

## CHAPTER III

## THE AUTHOR AND HIS WORKS

Fyodor Dostoevsky was born in 1821 in Moscow, where his father, an impoverished nobleman, held the post of resident physician at a charity hospital. The family had small living quarters in the hospital grounds, and the child at an early age, became familiar with suffering, misfortune, and death. He was brought up in an atmosphere of strict discipline and religious piety under his morose and authoritarian father. His mother, kind and sickly, died when he was sixteen. Sent afterwards to the St. Petersburg School of Military Engineers, he spent there for depressing unhappy years. His father had been murdered by his mishandled serfs; Fyodor remained alone, without money or friends. He detested his school and had but one passion: literature. Shortly after graduation he resigned his position as a military draughtsman and devoted himself to writing. After years of poverty and privation, he published his first novel, *Poor Folk*, which met with a certain success. He published other novelettes and tales and wrote feverishly, brimming with projects and ideas. Then a catastrophe befell him: he was arrested as a member of a clandestine group of young idealist who discussed

Utopian socialism and dreamed of freedom. In 1849 Dostoevsky, together with his friends, was sentenced to death and brought to the execution place in a public square before the firing squad. At the very last moment an official came forward and announced the Tzar's clemency, and the death sentence was commuted into one of penal servitude. Before Dostoevsky could recover his senses, he found himself in irons and on his way to Siberia.

After this monstrous experience of sham execution, he spent four years as a convict at hard labour, surrounded by murderers and other criminals, and had to submit to treatment so inhuman that only glimpses of it can be caught in his later work, especially in *Memoirs from the House of the Dead*. In 1854 he was sent as a private to an infantry regiment in Semipalatinsk, an Asiatic hellhole. In 1857 he married a young consumptive widow. He was thirty eight years old when, after nine years of all kinds of ordeals, he was finally allowed to return to St. Petersburg and to resume his place in literature. From 1859 and until his death in 1881 he was incessantly active as a novelist, journalist, and editor. In the sixties and seventies Dostoevsky published his most important works : *The Humiliated and Wronged (1861)*, *Notes from the Underground (1864)*, *Crime and Punishment (1866)*, *The Idiot (1868)*, *The Possessed (1871)*, *A Raw Youth (1875)*, *The Diary of a Writer (1876-80)*, and *The Brothers Karamazov*

(1880). All these works brought him fame, yet this did not make things easier for him. He had to write hurriedly in order to fight off poverty, and he was in precarious health and subject, after his imprisonment, to frequent and exhausting fits of epilepsy. During his travels abroad his passion for gambling led to disaster. There were further conflicts with the censors and the government, there were quarrels and feuds with his colleagues and former friends, but over and above all this, there were his ecstatic flights, his carnal temptations, and the rambling of his tormented soul in search of God, harmony, and truth.

Dostoevsky's literary roots are started in the wake of Russian Realistic school, and imitated Gogol in his first novels and stories, especially in *Poor Folk* and *The Double*. But he was also strongly influenced by European Romantics; E.T.A. Hoffman's images of split personality and of the fantastic power of evil, Victor Hugo's humanitarianism, and the rapid pace of adventure novels by minor French authors. These trends converge in his novels, which are constructed like thrillers and unroll a stream of most unusual events, being filled at the same time with accurate detail and description.

Dostoevsky started by following the great Russian tradition of compassion for the little man which could be seen from his works, *Poor Folk* and *The Double*. These



novels exposed the life condition of governmental clerks. In *The Double*, a novel which offers very important clues for understanding Dostoevsky, this clerk, Golyadkin, becomes a complete schizophrenic. In order to escape the narrow pattern of a miserable existence, he creates the image of his own aggressive and successful self, a double, and his dream materializes and acquires independent life, until this character is taken to a lunatic asylum. The theme of split personality and of the double which lurks in every man is combined here with a study in depth and inferiority complex and of a pathological and erotic drives.

For Dostoevsky the underdog's unhappy fate in a hostile universe is not a simple matter for pity; his victims of environment raise directly or indirectly the problem of man's condition on earth. The order of things is questioned not only from the social and moral but also from the metaphysical point of view.

In the second period of Dostoevsky's development (between 1854 and 1864), there is, however, a shift of emphasis, and the 'defeated ones' are no longer resigned to their status — instead, they become more conscious of human and divine injustice and they claim their rights. Fifteen years after his first novel, under cover of a story which contains all the paraphernalia of a cheap mystery thriller, Dostoevsky expanded on his main theme.

He combined the psychological, the symbolic, and the philosophical elements in his narrative, stressed the clash of man's contradictory drives, and sharpened the conflict between two types of humanity: the weak, submissive ones who have masochistic inclinations, confronted (and exploited or martyred) by ruthless 'masters of life' who, with sadistic relish, reject moral codes and transgress the boundaries of good and evil. The virus of transgression, however infects their victims, who finally refuse to accept their place in the collar of the social edifice. Those 'men from the underground' either protest intellectually or resort to the miracle of chance. The hero of *Notes from the Underground*, one of Dostoevsky's most significant works, rationalizes his passivity and his sadomasochistic tendencies. He claims that action is typical of stupid, simple men while intelligence leads to doubt and inertia. Betterment of society is impossible because of the irrationality and the contradictions in human nature; the trouble therefore lies not in man's condition but in his mind and body since he is basically rebellious, cruel, unreasonable, and prefers danger to safety and chance to order.

In the third and final stage of Dostoevsky's literary and ideological evolution, the man from the underground comes to the surface and, in the person of Raskolnikov (*Crime and Punishment*), chooses open rebellion as the only

means of changing his destiny. Raskolnikov also has a theory; he divides mankind into two main groups — the trembling multitude of common men and the daring minority of exceptional individuals who have the right to transgress the conventional rules of social law and custom. In order to prove to himself that he belongs to the second category, Raskolnikov kills an old hag of a moneylender and her simple-hearted-sister. In the ensuing conflict between his rational self and his emotional sensitivity, he comes to conclusion, however, that his intellectual crime does not constitute a valid proof. The main themes of this story were later taken up by Nietzsche who recognized Dostoevsky as one of his masters.

All the main themes of Dostoevsky found their fullest expression in *The Brothers Karamazov*, a novel which can be interpreted on many levels and which has many symbolic intimations and hidden meanings. It is probably Dostoevsky's highest achievement, both in psychological insight, variety of character, and intellectual richness. Here again, the plot revolves around a crime and its detection. As a central figure in the novel, Ivan is akin to Raskolnikov. He is also a rebel, but his rebellion is more abstract, and more sustained philosophically. He is a dialectician who is weighing the arguments of faith and disbelief. Like Raskolnikov, Ivan collapses in the isolation of his intellectual search, which ignore love

and nature and which ends in an ethical 'no man's land' where freedom is sterile and useless.

An atheistic socialist in his youth, Dostoevsky underwent a political and religious changes during his Siberian exile, and he returned to St. Petersburg a defender of autocracy and of the Church. Despite his conversion the very dynamism of his intellect and the intensity of his emotions gave an extremist stamp to all his writings. He was afraid of the provocative and anarchial impact of his novels and tried to discipline his own nature, to penalize his rebellious spirit, and to genuflect before the Tzar and Greek Orthodox dogma and ritual. This spirit revolutionary who challenged accepted ideas, whose art registered all the eruptions of passion and all the convulsions of the unconscious, proclaimed his worship of thrones and altars and his submission to established civic and clerical orders.

Dostoevsky has discovered so much about our emotions and thoughts, has explored so deeply the human psyche, has made such astonishing revelations about our repressed drives and pathological complexes, that the modern world has hailed him as a master of psychological novel. Some of his descriptions are so precise that they serve as illustrations in the study of clinical psychology.

In exploring the reaches of human reason, he anticipated psychoanalysis by exposing what is irrational

and hidden in the motives of men. To the development of the modern novel he contributed a technique whereby fiction could more dramatically illuminate reality: recreating the physical world only as it impinged upon the consciousness of his characters, he prepared realistic writings for the uses of expressionism, surrealism, and fantasy. His heroes move in an atmosphere of unresolved tensions, his quest for metaphysical absolutes attended by violence in the real world, and delirium in the world of dreams.



# CHAPTER IV

# ANALYSIS

# THESIS

