theory of *ostraneniie*. Each author left his narrative signature on his criticism and his fiction.