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Dostoevsky and the English Novel: Dickens, John Cowper Powys and D. H. Lawrence

David Gervais

FOR A NON-RUSSIAN READER to offer to write about Dostoevsky will seem like presumption. One thinks of Dr Johnson's description of a woman preacher as 'like a dog walking on its hinder legs. It is not done well; but you are surprised to find it done at all.' It goes without saying how much I must be missing in reading Dostoevsky in translation – a great novel is as much a work of language as a great poem is. Yet, as I hope to show, Dostoevsky is an essential author for anyone interested in the novel form as a whole, particularly the English novel.

What I propose is to look first at Dostoevsky's debt to Dickens and how his own novels built on it, and then to look at two major English novelists from the first half of the twentieth century – the period of Dostoevsky's most profound impact in England – both of whom engaged creatively with his novels: first, the grossly neglected John Cowper Powys, the author of *Wolf Solent*, *A Glastonbury Romance* and, among many other books, a 1946 monograph on Dostoevsky; then, the much better known but often equally misunderstood D. H. Lawrence, the sharpest and also the rudest of his English critics. These comparisons suggest both what English writers learnt from Dostoevsky and the ways in which his novels differ from their own. For the time being, I defer speculation on how much later English novelists have taken from him.

It comes as no surprise to the reader of his own novels that John Cowper Powys should have thought Dostoevsky the 'greatest of all novelists', but it is

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worth pointing out why he took to him so easily. Dostoevsky himself was an avid reader of English fiction and this made him a less exotic influence than he might otherwise have been. By the time he wrote *The Brothers Karamazov*, he had read and assimilated virtually every one of Dickens's novels, albeit in translation. He also knew the work of writers like Charlotte Brontë and Mrs Gaskell. All Dickens's novels had been translated into Russian by the time of Dostoevsky's death in 1881. He was virtually an honorary Russian and to this day many Russian homes boast a complete set of his novels. Readers queued up for the latest serial instalment of them in Moscow just as they did in London and New York. As early as 1846 one of Dickens's Russian translators informed him that his books were known and loved 'from the Neva to Siberia'. Dostoevsky's daughter was later to remember that 'My father, who would forget his wife's name and the face of his beloved, could remember all the English names of the heroes of Dickens and Walter Scott, who had made such an impression on him in his youth and about whom he spoke as if they were old friends.'¹ Dickens was also, of course, one of Powys's favourite novelists, though the younger and less Victorian Lawrence might be said to have been in uneasy reaction against him.

It is striking that Dostoevsky read *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *David Copperfield* in his penal colony in Siberia just a few years after their publication in England, at a time when he was reading little else but the Bible. Later, Steerforth and Little Nell were to inspire some of his most revealing characters. *Crime and Punishment* may go further than Dickens in the exploration of evil, but there is little doubt that Raskolnikov is prefigured by murderers like Bill Sikes and Jonas Chuzzlewit. There is a sense in which the Russian novel developed from the English. This is why English novelists like Powys and Lawrence could learn so readily from it. At its greatest, the novel is an international rather than a simply national form.²

I begin from Dickens to go on to Wordsworth, another writer who was deeply important to Powys and uncomfortably close to Lawrence. This will enable me, when I get to Powys's book on Dostoevsky, to put it in the context of his thought as a whole. I would also like to mention a quality that all three novelists in their way share with Wordsworth: the ability to turn the prosaic into poetry. By poetry I mean neither Byronic passion, of the kind Charlotte Brontë fed on, nor picturesque descriptiveness of the sort that Scott used to anchor his novels in a particular place. Poetry can be bare

¹ W. J. Leatherbarrow (ed.), *Dostoyevskii and Britain* (Oxford 1995) pp. 18–19 (this book gives a valuable account of Dostoevsky's response to English literature).

² It is well known that Tolstoy drew on *David Copperfield* and *Dora* when he described Prince André's marriage in *War and Peace*. See F. R. and Q. D. Leavis, *Dickens the Novelist* (London 1970) pp. 34–43.

and plain, and I am thinking not of poetic diction, but of the poetry that there is in events themselves. In a poem like Wordsworth's 'Michael' we don't find the poetry simply within the words in which it is embodied but in the spaces *between* them. One thinks too of the stirring hiatus in 'A Slumber did my Spirit Seal', between 'The touch of earthly years' and 'No motion has she now, no force ...'.

Stendhal's novels are punctuated by such silent poetry, though he rigorously excised every adjective from his prose that he could; Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park*, apostrophising the evergreens in Mrs Grant's shrubbery, has the poetry of a creature whose identity is locked in time, even though her wondering response to the scene is expressed in words that are merely tasteful and conventional. Just so, Dostoevsky could make poetry out of a tawdry newspaper report, in fidelity to reality rather than from any desire to embroider it. For all his visionary credentials, he can be the most mundane of novelists, diligently poking and probing into matter-of-fact reality. The fabric of ordinary Russian life is his equivalent of Jane Austen's 'little piece of ivory'. For instance, in the scene where Marmeladov dies, in *Crime and Punishment*, we learn how and when his wife does the weekly wash. On the other hand, there is nothing in his work like the exquisite scene at the Tsarintso Lakes in Turgenev's *On The Eve* or the evocations of 'Wessex' in Hardy or Powys. Alyosha Karamazov may be morally beautiful, but he inhabits a tawdry and commonplace world. For all their intensity, there is no grandly tragic backdrop to Dostoevsky's novels but, instead, the mute signs of poverty in a city flat or the slow pace of time in some provincial backwater. They may sometimes seem strident or portentous but, if so, it is against a background of almost eerie normality. Their eloquence could not be less like that of the epic poet.

There is telling support for this approach in some remarks that the poet Arthur Hugh Clough made after his first reading of Matthew Arnold's early poems:

The modern novel [*Bleak House*, *Vanity Fair*] ... does try to build us a real house to live in; and this common builder, with no notion of orders, is more to our purpose than the student of ancient art who proposes to lodge us under an Ionic portico ... The true and lawful haunts of the poetic powers ... are no more upon Pindus or Parnassus ... but in the blank and desolate streets, and upon the solitary bridges of the midnight city, where Guilt is, and wild Temptation ... there walks the disrowned Apollo, with unstrung lyre.³

³ Quoted *ibid.*, p. 175.

These prescient remarks apply as well to *Crime and Punishment* as to Dickens. *Bleak House* is not *poetical*, far from it, but, in a new way, it is a kind of poem. It could not be explicated simply in prose terms. Dostoevsky understood this very well. He may have sized up Dickens's often black and white morality (he used to call him 'the great Christian'), but he also saw that, under his overt moral judgements, lay a darker and deeper reality that could only be apprehended in a non-utilitarian and poetic way. (He was, incidentally, a great admirer of *Hard Times*.) This is why, to the surprise of some readers, he singled out Mr Pickwick as one of the inspirations for Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot*:

The chief idea of the novel is to portray a positively good man. There is nothing in the world more difficult ... There is only one positively good man in the world – Christ. [Dostoevsky then mentions Don Quixote] Dickens's Pickwick (an infinitely weaker idea than Don Quixote, but still enormous) is also funny and succeeds just by that. There appears compassion for the good man who is laughed at [and] this compassion is the secret of humour.⁴

Dostoevsky saw a poetic spirituality beyond Dickens's morality and humour at a time when most English readers regarded *The Pickwick Papers* as merely an entertainment.

Let me turn now to a suggestive passage at the start of *A Tale of Two Cities*. The narrator is watching the faces of the passers-by in the street and speculating on what they mean, something both Balzac and Dostoevsky also did when they described the modern city:

A wonderful fact to reflect upon, that every human creature is constituted to be that profound secret and mystery to every other.

A solemn consideration, when I enter a great city by night, that every one of those darkly clustered houses encloses its own secret; that every beating heart in the hundreds of thousands of breasts there, is, in some of its imaginings, a secret to the heart nearest to it! In any of the burial-places of this city through which I pass, is there a sleeper more inscrutable than its busy inhabitants are, in their innermost personality, to me, or than I am to them?

A novel that begins in this vein is not likely to be explicable in terms of conventional categories such as character and theme. Its key figures will be like the tips of icebergs whose main bulk is submerged and hidden in darkness, just like Dostoevsky's Pickwick. Take Dr Manette, the released Bastille prisoner. His only conscious desire is to cling to his daughter's apron strings,

⁴ Leatherbarrow, *Dostoyevskii and Britain*, p. 87.

but, as soon as events jog his mind back to the memory of the past, his old fixation re-emerges and he starts to cobble away at his last again as he had done in prison. His mind is as much of a mystery to himself as it is to the reader. Dickens is as fascinated by the illogic of memory as Wordsworth was. This is why his novels are full of people whose compulsions come from some buried self that is hidden by their conventional 'character': Mr Dick and Rosa Dartle in *Copperfield*, Miss Flite in *Bleak House*, Mrs Clennam and Miss Wade in *Little Dorrit*, Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations* and, of course, the guilt-ridden murderers who anticipate Raskolnikov. All these figures have to be understood poetically and imaginatively. They are more than the sum of their socio-economic parts or the novelist's explicit psychologising. In fact, Dr Manette, like John Jasper in *Edwin Drood*, seems more like two people than one, a kind of walking mystery.

I can hardly suggest how all this fed into Dostoevsky, but I can at least refer here to *The Possessed*, which was Powys's favourite Dostoevsky novel. A remarkable proportion of *The Possessed* is given over to inconsequential talk, meetings in which minds never meet, futile gatherings that aspire to be intellectual but are no more than hotbeds of gossip. It is a novel about revolution but it seems more like a recipe for a lightweight social satire where everyone is placed and judged. Yet into this flimsy world Dostoevsky introduces the brooding and charismatic Stavrogin, a sort of Russian Byron. Stavrogin is always more than meets the eye, another iceberg whose depths we can only surmise. Behind his gentlemanly air he is unfathomable, like Dickens's Steerforth, whom he is clearly modelled on. Even when he fights a duel he refuses to fire at his opponent, and we remain in the dark about his feelings. The only time we come near to knowing him is in death. Certainly, we can never explain him in terms of any political ideology he may be supposed to promote. His politics are as cloudy as his character. He is like a drop of poison that Dostoevsky pours into the novel to darken everything in it. Whether this anticipates Powys as well as recalling Dickens is something I can't pursue now. I should, however, mention the elusive charisma and mystery of Owen Glendower in Powys's great historical novel of that name. Owen is a very different sort of politician from Stavrogin, but he is a similarly poetic question mark of a character. As with Owen, we are still trying to figure out Stavrogin when the novel ends. We can only identify with such characters, as we do with Jane Eyre or Tess, if we are prepared to let them take us into parts of our mind that we barely know ourselves. Dostoevsky was fascinated by Hamlet, and no doubt when he created Stavrogin he understood how even the most eloquent character could imply far more than he actually avowed, by 'that within that passes show'.

Such characters do not respond to the more laborious kinds of moral or psychological analysis. We know them rather through some sudden

arresting gesture, like Stavrogin's at the duel, or, as T. S. Eliot pointed out, through some vividly individual turn of phrase like Mr Squeers's 'Here's richness!' or the comic 'Barkis is willin'. This is how we know the figures in Shakespeare or the *Inferno* rather than by the sort of painstaking analysis we get in a novel such as *Middlemarch*. 'I saw her once hop forty paces in the public street.' The result may be as comic as it is poetic. In this respect it is worth adding that Dickens and Dostoevsky shared an intense sense of comedy (the latter is a much funnier writer than English readers think) as well as an intense admiration for Shakespeare, not least for the character of Falstaff.⁵ Dickens's humour may have been too bound up with the English language to be imitated, but Dostoevsky still found a kind of Russian equivalent for it. Take, for example, Katerina Ivanovna Marmeladov's tragicomic outburst to the priest by her husband's deathbed in *Crime and Punishment* (both writers are full of deathbed scenes):

'The drunkard drank up everything. He stole from us, and took it to the pot-house; he wasted their lives and mine in the pot-house! Thank God he's dying! We'll have fewer losses!'

'You would do better to forgive him in the hour of death. Such feelings are a sin, madam, a great sin!'

Katerina Ivanovna was bustling around the sick man, giving him water, wiping the sweat and blood from his head, straightening his pillow, as she talked with the priest, and only turned to him from time to time while doing other things. But now she suddenly turned upon him almost in a frenzy.

'Eh, father! Words, nothing but words! Forgive him! And what if he didn't get run over? He'd come home drunk, wearing his only shirt, all dirty and ragged, and flop down and snore, and I'd be sloshing in the water till dawn, washing his and the children's rags, and then I'd hang them out the window to dry, and as soon as it was dawn, I'd sit down right away to mend them – that's my night ... So what's all this talk about forgiveness! As if I hadn't forgiven him!'

That 'Thank God he's dying' is more moving than Paul Dombey and his waves because the person who is dying is so uncomfortably real. Marmeladov is a sort of Russian Micawber: even in death he is as ludicrous as he is pathetic. Indeed, it is precisely his undimmed capacity for pompous self-deception that makes the spectacle of his grieving family so moving by

⁵ Dostoevsky referred frequently to Falstaff, who usually left him torn between delight and disapproval. Some of the most amusing of these references occur in *Nenotchka Nezvana*, where a fierce boxer dog called Falstaff has a prominent role.

contrast. What interests Dostoevsky most in this scene is not the dying Marmeladov, run down by a cab when paralytically drunk, but the emotional vitality of his desperate and impoverished family. The scene crackles with coarse life in spite of both its solemnity and its comedy, and the dramatic emotion is sustained over many pages. Like Dickens, Dostoevsky had a gift for intensifying his effects over long periods of narrative (something that Proust was to learn from both of them). The sustained, rhythmic build-up of such periods creates, beyond suspense or structure, a kind of music, a narrative poetry. Such effects are always complex: as we laugh at Marmeladov's bogus contrition we feel touched by the plight of his family. There is an unusual appetite for the contradictoriness of experience and, hence, its spaciousness. The squalid apartment of the Marmeladovs turns into a great stage as we watch. It would be shallow to think of such comedy as 'light relief'. After all, Marmeladov's oscillations between pride and humility, hope and despair, are, in the context of the novel as a whole, a parodic version of Raskolnikov's tragedy too. That the scene is also very close to *David Copperfield* is suggested by the fact that Marmeladov's wife keeps harping on the gentility of her parents, just as Mrs Micawber frequently feels nostalgic for her home life with her dear 'Papa'. Dostoevsky even borrowed Dickens's jokes.

This is not to say that *Crime and Punishment* doesn't also go beyond *David Copperfield*. Micawber has nine lives and always gets out of gaol, whereas the consequence of Marmeladov's improvidence is that he ends up prostituting his own daughter – the same Sonia whose love will eventually redeem Raskolnikov in his exile to Siberia. Dostoevsky's heroes do not come into a fortune and a pretty girl as Nicholas Nickleby does. Thus, in *The Idiot*, Dostoevsky's interest in the goodness embodied in Mr Pickwick can only be worked out by exposing Prince Myshkin to the reality of evil in the shape of Rogozhin. Myshkin's innocence would not be complete if it were protected as much as Pickwick's is. Nor does Dostoevsky divide up good and evil in the way Dickens's early novels do. Sometimes good and evil impulses coexist in the same character. When Rogozhin murders Nastasya Filipovna he is seen to be as much moved by his love for her (albeit a sensual love) as by hatred. Myshkin, whose own love for her is much more spiritual, can still understand what Rogozhin is going through. A novel like *Oliver Twist* seems Manichaean by comparison. Nevertheless, it is not far-fetched to see Dickens's Bill Sikes – on the run and trapped in his own obsessive thoughts – as a precursor of the hunted Raskolnikov. The difference is that, whereas Sikes is a slave to his passions, Raskolnikov's energy goes into trying to understand his.

Rather than pursue this line of thought here I would like to turn back to Wordsworth. He too, like Dickens and Dostoevsky, is preoccupied by the

hinterland of consciousness where our thoughts originate without our conscious knowledge, with the 'unknown modes of being' that Powys describes as 'tragic' in *Dostoevsky*. The closer Wordsworth got to his own hidden depths, the more they tended to 'fade into the light of common day' and the heavier became the 'burden of the mystery'. As he put it in the great 'spots of time' passage at the end of *The Prelude*:

The hiding-places of my power
Seem open; I approach, and then they close;
I see by glimpses now; when age comes on,
May scarcely see at all ...

It is telling that Powys, who calls himself a 'congenital Wordsworthian', should have compared Dostoevsky to Wordsworth. The former's prophetic sense of the enveloping mystery of Mother Russia is, he says, akin to Wordsworth's 'blank misgivings of a creature moving about in worlds not realised'. In each, the poetic imagination grapples with the unknown. Neither writer is simply a realist observer defining a known reality. Powys was particularly drawn to writers who were visionaries – Blake was another of them.⁶ This does not mean that he disregarded more realistic novelists such as Balzac and Flaubert – his tastes were splendidly eclectic – but it does indicate his own bent as a writer.⁷ Characteristic figures such as Geard and Quirm, Glendower and Merlin confirm this. He liked to see himself as a magician. When we add Dickens and Dostoevsky to the equation we see how this bent worked itself out in terms of the history of the novel. Of course, their poetry had a strong base in social reality, as Clough saw, but that was not its be-all and end-all; realism was rather a kind of launch-pad or springboard to a deeper reality. The squalor of *Bleak House* is nearer to Blake's 'London' than it is to the slums depicted by Zola. The same is as true of the Dostoevsky who began his career by translating Balzac and gradually turned into a visionary as it is of the Dickens of whom Alexander Blok once said that 'those cosy novels ... are very terrible and explosive material; in reading Dickens I have felt horror the equal of which Poe himself does not inspire'.⁸ The novelist stands on the precipice above a deep

⁶ Gide had not long discovered Blake when he gave his lectures on Dostoevsky, and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* clearly helped him to understand the novels better. See *Dostoevsky*, preface by Arnold Bennett (London 1925) pp. 161–74.

⁷ Powys read and lectured with a breadth that would be rare today. For instance, his admiration for Dostoevsky was paralleled by a lifelong devotion to the work of Henry James, whom he discovered long before the academics did. Readers of his own novels do not always realise how highly he valued *The Ambassadors*. What he found in it was a similar benignity towards life to his own.

⁸ Quoted in Leatherbarrow, *Dostoyevskii and Britain*, p. 109.

gulf. All of John Cowper Powys's novels transcend conventional realism, and this, more than anything else, is the index of how much he owed to Dickens and Dostoevsky. One need only think of Wolf Solent's recurrent nightmare of 'the man on the Waterloo steps', an image of spiritual negation as much as of material poverty, to see how he took his masters. Dickens's social pathos was one step on the way to this vision.

Judging from *A Writer's Diary* and his letters, Dostoevsky was particularly affected by early Dickens for the consoling influence it had on him. This seems surprising to us because it is the later Dickens that we think of as 'Dostoevskian', even allowing for the fact that the later Dickens is already implicit in the early books. Dostoevsky certainly read the later books (a French translation of *Little Dorrit* was found in his study after his death), but he did not draw so clearly on them as on *David Copperfield*. I would like to turn now to a novel he would have found especially suggestive though it is not certain he had read it – *Our Mutual Friend* – and in particular, to the drama of Bradley Headstone, the respectable schoolmaster who turns into a would-be murderer. Whether or not Bradley's story influenced *The Brothers Karamazov* is neither here nor there (it isn't a question of imitation): what is interesting is that by quite different routes the two novelists arrived at similar psychological insights. *Our Mutual Friend* enables us to judge both what they have in common and where they differ.

Quite early in the novel Bradley falls in love with Lizzie Hexam, the beautiful but low-born sister of his assistant Charley, and hopes to raise her to his own status. His love is thwarted, however, by Eugene Wrayburn, a feckless and briefless barrister who (rather more slowly) falls in love with her too. Wrayburn delights in goading and taunting Bradley with reminders of his own lowly social standing. More so than in Dostoevsky, passion begins in class. Gradually, as the two lovers vie to protect Lizzie, Bradley becomes consumed with jealous hatred of his rival and eventually tries to murder him. In his professional life Bradley is a well-drilled automaton, neurotically attentive to the conventions and on his guard against his own impulses:

He always seemed to be uneasy lest anything should be missing from his mental storehouse, and taking stock to assure himself.

Suppression of so much to make room for so much, had given him a constrained manner ...

After he attacks his rival, his world caves in on him: his pupils suffer the spectacle of the fits that increasingly grip him, forcing him to recognise the true nature of his feelings. Such knowledge well-nigh destroys him. It is easy to see how much it might have struck Dostoevsky. Yet Bradley still struggles to hang on to his old respectable persona, even if he is now aware of parts of himself that he has until now ignored. The heaviest cross he has

to bear is that, unlike Raskolnikov, he is doomed never to understand his new self and therefore has no way of redeeming it from evil.

Dickens enacts his melodrama symbolically. When Bradley returns to the scene of his crime by the river he carefully removes his neat schoolmaster's coat, his salt and pepper trousers and his fob watch, and dons instead a copy of the bargeman's clothes he has seen on the person of the lock-keeper, Rogue Riderhood, the most contemptible character in a novel that is full of contemptible characters. Consciously, Bradley hopes to implicate Riderhood in his crime; unconsciously, he identifies with him as his *Doppelgänger*. Thus his fate is sealed. At the end of the novel, after a protracted game of cat and mouse in which Bradley himself ends up as the mouse, he drags Riderhood down into the waters of the lock, where they grapple inseparably in death. The scene, brilliantly set against a winter landscape, has a Dantesque penetration in its Dickensian gloom.

Whether or not Dostoevsky knew Bradley's story is not my point. It is still Dostoevskian. When Ivan Karamazov wills his father's murder but leaves his half-brother Smerdiakov to execute it, so that the intellectual and the scullion share in the same dark impulses, we are in the same psychological territory as we are in *Our Mutual Friend*. Dostoevsky had already devoted his earlier novel *The Double* to the theme, and Dickens was to explore it again in the figure of John Jasper in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. Both novelists were pushing psychological realism well beyond the realm determined for it by even their most imaginative predecessors. Both saw character as mystery, beyond explanation.

This does not mean that Dickens pursued such perceptions as far as Dostoevsky did. Bradley is doomed partly so that he can be exorcised from the novel's ending and the field left free for Wrayburn. The latter can only be made fit to marry Lizzie if his rival is safely out of the way. Even so there remains a credibility gap in the ending. Dickens never quite sees through the sheer snobbery of Wrayburn's treatment of Bradley, nor does he realise how natural it is for Bradley to want to kill him. After all, his enemy has sought to deny his own existence. Thus, even though the tragedy is there for the sake of the happy ending, it is Bradley who has our sympathy. In *The Brothers Karamazov* there is no question of Ivan's being let off the hook as Wrayburn is. Nor is his complexity diluted. Wrayburn, chastened and depleted as he is after the attack, may be more suitable as Lizzie's husband but he is considerably less alive than he was in his more unregenerate days. If he lives at all, it is at the expense of Bradley's doomed intensity. Dickens did not find it easy to embody such strong feeling in the kind of hero who qualified for success in his world.

My reason for this digression about Bradley Headstone is that his story's symbolism brings with it one of the most remarkable chapters in *Our Mutual Friend*, the related story of Riderhood's revival from drowning. Riderhood's

wherry is run down by a steam-boat and his nearly dead body is brought to the Jolly Fellowship Porters, a house from which he has been banned. Dickens, like the men who try to revive the victim, focuses here not so much on Riderhood the man as on 'the spark of life within him' that is 'curiously separable from himself'. The men are agog for a 'token of life' but Riderhood, 'like us all, when we swoon – like us all, every day of our lives when we wake ... is instinctively unwilling to be restored to the consciousness of this existence'. Eventually, he comes round: 'The short-lived delusion begins to fade. The low, bad, unimpressible face is coming up from the depths of the river, or what other depths, to the surface again.'

There are, that is, deeper 'depths' than those of what is called 'Dickensian morality'. The attention is not on character but on the 'one touch of nature' that, despite morality, 'makes the whole world kin'. The flickering 'spark of life' may fade, but it is enough to show us where the real interest of the novel is centred. What moves the rough watermen in the bar is the presence of life itself – sheer existence – beyond the whys and wherefores of behaviour. It is the same spark that illuminates Sairey Gamp and a hundred other Dickens characters. It is also precisely what the redeemed Eugene Wrayburn seems to lack. To be fully alive and human, a Dickens character has to be a bit mad. Miss Havisham has the spark, but David Copperfield, who is worthy and dutiful to the point of priggishness, does not. Neither does John Harmon: when he reclaims his identity and his fortune at the end of *Our Mutual Friend* he turns out to be rather a stick. He is more interesting when he is perpetually on his guard and constrained by guilt. Both he and Wrayburn are destined for a half-alive sort of happiness that hides the 'spark of life'. In Dostoevsky, on the other hand, it is tragedy rather than happiness that releases the desire to live. Far from being destroyed by their sufferings, Dmitri Karamazov and Raskolnikov only glimpse the possibility of redemption by wholeheartedly undergoing them. They cannot be fobbed off with the mild consolations of bourgeois happiness, because the life-force in them is an intrinsic part of their spiritual force too. It is only when they have touched bottom that they know what it means to be alive. Whether this means that Dostoevsky is a more religious writer than Dickens, or simply that Dickens was more Victorian, is uncertain. It may be that, in the last resort, Dickens was simply more wedded to actual social reality than Dostoevsky was. What is clear is that a novel like *Our Mutual Friend* does not manage to get to the bottom of its own deepest insights as directly as *The Brothers Karamazov* does. The difference is between a vision that reaches us clearly and one where we have to read between the lines. Faced with the unexplained gap between the damned Bradley and the saved John Harmon, in complacent possession of his family home and fluttered over by an adoring Bella, we are unsure which way to look.

I won't take these thoughts further because it is time to look in more detail at the ways in which Dostoevsky goes beyond Dickens. For Powys takes it as read that he offers something that the English novelist cannot. Yet Dostoevsky did not reject his master; he built on him. For instance, he did not find a character like Little Nell cloyingly sentimental as most of us do, nor would he have understood Wilde's quip that only someone with 'a heart of stone' could refrain from laughing at her death. He took Little Nell straight because her pathos pointed him towards a pathos of his own. (She is a model for the heroine of his early novel *Nenotchka Nezvanova*, in which the heroine's bond with her father astutely recalls Nell's relationship with her grandfather.⁹) In practice this meant going beyond simplistic moral categories and turning the sentimental into the tragic. Thus, Dostoevsky's suffering victims can also be monsters of pride and envy, like Nastasya Filipovna in *The Idiot*. Everything has to be questioned. Powys refers to Dostoevsky's 'doubt à la Pascal and à la Nietzsche ... *dangerous doubt*'. He is not a moraliser but a kind of medium for whatever life throws at him, 'like a terrible aeolian harp hung across the cave of hell which is to be found in the forest of the human heart'. In a forest, we see only part of what is there and surmise the rest.

But this tragic vision does not make Dostoevsky as gloomy a writer as he is often thought to be. Even his grimmest moments can be lit up by comedy. What is more, he could see the funny side of his own *angst* – when he had lost all his money on the gaming tables and he and his wife were penniless wanderers in the spas of western Europe, his name for them both was 'Mr and Mrs Micawber'. From as early on as *Notes from the Underground* he was keenly aware of the absurdities of the self-conscious, questioning sort of character who was to become his own stock-in-trade. Yet irony was never enough. Set *The Brothers Karamazov* beside a novel like *Jude the Obscure* and one is immediately aware of an exhilaration and an enhanced vitality in it that outlasts what Hardy called 'life's little ironies'. Powys attributes this to something we also find in Dickens, what he calls 'the play instinct', 'an ancient Dionysian glorying in destiny' – a 'shocking and profane vitality' that enables us to face 'tragedy' without shrinking from it. In Powys's view, the greatest novelists – Balzac, Tolstoy, Victor Hugo – all possess this instinct in abundance. It is especially strong in the writers Dostoevsky

⁹ This early novel is steeped in the sense of everyday Russian life. Nenotchka's quixotic father is presided over by the spirits of Pushkin and Lermontov, but the debt to Dickens's portrayal of childhood and childlike adulthood is powerful and pervasive. The influence of *The Old Curiosity Shop* is also apparent in the sub-plot of *The Insulted and Injured*: see Loralee MacPike, *Dostoevsky's Dickens* (London 1981), *passim*. *The Gambler*, written not long before *Crime and Punishment*, is similarly Dickensian in the ease with which it moves from the comic to the tragic and back again.

admired most – Shakespeare, Cervantes, Gogol and, of course, Dickens himself. Nowhere is this clearer than in the crucial role given to children – the most instinctive and inveterate exponents of play – in the novels of Dickens and Dostoevsky. A child like Paul Dombey cuts through the lies of the adult world and goes direct to the heart of it; in Dostoevsky, childhood is like a searchlight trained on all those things that adults try so hard not to see. This anarchic ‘play instinct’ is so important to Powys that he chooses to end his book on Dostoevsky by emphasising it:

the human soul possesses an exultant power at a dramatic crisis of staring into the Abyss until it becomes the equal of the Abyss ... It is the knowledge of a play-instinct in us that feels as if it came from behind and beyond Nature. It is in fact the pre-historic Promethean gesture of man, of man the undefeated even in defeat, of man the unconquerable even in death ...

Not for nothing does Dostoevsky’s death-mask resemble the death-mask of the most modern and the most heretical of the ancient Greek dramatists. Not for nothing does there run throughout his work, as it ran throughout his life, a mysterious resilience that startles and almost shocks us. It is in fact the old Hellenic challenge to fate, the old Homeric acceptance of fate, the old human vitality that contains death as its final ingredient, the vitality that will yet make *man*, rather than any Man-God or God-Man, the creator of man’s future.¹⁰

The stress is on ‘man’, not on a Man-God like Stavrogin or a God-Man like Father Zossima. For Powys, Dostoevsky is not a religious mystic or a political ideologue but a tragic dramatist. His novels add up to more than just their ostensible message. The word ‘Dionysian’ may suggest Nietzsche (who deeply admired Dostoevsky), but what it really points to is the impassioned poetry of Euripides (a favourite writer of Powys’s too). Tragedy in this sense is quite different from anything we find in an English novelist such as Hardy. A ‘mysterious resilience’ is the last thing we get when Jude Fawley capitulates to what he calls ‘the coming universal wish to die’. In Dostoevsky tragedy makes us feel more alive. His novels, however, were scarcely known in England when *Jude the Obscure* first appeared. Soon after, Robert Louis Stevenson was bowled over by *Crime and Punishment* (the theme of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* is clearly Dostoevskian) though, even so, Henry

¹⁰ ‘... the great tragic soul of Flaubert is, so to speak, given only the rather commonplace bodies of Emma and Charles Bovary. There’s a misfit. And to get over the misfit, you have to let in all sorts of seams of pity. Seams of pity, which won’t be hidden.’ *Phoenix: The Posthumous Papers of D. H. Lawrence*, ed. Edward D. McDonald (London 1961) p. 226.

James could still describe Tolstoy's and Dostoevsky's novels as 'loose baggy monsters ... fluid puddings' in comparison with his own work or the best French novels. It was not until Constance Garnett's translations of Dostoevsky came out in the second decade of the twentieth century that his novels really took hold of English readers. In England, at least, Dostoevsky was read by the generation *after* the one he had written for.

At this point I will risk a generalisation. The tragic vitality that Powys found in Dostoevsky was not something available to him in the English novel, not even in Dickens. The English novel, preoccupied with class and money and manners, was too bound up in social considerations not to be half-immune to the more final and universal exigencies of tragedy. Of course, some English novels do explore a tragic subject-matter but, in comparison with a novel such as *The Brothers Karamazov*, they tend to pull their tragic punches. In *Middlemarch*, Dorothea Brooke is eventually assimilated into society – she never gets the chance to be a tragedy queen; *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* dissolves into a sort of pantheistic melodrama; Amy Dorrit eventually goes back down into society at the end, even though she has seen through it. Even Lawrence, in the final, highly Dostoevskian chapters of *Women in Love*, where Gerald Crich goes out into the snow to die, turns his back on tragedy for a conclusion in which Ursula and Birkin detach themselves from the thought of their dead friend and start to map out their own fulfilment. In short, Powys would have been aware that Dostoevsky's tragic vision confronted something which the English novelists had tended either to circumvent or to fudge.

This point is not a new one. Indeed, Lawrence himself repeatedly makes it in his *Study of Thomas Hardy*. He describes Hardy's heroes as 'pathetic' rather than 'tragic': 'the question of their unfortunate end is begged in the beginning'. There is no surprise to tragedy as there is in Dostoevsky. For Lawrence, as for Powys, tragedy should be 'a great kick at misery', not just a bowing down to the inevitable. Nineteenth-century tragedy – Balzac and Flaubert – was a capitulation which, in consequence, exposed all sorts of 'seams of pity' that turned the tragic into the depressing.¹¹ Lawrence, in reaction against novels like *Madame Bovary*, was therefore much more uneasy with the notion of tragedy than Powys was. He suspected it of being a kind of grand cop-out from life: 'with regard to their conclusions [the great tragedians] leave the soul feeling unsatisfied, unbelieving'. Unlike Powys, he wanted to go beyond tragedy to a vision that was nearer to the religious – a 'supreme art' that remained to be 'fully done'.¹² One might add that one of the inspirations of this ambition must have been Dostoevsky

¹¹ *Phoenix I*, pp. 514–15.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 285.

himself, despite the many reservations that Lawrence had about him. He may have been repelled by his religion of Love, but he still admired him as a visionary, 'an evil thinker but a marvellous seer'.¹³ Powys, on the other hand, values Dostoevsky the dramatist over Dostoevsky the religious philosopher. Thus, whereas his novels gave Powys something to emulate (not imitate) what they offered to Lawrence was something to react against, something to rewrite.

Take, for instance, Lawrence's deep interest in Ivan Karamazov's celebrated legend of the Grand Inquisitor. His preface to Koteliansky's translation of this legend was the last thing Lawrence published before his death. In Ivan's fable, Christ comes back to earth in the Spain of the Inquisition only to be imprisoned on the orders of the Grand Inquisitor for demanding more of human nature than it had in its power to give. The Inquisitor fears that Christ's idealism will disrupt the social order if he is allowed to go free (the situation is a variation on King Pentheus' imprisonment of Dionysos in Euripides' *Bacchae*). Lawrence thought the legend an 'unanswerable criticism of Christ', but he could not understand why Dostoevsky should have masked this liberation from idealism in Ivan's arid scepticism. It confirmed him in his belief that Dostoevsky had created 'great parables but bad art':¹⁴

Alyosha kisses Ivan: Thank you, brother, you are right, you take a burden off me! So why should Dostoevsky drag in Inquisitors and *autos-da-fé*, and Ivan wind up so morbidly suicidal? Let them be glad they've found the truth again.¹⁴

Despite this disrespectful humour, Lawrence clearly knew that Dostoevsky had helped to pave the way for his own insights.

All this disturbed Lawrence so much that in 1930 he decided to write his own version of the legend, the parable *The Man Who Died*. In this story Christ escapes the tomb, not to be resurrected in the spirit but to be born for the first time into the flesh. He has to atone for disparaging the body in his life in the world. To this end he is initiated into the joys of the flesh by a priestess of Isis who teaches him everything he had previously ignored. Instead of the tragedy of the crucifixion we have a revelation of the joys of this world. Though Lawrence, like Powys, celebrates the Dionysian here, he gives it a paradisaical rather than a tragic context. He rejects both the spiritual love of the old Christ and the beneficent agency of tragedy. This tallies with his response, years earlier, to his friend Middleton Murry's pioneering 1916 study of Dostoevsky, a book he refuted on the grounds that all Dostoevsky's people are 'fallen angels – even the dirtiest scrubs. This I cannot stomach.

¹³ *Letters of D. H. Lawrence*, ed. A. Huxley (London 1956) p. 327.

¹⁴ *Phoenix 1*, pp. 290–1.

People are not fallen angels, they are merely people. But Dostoevsky used them all as theological or religious units, they are all terms of divinity'.¹⁵ Murry fails to see beyond his professions of love:

the last and most beautiful article of his creed: 'If any one can prove to me that Christ is outside the truth, and if the truth really does exclude Christ, I should prefer to stay with Christ and not with the truth.' For in those words Dostoevsky confessed that for him the truth did exclude Christ.¹⁶

To Lawrence, the spiritualised Dostoevsky embodied in Myshkin was merely a disguise for another Dostoevsky who was 'like the rat, slithering along in hate, in the shadows'.¹⁷

Dostoevsky ... can nicely stick his head between the feet of Christ, and waggle his behind in the air. And though the behind-wagglings are a revelation, I don't think much even of the feet of Christ as a bluff for the cowards to hide their eyes against.¹⁸

Of course, Lawrence's response went deeper than this, as his own fiction shows, but he was shaken by Dostoevsky and reluctant to show it to someone like Murry whose religious values were different from his own. Elsewhere, he confesses to feeling a 'subterranean love'¹⁹ for Dostoevsky, in spite of all his objections to him. To Murry, Dostoevsky was the avatar of the art of the future, but to Lawrence he was instead the culmination of two millennia of Christianity whose work made it possible for later artists to make it new. Thus, *The Man Who Died* both derives from him and seeks to write him out.

In this respect, Powys – who treats Murry with a good deal more deference – tended to share Lawrence's distrust of the gospel of 'Love'. He thought that Murry was applying Western ideas to Eastern orthodoxy:

¹⁵ *Letters*, p. 327.

¹⁶ *Fyodor Dostoevsky: A Critical Study* (London 1916) pp. 133–4. Murry, who goes on from Myshkin to Rogozhin, Stavrogin and Ivan, makes it plain that it was precisely because 'he would rather stay with Christ than with the truth, [that Dostoevsky] could not'. Lawrence was closer to this position than he let on.

¹⁷ *Letters*, p. 238. That this was only *part* of what Lawrence felt about Dostoevsky is plain from the *Study of Thomas Hardy*, where he aspires to 'fly the flag of myself, at the extreme tip of life. He who would save his life must lose it ... when he has traversed his known and come to the beach to meet the unknown, he must strip himself naked and plunge in, and pass out: if he dare' (*Phoenix I*, p. 409). The quotation from John's Gospel occurs constantly in Dostoevsky and Lawrence might be describing Dmitri Karamazov (see below).

¹⁸ *Letters*, p. 365.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 325.

'I fight shy of the word "love" ... love in the Christian sense – I am not speaking now of Amor or Eros – requires a great deal of drastic overhauling.'²⁰ Both novelists had been to school with Nietzsche. Moreover, we know from Powys's great *Autobiography* that he was aware of how much his own view of 'love' had in common with Lawrence's:

It is this business of 'lovingness' that puzzles me ... I have seen, now and again, a look in the eyes of this 'love' that gives me a very queasy feeling. Nietzsche and D. H. Lawrence are undoubtedly right. There is something 'funny' about this Christian 'love'. At any rate it needs a thorough heathen analysis. Dostoevsky who understood it to its fathomless depths was himself doubtful about it.²¹

This is a subtler view of Dostoevsky than Lawrence's and it helps one to see why it would be wrong to assume that writers like Powys and Lawrence had simply left the author of *The Idiot* behind. That would be as superficial as the idea that Dostoevsky ever left Dickens behind. It is truer to say that it was Dostoevsky's comprehensive analysis of the notion of love that made them possible. After all, in *The Brothers Karamazov* love is more than just one thing: Dmitri and Ivan are as much possessed by it as Alyosha is. Love is more than any single one of the brothers can represent. In the same way, Birkin and Gerald love in different ways and Wolf Solent feels one kind of love for Gerda and another for Christie.

Murry's *Dostoevsky* is from his best period as a critic and it is still readable and thought-provoking, as well as being a good deal more subtle than Lawrence recognised. The reason it infuriated him was probably its assumption that Dostoevsky was the keeper of spiritual secrets that the West had yet to discover. Powys shared this view, though his Dostoevsky was less spiritualised than Murry's, but Lawrence eventually came to the conclusion that 'our own stuff' (including Hardy) was really 'much finer and purer',²² precisely because it was less spiritualised. To him, Dostoevsky was a consummation of the Christian past rather than a herald of the future.

To read *The Man Who Died* in conjunction with Powys's *Dostoevsky* is to realise how much more didactic Lawrence's response to Dostoevsky was. Powys's book is open and exploratory, whereas *The Man Who Died*, though

²⁰ *Dostoevsky* (London 1946) p. 208.

²¹ *Autobiography*, preface by J. B. Priestley (London 1982) p. 376.

²² *Letters*, p. 384. (I doubt whether I am the only reader who finds Lawrence's statement difficult to square with the *Study of Thomas Hardy*. There, one half of Hardy is an Angel Clare. Lawrence may have forgiven this because one half of the author of *Lady Chatterley* was an Angel Clare too.)

a fiction rather than a critical essay, always has an axe to grind and goes out of its way to be blasphemous. It aspires to be a poetic fable but it can't help preaching a moral. But Dostoevsky's own finest novels have a redeeming ambivalence which, in Lawrence's story, is sacrificed to the need to make a point. It is the contradictory richness of the experiences they describe – such moments as the ones where Father Zossima bows down before Dmitri and when Alyosha blesses Ivan – that justifies one in thinking of them as in quest not of a morality but of the life-force itself. For Powys, Dostoevsky's 'colossal physical vitality' goes even deeper than his sense of 'Mother Russia'.²³ Another name for it might be 'poetry'.

Just before Dmitri Karamazov is formally charged with the murder of his father he falls into a deep, exhausted sleep in his prison cell and dreams a strange dream of a peasant family blighted by poverty and war. It ends with the voice of Grushenka saying that she will never leave him. Then he wakes up:

He was suddenly struck by the fact that beneath his head there was a pillow that had not been there when he had subsided in exhaustion upon the trunk.

'Who put a pillow under my head? Who was that kind person?' he exclaimed with a kind of ecstatic, grateful emotion and in a voice that almost wept ... Mitya's entire soul was as if shaken by sobs and tears. He approached the table and declared that he would sign whatever was required.

'I had a good dream, gentleman,' he declared somehow strangely, with a face somehow new, as though illumined by joy.

Thus the chapter ends, as he prepares to sign the legal protocol that will send him to prison. The urbanity of 'I had a good dream, gentlemen' is unexpected. It is as if Dmitri were no longer trapped in the throes of his own desperate emotions but is seeing them at a remove. Nor is this mere fatalism on his part. His tone is more blithe than that would suggest. The dream has come *to* him, not just *out* of his own conscious anxieties. It allows him to stand back from his predicament as if it were another man's rather than his own. Nothing he has previously done prepares us for it. Yet this 'good dream' dreamt by a sinner shifts the whole ground of his being. What is perhaps most profound about it is the matter-of-fact way in which it is presented. Dostoevsky does not attempt to explain it, as more knowing and moralistic novelists would, and the chapter comes to an abrupt halt as soon as Dmitri wakes up. He is simply 'such stuff as dreams are made on'. What the dream denotes, it seems, is that life is simply living itself out through

²³ *Dostoevsky*, p. 29.

him, buoying him up and carrying him forward on its tide, irrespective of motive or ego. There is no call for interpretation. Dmitri abstains from trying to force or fashion his fate according to his own desires. What interests Dostoevsky is not his psychology (which by now we already understand) but what Powys calls the 'life-force' in him. The dream is affirmative, whatever crimes he may or may not have committed. It puts him in touch with his own being at a level deeper than that of the will and the flailing emotionality by which he has lived hitherto. We glimpse a bedrock of humanness in him, a calm acquiescence in life, beyond either guilt or penitence. Hence his disarming urbanity. Hence too Alyosha's abstention from giving him advice: the scene asks us to recognise a kind of sanctity in Dmitri's aboriginal desire to live.

Few novelists explore the sheer sense of existence as deeply as this. Balzac sometimes does, but rarely without adulterating his insights with an atmosphere of melodrama (Vautrin). Moreover, Balzac is too obsessed by the will – what we project onto life – to rest content with the sense of what life brings to us. A closer parallel to Dmitri's dispassionate acceptance of life might be found in a late Shakespeare play like *Pericles*. There too the hero responds unquestioningly to whatever life (and the sea) throw at him:

He puts on sackcloth, and to sea. He bears
A tempest, which his mortal vessel tears,
And yet he rides it out.

Dmitri is given to life in the same way, there being no other option for him. This is why the catharsis of the reconciliation scenes in *Pericles* seems to depend on a certain abeyance of character and volition. So, too, Dmitri faces his fate freed from that wildness of passion that marked him before it supervened.

Dmitri's dream is no doubt too much of a mystery to be discussed as I have tried to here. The greatest novels always have the last word. One can, however, begin to see why a novelist like Powys revered Dostoevsky so deeply. His own characters, for all their ineradicable self-consciousness, are fringed with mystery in a similar way. They too give themselves up to the element in which they struggle; for instance, Wolf Solent staring into the depths of Lenty Pond at the end of that novel. He may be defeated but he is not lost, even though the pond has been an emblem of suicide to him ever since his arrival in Dorset. It is, in fact, precisely at this moment that he graduates from introspection to a sense of belonging to the world which he inhabits. For the first time he can reflect that world instead of lapsing back into an inner world of his own making:

There was no 'I am I' to worry about; no Wolf Solent, with a mystical philosophy ... What was left of consciousness within him flapped like a

tired bird against the whole dark rondure of the material universe. If only he could find a crack, a cranny in that thick rotundity. But the thickness was his very self! He was no longer Wolf Solent. He was just earth, water, and little, glittering specks of fire!

Once again, there is a part of the story that can't be told in terms of character. Owen Glendower, on the run from the English, has a similar experience. It is as if the charismatic prince and elusive ham actor who spellbinds his followers found his personality peeling away to leave just an anonymous middle-aged man at grips with death. In his final disappearance or 'difan-coll' he asks his friend Broch to cremate his body and give it back to the earth: 'just bones. And I want you to break these in pieces with your axe, and strew them – little pieces mind! – round the walls.' His only other proviso is that a few 'bits' of his bones should be buried under a cross 'in the centre of the Druid mill-stone':

'Dig a hole – no bigger than a rabbit's – under the stone. Dig till you're at the centre of the stone and below the pillar of the cross and there leave what you've got in your hand. Spit on them first, Broch old friend. They'll rest the better for that. And then back with the earth-mould and stamp it down.'

No one is to know where he is buried. In our last glimpse of him his 'uplifted white beard' seems to 'come close to a crack in the visible, a crack through which the invisible was blowing like an ice-cold blast on its phantom horn'. It is only when Owen's many-coloured character is stripped down and effaced that Powys can express its full significance. He was never a 'Wessex' novelist as Hardy was and his people do not embody their place or live by their own quirks as Hardy's do. In the end, Owen is a kind of pervasive spirit whose mystery cannot be explained simply by his origins. In the same way, Wolf or Dud or Jobber Skald emerge from a place without being tied to it. Neither personality nor place circumscribes them. It is what is left unsaid and undisclosed that gives them their full resonance. What the novel doesn't say is a vital part of what it has to say. The effect is very like that of the narrator's final comment on Stavrogin's suicide at the end of *The Possessed*: 'The verdict of our doctors after the post-mortem was that it was most definitely not a case of insanity.' Not a study in personality, that is, but a recognition of mystery.

I mentioned earlier André Gide's observation that the English and the Russian novelists, unlike the French, are deeply preoccupied with the nature of childhood. 'The child is father of the man.' Not for nothing were Dickens and George Eliot, like Powys, the successors of William Wordsworth. Dickens's famous set pieces on child mortality – such as the deaths of

Little Nell and Paul Dombey – were popular variations on something Wordsworth had done long before, for example in the ‘Lucy’ poems. Dostoevsky was particularly drawn to this aspect of Dickens, which he took with great seriousness. Yet his own treatment of similar scenes provides as good a way as any of distinguishing between the two novelists.

The death of a child pits life against death in the starkest possible way. Here is how Dickens handles the subject in *Dombey and Son*:

As the reflection [of the sun] died away, and a gloom went creeping up the wall, he watched it deepen, deepen, deepen, into night ... His fancy had a strange tendency to wander to the river, which he knew was flowing through the great city; and now he thought how black it was, and how deep it would look, reflecting the hosts of stars – and more than all, how steadily it rolled away to meet the sea ... His only trouble was, the swift and rapid river. He felt forced, sometimes, to try to stop it – to stem it with his childish hands – or choke its way with sand – and when he saw it coming on, resistless, he cried out!

Paul is clearly a special kind of child with his own special pathos. Someone once said that sentimentality consists in laying claim to feelings you don’t really have, and Paul’s death, with those irksome symbolic waves, feels more like an occasion to work up the reader’s feelings than an unblinking recognition of mortality. It is all too clearly an exercise in fine writing. Dickens, as Ruskin said in *Unto This Last*, writes from ‘within a circle of stage fire’. However much we admire his extraordinary rhetorical gifts, we can’t help distrusting them here and suspecting that something is being swept under the carpet.

For contrast, I would like to quote from the final scene of *The Brothers Karamazov* where the schoolboy Ilusha dies, surrounded by his friends and family. Incidentally, for Dostoevsky to end his novel with the death of an innocent may be taken as a kind of riposte to Ivan’s question in ‘The Grand Inquisitor’: how can a God who lets the innocent suffer be good?²⁴ For Ilusha’s death is far from just depressing:

At last the funeral service proper began again, and candles were handed out. The panic-stricken father began to fuss about again, but the moving, stupendous funeral singing woke and shook his soul. He somehow shrank all over suddenly, and began a rapid, staccato sobbing, at first under his voice, but towards the end loudly. And when the

²⁴ Note that although Ilusha is innocent in the real sense he is not piously so like Paul Dombey. He is still the boy who attacked Krassotkin with a pen-knife for making fun of his father. The funeral commemorates that Ilusha too.

valediction began and the coffin was covered, he embraced it with his arms, as though he would not let them cover up Ilyushechka, and began rapidly and avidly, without cease, to kiss the lips of his dead boy. At last they managed to prevail on him and had already begun to lead him away from the step, when he suddenly stretched out an arm impetuously and took a few flowers from the little coffin. He looked at them, and it was as if he had a dawning of some new idea, with the result that he seemed to forget about the principal matter for a moment. Little by little he seemed to fall into a reverie and no longer offered any resistance when the coffin was raised up and borne outside to the little grave. It was not far away, in the cemetery, right beside the church, expensive; it was Katerina Ivanovna who had paid for it. After the customary ritual the grave-digger lowered the coffin ...

What is striking about the scene after *Dombey* is that nothing is done to prettify death or draw its sting: the ugly marks of disease are plain to see; Ilusha's father is as ridiculously sentimental as he was when he was alive; nothing is there to provide an easy consolation. We see the death through the eyes of children who have never seen death before and have therefore never become used to it. Yet, paradoxically, this unsentimental directness (as in that 'avidly') is the cue not for negation but for a kind of affirmation. Seeing death for what it is, we value life all the more. Hence Dostoevsky's attention to the unquenched liveliness of the schoolboys. We even find out, in passing, amidst all the pathos, who has paid for a grave in the expensive part of the cemetery. By contrast, Paul Dombey's death scene seems languid and enervated in its mood, more like elaborate mourning than real grief.²⁵ Its sentiment provides a cushion against tragedy whereas Dostoevsky, by confronting tragedy, is able to go beyond it. Dickens pulls a punch that Dostoevsky is prepared to throw, but the result is not so much an added gloom as an added vitality. Ilusha's death may be one of those acts of God that Ivan refuses to accept, but the novel ends with Alyosha explaining to the boys why true wisdom consists in accepting it and not, like Ivan, in sending one's ticket back. It was for such purposes that Father Zossima had sent him out from the monastery into the world. So *The Brothers Karamazov* concludes, not with death nor by evading tragedy, but by embracing life. To quote Powys again: 'the human soul possesses an exultant power at a dramatic crisis of staring into the Abyss until it becomes the equal of the Abyss'. Unlike Ivan, Alyosha looks death straight in the face. In

²⁵ But note the stark realism of the pauper burial in *Oliver Twist*. From the start, Dickens could be as unsentimental as he was, at times, sentimental. No doubt Dostoevsky would have realised this.

other words, to later English novelists, Dostoevsky represented a Dickensian intensity coupled with an unswerving honesty, like a Dickens without the Dickensian tendency to pull the strings.

Dostoevsky is one of those writers who belong not just to their own literature but to Europe as a whole. Everyone – including readers of Jane Austen – should read him. He gives us both a standard against which to measure the English novel and a pointer to the future. In fact, there is a sense in which Dostoevsky is himself a part of English literature.²⁶ He opened writers' eyes to the poetry of everyday reality. If, after the Victorians, novelists like Powys and Lawrence learnt how to embody the spiritual in the sensuous and the sensuous in the spiritual, it was partly because he taught them how to. For a brief period in the early twentieth century, a period that seems more and more important as it recedes from us, he was an integral part of the English novelist's inheritance. Nothing has happened since then to change this.

²⁶ Even Conrad, with his hereditary Russophobia and his distrust of mysticism, could not keep the atmosphere of *Crime and Punishment* out of *Under Western Eyes*.