

## Artists at Odds

**Tolstoy or Dostoevsky.** An Essay in Contrast.  
By GEORGE STEINER. *Faber*. 30s.

**T**OLSTOY or Dostoevsky? Aristotle or Plato? Goethe or Schiller?—the great pairs of disputing twins continue to exercise our imagination and inflame our natural partisanship. We are right, I think, to treat these neat dichotomies with at least an initial suspicion. In order to point a contrast the rivals are so often weighted in the direction of their differences, and in the process their own words tend to be forgotten. The answer to Mr. Steiner's question is, of course, "Both!" and for a great deal of his book this seems to be the answer that he is giving us. But we realise clearly enough by the end that the author is a convinced partisan and that his earlier tributes to Tolstoy have been paid partly at least in order to give more weight to the ideological summing-up against him.

There is a real complaint to be made here. When a more or less precise question of belief is involved a critic should make his own position clear from the start. This is particularly needed in our own time when the question of Christian belief is at issue. A bad habit is developing, and should be checked. Non-Christians find it satisfactory to use Christian metaphor as a means of adding a spurious depth and richness to their theories, so that we are often left in ignorance of whether religious language is being used metaphorically or not. This is permissible, of course, in the rhetorical and imagist language of poetry: it is a dangerous and annoying practice in works of prose exposition. I would like to know whether Mr. Steiner is a Christian; and I don't know. When he writes about Original Sin does he mean that he believes in an historical Fall of Man? Even the blurb seems to be deliberately contributing to our uncertainty. "Mr. Steiner believes that without an awareness of the presence of God (*or a denial of that presence*) [my italics] certain ranges of intensity cannot be attained." How ambiguous can you get? And it matters more than Mr. Steiner seems to think that we should be fully informed about his religious position.

This is no more than a preliminary stutter of irritation, though it is not a trivial one. In general this is a good, learned, and thought-provoking book, in spite of the pervasive fault which I have mentioned and in spite of a rather ominous beginning. "We can speak in one breath of the *Iliad* and *War and Peace*, of *King Lear* and *The Brothers Karamazov*. It is as simple and as complex as that." He does not save himself from the simplicity by paying deference to the complexity. There is a good

deal of this initial bombination about stature before Mr. Steiner gets down to his serious occupation, which is to examine his two writers and their works with the closeness which we may properly demand. But he does do this; and the greater part of the book is an illuminating study of the texts, in which Mr. Steiner shows very clearly that he is both well-informed and perceptive. His general critical position is made clear both early and late in the book: early he writes that

immemorially literary criticism has aspired to objective canons, to principles of judgment at once rigorous and universal. But on considering its diverse history one wonders whether such aspirations have been or indeed can be fulfilled. One wonders whether critical doctrines are ever more than the taste and sensibility of a man of genius, or a school of opinion, temporarily imposed upon the spirit of an age by force of presentation.

And towards the end of the book this judgment is reiterated in a brisker, and better, form; "In matters of poetry or myth there are no solutions, merely attempts to make our responses more adequate and of a more precise modesty." This seems to me to be the only sane view of the critical function, and Mr. Steiner adheres to it with admirable consistency.

He shows us a Tolstoy who was epical, earth-bound, a brilliant observer of the world, and a passionate though limited moralist. One of his boldest strokes is to choose three of the most admired, and "spiritual," passages of *War and Peace* and attempt to show that they do not deserve the admiration that has been accorded them. "In the three examples cited, we come to a point at which the tone falters and the narrative loses something of its rhythm and precision. This occurs as we pass from the portrayal of action to the interior monologue. Every time, the monologue itself strikes one as inadequate. It takes on a forensic note, a neutral resonance, as if a second voice were intruding." This seems to me to be well observed.

Mr. Steiner then shows us a Dostoevsky who was dramatic, anti-humanist, heretically Christian, *profoundly aware of the evil in the world* (and of its inevitability), anti-moralist and pessimistic. This is, of course, the conventional portrayal, and it is hard indeed to think of a contrary one which would carry any conviction. What Mr. Steiner usefully does is to show that much of the mechanism of Dostoevsky's novels is, in a sense, extraneous to their matter, and that a confusion about this has led to confusions about the real nature of what the novelist was saying. He shows that Dostoevsky took a great deal of his apparatus from the Gothic novels

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MACMILLAN

of the first half of the century. All this is very well presented. It is informative and unpretentious.

BUT IF, with our initial conception of scales to be evenly balanced, we expect to find strictures on Dostoevsky for failing where Tolstoy so notably succeeded we shall be seriously disappointed. By this point in the book Mr. Steiner is beginning to slide surreptitiously into the saddle of his chosen horse. He has taken sides, though we may not recognise this until near the end; and henceforth the whole trend of his argument will be more and more weighted against Tolstoy.

Yet there *is*, of course, a criticism to be made of Dostoevsky in the terms we were expecting. There *are* moments in these great but flawed novels when the characters leave the ground so far below them that we can no longer accept their reality—in any of the many senses of an ambiguous word. And equally it is true that there are many moments in Tolstoy—moments, in particular, of extraordinary joy—when the nature of human experience is being explored in the profoundest terms we can conceive of. It is true that Tolstoy's politics were naïve—but so were Dostoevsky's. Yet Tolstoy's are used against him by Mr. Steiner while Dostoevsky's are dismissed as irrelevant. And when Mr. Steiner finds immense and loaded significance in the fact that Soviet Russia has accepted Tolstoy and, until recently, rejected Dostoevsky, he is really using the argument of guilt by association. (Not that popularity in modern Russia would seem to me to carry the least suggestion of inadequacy—or of merit either.)

As for the first answer which I have suggested to the implied question of Mr. Steiner's title, he seems to dismiss it in a single sentence. "The tenor of their respective greatness and its forms of being set them irremediably at odds." This implies that those merits which each writer exclusively possessed are *by their nature* incompatible. But need we believe that this is so? Mustn't we, in fact, believe that it need not be so, and that it has not invariably been so? There is, of course, a great deal of Dostoevsky which could never have appeared anywhere in Shakespeare. But in *Timon*, in *Hamlet*, in *Lear* and *Troilus and Cressida* there is as much of Dostoevsky's unique perception as the period allowed. Just as there is much of the true greatness of Tolstoy in *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Othello*, *Henry the Fifth*, and *Twelfth Night*.

And even if this dubious appeal to the greatest authority should be rejected, it still remains true that there is nothing necessarily incompatible in the fundamental qualities of the two writers. Of course if one believes in original sin one

cannot simultaneously believe in human perfectability (though the dramatic element in all great literature does not exclude this possibility so rigorously as the more literal-minded critics might suppose). But if we are thinking in terms of epic and drama, of optimism and pessimism, of the world within and the world without, the ethical and the existential, then the incompatibility lies only in the apparent limitations of the individual human temperament. But art can and does transcend the temperamental limitations of the artist. A reconciliation of these attitudes, or at least their meaningful juxtaposition, should be the object of every ambitious writer.

Philip Toynbee

## The Messianic Heresy

Political Messianism: The Romantic Phase. By J. L. TALMON. *Secker & Warburg*. 50s.

PROFESSOR Talmon's *Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* has become a landmark in the discussion of revolutionary movements. His new volume, a massive sequel to the earlier work, carries the story and the argument a step further. The *Origins* presented a critique of the radical ideas which came to the surface in the French Revolution, and an analysis of political tendencies inherent in the sects which sprang from the collapse of Jacobinism. Now we are given a picture of the Europe that arose from the double impact of the industrial revolution and the French Revolution. This broadening of the canvas carries with it a shift from ideological to material considerations, but for the most part Dr. Talmon provides a history of ideas during the period under review—roughly the years between Waterloo and the upheaval of 1848. Given the programmatic character of almost all political thinking in this age, the emphasis on ideology is doubtless justified, but it leads to some awkwardness when in a separate chapter the attempt is made to bring the industrial revolution into the picture.

It is no criticism of Professor Talmon's earlier work to say that it had something to do with promoting the conservative outlook of the decade that lies behind us. The Western world in the 1950's bore some resemblance to Europe in the 1850's—both had witnessed a revolutionary upheaval and were busy digesting the fruit. We are still pondering the outcome of the Russian