

Panin Ivan

**Lectures on Russian  
Literature: Pushkin, Gogol,  
Turgenev, Tolstoy**



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# Ivan Panin

## Lectures on Russian Literature: Pushkin, Gogol, Turgenev, Tolstoy

### PREFACE

The translations given in this volume, with the exception of the storm-scene from Tolstoy in the First Lecture, are my own.

The reader will please bear in mind that these Lectures, printed here exactly as delivered, were written with a view to addressing the ear as well as the eye, otherwise the book would have been entirely different from what it now is.

When delivering the Sixth Lecture, I read extracts from Tolstoy's "My Religion" and "What to Do," illustrating every position of his I there commend; but for reasons it is needless to state, I omit them in the book. I can only hope that the reader will all the more readily go to the books themselves.

*I. P.*

Grafton, Mass.,

1 July, 1889.

# LECTURE I.

## INTRODUCTORY

1. I have chosen the four writers mentioned on the programme not so much because they are the four greatest names of Russian literature as because they best represent the point of view from which these lectures are to be delivered. For what Nature is to God, that is Literature unto the Soul. God ever strives to reveal himself in Nature through its manifold changes and developing forms. And the human soul ever strives to reveal itself in literature through its manifold changes and developing forms. But while to see the goal of the never resting creativeness of God is not yet given unto man, it is given unto mortal eyes to behold the promised land from Pisgah, toward which the soul ever strives, and which, let us hope, it ever is approaching. For the soul ever strives onward and upward, and whether the struggle be called progress of species, looking for the ideal, or union with God, the thing is the same. It is of this journey of the soul heavenward that literature is the record, and the various chases of literary development in every nation are only so many mile-posts on the road.

2. In its childhood the human soul only exists; it can hardly yet be said to live; but soon it becomes conscious of its existence, and the first cry it utters is that of joy. Youth is ever cheerful,

and in its cheer it sings. Youth sings to the stars in the sky, to the pale moon and to the red moon, to the maiden's cheeks and to the maiden's fan; youth sings to the flower, to the bee, to the bird, and even to the mouse. And what is true of the individual is equally true of the race. The earliest voices in the literature of any nation are those of song. In Greece Homer, like his favorite cicada, chirps right gladly, and in England Chaucer and Shakespeare are first of all bards. In France and Germany it is even difficult to find the separate prominent singers, for there the whole nation, whatever hath articulate voice in it, takes to singing with its troubadours and minnesingers. In its earliest stages then the soul sings, not in plaintive regretful strain, but birdlike from an overflowing breast, with rejoicings and with mirth.

3. But the time soon arrives when the soul recognizes that life means something more than mere existence, something more than mere enjoyment, something more even than mere happiness; the time soon arrives when the soul recognizes that by the side of the Prince of Light there also dwells the Prince of Darkness; that not only is there in the Universe a great God the Good, but also a great Devil the Evil; and with the impetuosity and impassionateness of youth it gives itself up to lamentation, to indignation. The heart of the poet, the singer, is now filled with woe; he departs and leaves behind him only the lamenter, the reproacher, the rebel. Job succeeds Miriam, Æschylus succeeds Homer, Racine and Corneille take the place of the troubadours,

and Byron succeeds Shakespeare. This is the stage of fruitless lamentation and protest.

4. But unlike the bear in winter, the soul cannot feed long on its own flesh, and the time soon comes when it beholds the wasteful restlessness of mere indignation, of mere protest. It sees that to overcome the ill it must go forth manfully and do battle, and attack the enemy in his most vulnerable spots, instead of fruitlessly railing against him. Literature then becomes full of purpose; becomes aggressive, attacks now the throne, now the church, now the law, now the institution, now the person. Tragedy is followed by comedy, sentiment by satire; Æschylus is followed by Aristophanes, Horace is followed by Juvenal and Martial; Racine is followed by Voltaire, and Byron by Dickens. This is the stage of war.

5. But neither is it given unto the soul to remain long in hatred, for hatred is the child of Darkness; the goal of the soul is Love, since Love is the child of Light. And the spirit of man soon discovers that the powers of darkness are not to be conquered by violence, by battle against the men possessed of them, but by faith in the final triumph of the Good, by submission to Fate, by endurance of what can be borne, by reverence towards God, and lastly by mercy towards men. The soul thus discovers its true haven; it lays down the sword; its voice calls no longer to strife, but to peace; it now inspires and uplifts, and Greek literature ends with Socrates and Plato, Rome with Marcus Aurelius and Seneca, England with Carlyle and Ruskin, America

with Emerson, and Germany with Goethe. Letters indeed go on in England, in America, and in Germany, but the cycle is completed; and higher than Plato, Marcus Aurelius, Goethe, Emerson, Carlyle, and Ruskin, the soul need not seek to rise. Whatever comes henceforth can add naught new to its life; the tones may indeed vary, but the strain must remain the same.

6. The eye of the body never indeed beholds the perfect circle; however accurately the hand draw, the magnifying glass quickly reveals zigs and zags in the outline. Only unto the eye of the spirit it is given to behold things in their perfection, and the soul knows that there does exist a perfect circle, magnifying glass or no magnifying glass. So history shows indeed many an irregularity in the law just laid down for the development of the soul, but the law is still there in its perfection, and Russian literature furnishes the best illustration of this law. Every literature has to go through these four stages, but nowhere have they been passed with such regularity as in Russia. Accordingly we have in due order of time Pushkin the singer, Gogol the protester, Turgenev the warrior, who on the very threshold of his literary career vows the oath of a Hannibal not to rest until serfdom and autocracy are abolished, and lastly we have Tolstoy the preacher, the inspirer.

7. How this law has operated on Russian soil, in Russian hearts, is the purpose of these lectures to show. For while the laws of the spirit are ever the same in essence, the character of their manifestation varies with time and place, just as in Nature the same force appears in the firmament as gravitation when it binds

star unto star, as attraction when it binds in the molecule atom unto atom, and in man as love when it binds heart unto heart. The phenomena therefore, natural to all literature, we shall also find here, but modified by the peculiar character of the people.

8. And the first characteristic of the Russian spirit is that it has no *originating* force. In the economy of the Aryan household, of which the Slavic race is but a member, each member has hitherto had a special office in the discharge of which its originating force was to be spent. The German has thus done the thinking of the race, the American by his inventive faculty has done the physical comforting of the race, the Frenchman the refining of the race, the Englishman the trading of the race; but the Russian has no such force peculiar to him. The office of the Slavonic race has hitherto been passive, and its highest distinction has hitherto been solely either to serve as a sieve through which the vivifying waters of European thought shall pour upon the sleeping body of Asia, or as a dead wall to stem the wild devastating flow of Asiatic barbarism upon European civilization. The virtue of the Slavonic race is thus first of all passivity; and as the virtue of a pipe is to be smooth and hollow, so the virtue of the Russian is first of all passive receptivity.

9. Look not therefore for creative originality in Russian literature. There is not a single form of literary development that is native to the Russian soil, not a single contribution to philosophy, to art, to letters, the form of which can be said to have been born on Russian soil. Its literary forms, like its

civilization (or that which passes for its civilization), have been borrowed bodily from the west. But as action and reaction are always equal, so this very limitation of the Russian national character has been the source of many virtues of spiritual life, which Europe and America might well learn to acquire, all the more now when western thought has matured to such ripeness as to be nigh decay.

10. And herein you have the explanation of the powerful hold Russian literature has suddenly gained upon thoughtful hearts. Wiseacres, marvelling at the meaning of the outburst of enthusiasm for Russian literature, mutter "fashionable craze," and henceforth rest content. But, O my friends, believe it not. Craze will go as craze has come, but the permanent force in Russian literature which now stirs the hearts of men is not to be disposed of by gossip at tea-table. Fashion can hug a corpse for a while, and proclaim its ghastly pallor to be delicacy of complexion, and the icy touch of its hand to be reserved culture, but it cannot breathe the breath of Life into what is dead. And the present enthusiasm is kept awake, rest assured, not because of fashion, but in spite of it. Craze will surely go, but with it will not go that which appeals in Russian literature to all earnest souls, because of its permanent elements over which fashion has no control.

11. For the Russians have elements in their writings quite notable in themselves at all times, but more notable now when letters everywhere else seem to run to waste and ruin, – elements

without which all writing must become in due course of time so much blacking of paper, and all speech only so much empty sound; elements without which all writing is sent off, not weighted in one corner, that it may, like unto the toy, after never so much swaying to and fro, still find its upright equilibrium, but rather like unto the sky-rocket, sent up into empty space whizzing and crackling, to end in due time in total explosion and darkness.

12. And of these elements the first is Intensity. What the Russian lacks in originality he makes up in strength; what he lacks in breadth he makes up in depth. The Russian is nothing if not intense. When he loves, he loves with all his heart; when he adores, he adores with all his soul; when he submits, he submits with all his being; when he rebels, he rebels with all his force. When Peter decides to introduce western civilization into his empire, it must be done in a day and throughout the country at once; and if human nature does not yield quickly enough to the order for change from above, soldiers must march about the streets with shears in their hands to cut off the forbidden beard and long coat. When tyrant Paul dies by the hands of assassins, a scene of joy at the deliverance takes place which is only possible on Russian streets: strangers fly into each other's arms, embrace, kiss each other, amid gratulations for the relief. When the foreign invader is to be repelled, no sacrifice is too great for the Russian; and he does not shrink even from setting fire to his own Mecca, the beloved mother Moscow.

When Alexander II. undertakes to liberate Russia, he crowds all reforms upon it at once, – emancipation of serfs, trial by jury, local self-government, popular education. And when an autocratic reaction arrives, it comes with the same storm-like rapidity and ubiquity. From a free country Russia is changed in one night, through the pistol-shot of a Karakozof, into a despotic country, just as if some Herman had waved his magic wand, and with his “presto, change,” had conjured up the dead autocracy into life again. When finally aristocratic youth is fired with the noble desire to help the ignorant peasant, home, family, station, fortune, career, all is forsaken, and youth goes forth to live with peasant, like peasant, that it may the better instruct him. This intensity which thus permeates all life of Russia is likewise visible in its literature; but while in practical life titanesqueness is a drawback, in literature, which is the nation's ideal life, it finds its most fruitful field. Hence the Russian writer may oft, indeed, be mistaken, frequently even totally wrong, but he is never uninteresting, because always powerful.

13. In times when feebleness has become so feeble as even to invent a theory, making thinness of voice, weakness of stamina, and general emasculation literary virtues; when intellect can find adequate interest only in the chess-puzzles of a Browning, and the sense of humor can find adequate sustenance only in the table-leaping antics of a Mark Twain, and the conscience can be goaded into remorse only by the sight of actual starvation, it is well to turn to these Russians and learn that one of the secrets of

their overwhelming power is their intensity.

14. Gogol, for instance, never sets you laughing explosively. Such laughter is only on the surface; but you can hardly read a page of his without feeling a general sense of mirth suffused as it were through every limb, and the cheek can laugh no more than the spinal column. So, too, Turgenev never sets you a weeping, but the sadness he feels he sends from his pages, circulating through your blood, and while the eye will not indeed drop a tear, for such grief is likewise mostly on the surface, the breast will heave a sigh. And Tolstoy never fires you to go forth and do a particularly good deed; he never, like Schiller, sends you off to embrace your friend, but on laying down his book you feel a general discontent with yourself, and a longing for a nobler life than yours is takes possession of the soul.

15. This is the result of the all-absorbing, all-devouring native intensity of the Russian spirit.

16. And this intensity accounts for the suddenness with which the Russian spirit has blazed forth on the horizon, so that the successive stages of development are scarcely visible. The darkness which overcast the letters of Russia before Pushkin disappears not slowly, but the sky is lighted up suddenly by innumerable lights. Stars of the first magnitude stud it, now here, now there, until the bewildered observer beholds not twinkling points but shining luminaries. In scarcely half a century Russia has brought forth Pushkin, Lermontof, Gogol, Dostoyefsky, Turgenev, Tolstoy; and as the institutions of Western Europe

became russified by the mere wave of an imperial hand, so Russian literature became modernized as if by the wave of a magic wand.

17. This national characteristic of intensity gives Russian literature a hot-house aspect. Its atmosphere is not only fragrant, but oppressively fragrant; and as in America after the civil war generals and colonels were almost too numerous for social comfort, so in Russia great authors are in well-nigh painful abundance, and the student is embarrassed not with the difficulty of selecting from the midst of poverty, but with the difficulty of selecting from the midst of riches. And not only is its aspect that of a hot-house, but its very character has been affected. Such is the intensity of the national spirit of Russia, that it can do well but one thing at a time, and all its strength can go into only one literary form at a time. From 1800 to 1835 Russian literature is like a field on a midsummer evening, full of all manner of musical sound, and whatever hath articulate voice does nothing but sing. Batushkof sings, Pushkin sings, Lermontof sings, Koltsof sings, Turgenef versifies, and Zhukofsky, like our own poetasters, balances himself acrobatically in metrical stanzas; and where the gift of song is wanting, it shrieks and screeches, but always, observe, in well-balanced rhymes. Then comes the era of the thick periodicals, and whatever is gifted in Russia, for a time speaks only through them; lastly comes realism with an intensity unparalleled elsewhere, and everybody writes in prose, and only one kind of prose at that, – fiction. Not a drama, not a

history, not an essay, not a philosophical treatise has yet grown on Russian soil; all the energy of Russia has gone into fiction, and Russia is not the country to produce, when it does produce masters, only one at a time.

18. But the great danger of intensity is extravagance; and Napoleon, who knew men well, could with justice say that the roots of Genius and Insanity are in the same tree, and indeed few are the writers of genius who have successfully coped with extravagance. It is the peculiar fortune however of the Russian writers to be comparatively free from it; and their second great virtue is the one which formed the cardinal virtue of a nation from whom we have still much to learn, the Temperance of the Greeks.

19. And of the virtues of which Temperance, Measuredness, is the parent, there are two, of which the first is Moderation and the second is Modesty: moderation with reference to things outside of the soul; modesty with reference to things inside of the soul. And for the highest example of moderation, you must read Turgenev's account of Nezhdanov's suicide in "Virgin Soil," or his account of the drowning of Marya Pavlovna in "Back Woods;" the first of which I will take the liberty to read to you.

"Nezhdanov sprang up from the sofa; he went twice round the room, then stopped short for a minute lost in thought; suddenly he shook himself, took off his 'masquerading' dress, kicked it into the corner, fetched and put on his former clothes.

"Then he went up to the three-legged small table and took

from the drawer two sealed envelopes, and a small object which he put into his pocket, but the envelopes he left on the table.

“He then leaned down and opened the door of the stove... The stove contained a heap of ashes. This was all that was left of Nezhdanof's papers and private book of verses... He had burned them all during the night. But in this same stove, leaning against one of the walls, was Marianne's portrait, Markelof's gift. Evidently Nezhdanof had not had the courage to burn this portrait with the rest; he took it out carefully and put it on the table by the side of the sealed papers.

“Then with a determined movement of the hand he seized his cap and started for the door ... but he stopped, came back, and went into Marianne's chamber.

“After standing motionless for a moment, he cast a look about him, and approaching the young girl's narrow small bed – he bent down and with one suppressed sob he placed his lips, not on the pillow, but on the foot of the bed... Then he stood up straight, drew his cap over his forehead, and flung himself from the room.

“Without meeting any one either in the entry, or on the staircase, or down below, he slipped out into the little enclosure. The day was cloudy, the sky lowering; a little damp breeze bent the tops of the grass-blades and gently waved the leaves on the trees. The mill rattled and buzzed less than usual at this hour; an odor of charcoal, of tar, and of soot came from the yard.

“Nezhdanof cast around him a scrutinizing, distrustful glance, then he walked up to the old apple-tree which had attracted his

attention on the day of his arrival, when he first looked out of his chamber window. The trunk of this apple-tree was covered with dry moss, its bare and knotty branches, with but a few little green and brown leaves, stuck out here and there, raised themselves crookedly towards the heavens, like the suppliant arms of an old man, with bent elbows. Nezhdanof stood firmly on the dark earth which surrounded the foot of the apple-tree, and drew from his pocket the small object which he had previously taken from the table drawer. – Then he looked attentively at the windows of the little wing.

“‘If some one should see me at this moment,’ he thought, ‘perhaps I should put off – ’

“‘But nowhere was a single human face to be seen... Everything seemed dead, everything turned itself away from him, drawing itself away from him forever, leaving him alone to the mercy of fate. Only the factory was sending forth its rank odor, its dull uproar, and a cold rain began to fall in fine drops, pricking like needles.

“‘Then Nezhdanof looked up, through the twisted branches of the tree beneath which he was standing, at the gray, heavy, wet, indifferent, blind sky; he gaped, shrugged his shoulders, and said to himself, ‘After all there is nothing else I can do. I cannot return to Petersburg, to prison.’ He threw down his cap, and with the premature feeling of a kind of agonizing, not wholly unpleasant yet powerful tension of the nerves, he put the mouth of the revolver against his breast and pulled the trigger...

“Something gave him a sudden blow not even a very hard one ... but already he lay on his back, trying to make out what had happened and how it came that he had just seen Tatyana... He wished to call to her and say, ‘Oh, there is something not right;’ but already he is speechless, and over his face into his eyes, over his forehead into his brain, there rushes a whirlwind of green smoke, and a flat something oppressively heavy crushed him forever to the ground.

“Nezhdanof was not mistaken in supposing he saw Tatyana; just as he pulled the trigger, she came to one of the windows of the little wing and descried him beneath the apple-tree. She had scarcely time to ask herself, ‘What is he doing under the apple-tree bareheaded in such weather as this?’ when he fell backward like a sheaf of wheat; but she felt at once that something tragic had happened; and she rushed downstairs, out into the enclosure... She ran up to Nezhdanof... ‘Alexis Dimitritsh, what is the matter?’ But darkness had already come over him. Tatyana stooped over him, and saw blood...

“Paul!” she shouted in a strange voice, ‘Paul!’

“In a few moments Marianne, Solomin, Paul, and two factory workmen were already in the enclosure; Nezhdanof was at once raised, carried into his chamber, and placed on a sofa where he had spent his last night.

“He lay on his back, his half-closed eyes remained fixed, his face was lead-colored; he breathed slowly and laboriously, catching each breath as if choking. Life had not yet left him.

“Marianne and Solomin stood on each side of the couch, almost as pale as Nezhdanof himself. Both were stunned, startled, crushed, especially Marianne, but they were not surprised. ‘Why did not we foresee this?’ each thought; and yet at the same time it seemed to them that they ... yes, they had foreseen it. When he said to Marianne, ‘Whatever I do, I warn you of it beforehand, you will not be surprised,’ and again, when he had spoken of the two men that existed in him, who can yet not live together, did not something like a presentiment stir in her? Why then did she not stop at that moment and reflect upon these words and this presentiment? Why does not she dare now to look at Solomin, as if he were her accomplice ... as if he too were suffering remorse? Why was the feeling of infinite pity, of desperate regret with which Nezhdanof inspired her mingled with a kind of terror, with shame, with remorse? Might she perhaps have saved him? Why does neither of them dare to utter a word? They hardly dare to breathe; they wait; what are they waiting for, Great God?

“Solomin sent for a surgeon, although there was of course no hope; upon the small black bloodless wound Tatyana had put a sponge with cold water, and moistened his hair also with cold water and vinegar; suddenly Nezhdanof ceased choking and made a slight movement.

“‘He is coming to himself,’ muttered Solomin.

“Marianne knelt beside the sofa... Nezhdanof looked at her ... up to this moment his eyes had been fixed, like those of every

dying person.

“Ah! I am still ... alive,’ he said with a hardly audible voice. ‘Unsuccessful as ever... I am detaining you.’

“Aliosha,’ Marianne contrived to groan out.

“Yes ... soon... You remember, Marianne, in my ... poem ... ‘Surround me with flowers.’ ... Where then are the flowers?... But you are here instead ... there, in my letter...’ Suddenly he began to shiver from head to foot.

“Ah, here she is... Give ... each other ... your hands – in my presence... Quick ... give – ’

“Solomin raised Marianne's hand, her head lay on the sofa, face down, close to the very wound. As for Solomin, he stood straight and rigid, black as night.

“So, that is right ... so.’

“Nezhdanof began to gasp again, but this time in an entirely strange way; his chest rose and his sides contracted ... he made evident efforts to place his hand on their clasped hands, but *his* were already dead.

“He is going,’ murmured Tatyana, who was standing near the door; and she began to cross herself. The sobbing breaths became rarer, shorter; he was still seeking Marianne with his look, but a kind of threatening milky whiteness already veiled his eyes from within.

“Good!..’ this was his last word.

“He now was no longer, but the hands of Solomin and Marianne were still joined across his breast.”

20. From this pure melancholy and measured sadness, go to Dickens and read his account of the death of little Nell, or to George Eliot and read her account of Maggie Tulliver's death. I venture to think you will need no comment of mine to perceive the difference; and the difference, I regret to say, is not in favor of the English masters.

21. But not only in the field of pathos is this moderation of the Russian striking; in the field of description of nature, of which both the English and the Russian are so fond in their literature, the two literatures offer abundant material for comparison, and I will permit myself to quote to you a passage from Dickens for the purpose of illustrating how the Russians go to work with a similar subject:

“It was small tyranny for a respectable wind to go wreaking its vengeance on such poor creatures as the fallen leaves; but this wind happening to come up with a great heap of them just after venting its humor on the insulted Dragon, did so disperse and scatter them that they fled away, pell-mell, some here, some there, rolling over each other, whirling round and round upon their thin edges, taking frantic flights into the air, and playing all manner of gambols in the extremity of their distresses. Nor was this enough for its malicious fury, for not content with driving them abroad, it charged small parties of them and hunted them into the wheelwright's saw-pit and below the planks and timbers in the yard, and scattering the sawdust in the air, it looked for them underneath, and when it did meet with any, whew! how it

drove them on and followed at their heels!

“The scared leaves only flew the faster for all this, and a giddy chase it was; for they got into unfrequented places, where there was no outlet, and where their pursuer kept them eddying round at his pleasure, and they crept under the eaves of the houses, and clung tightly to the sides of hay-ricks, like bats, and tore in at open chamber windows, and cowered close to hedges, and, in short, went everywhere for safety.” —*Martin Chuzzlewit*, ii.

22. Of which passage the principal vice is that it does not describe to you the wind, the thing Dickens really saw, but only what Dickens thought he saw. He gives you not the original but a translation, and a translation, as you will presently see, far from faithful; he gives you not the scene, but the effect of the scene on his mind; and as Dickens started out to produce not a faithful picture, but a startling emotion, his scene is accordingly gaudy, theatrical, false. For observe, the wind is a respectable wind, and yet afflicted with pettiness of tyranny, and it wreaks vengeance; and this vengeance-wreaking wind does not come up flying, as you would expect of a wind, but it *happens* to come up leisurely, evidently taking an after-dinner stroll, as is becoming a respectable wind, which finds it not inconsistent with respectability to be vengeance-wreaking. And this respectable wind, without any motive, suddenly transforms himself into a malicious wind. Observe, he is no longer revengeful, for revenge implies something wicked done to the wind, which rouses him, while malice has no such excuse, for malice acts without cause,

except from native depravity, while revenge acts always with cause. And this upright, leisurely strolling wind, now vengeance-wreaking, now malicious, again without sufficient cause changes his erect posture and kneels down, bends his head under the timbers, and the wind becomes a – peeper!

23. A conception like this may be very fine, it may be very poetic, and even very dramatic, but it is not true, for Dickens never *saw* the wind thus, else his metaphors would have been less mixed. What we see truly with our imagination we see clearly, and the metaphors born of clear sight are ever pure. Hence such description is extravagant because untrue; hence such description is demoralizing because extravagant, immoderate.

And now read Tolstoy's description of a storm during a coach-ride: —

“It was still ten versts to the nearest station; but the great, dark, purple cloud which had collected, God knows whence, without the smallest breeze, was moving swiftly upon us. The sun, which is not yet hidden by the clouds, brightly illumines its dark form, and the gray streaks which extend from it to the very horizon. From time to time, the lightning flashes in the distance; and a faint, dull roar is audible, which gradually increases in volume, approaches, and changes into broken peals which embrace the whole heavens. Vasili stands upon the box, and raises the cover of the britchka. The coachmen put on their armyaks, and, at every clap of thunder, remove their hats and cross themselves. The horses prick up their ears, puff out their nostrils as if smelling

the fresh air which is wafted from the approaching thunder-cloud, and the britchka rolls faster along the dusty road. I feel oppressed, and am conscious that the blood courses more rapidly through my veins. But the advance guard of the clouds already begins to conceal the sun; now it has peeped forth for the last time, has illumined the terribly dark portion of the horizon, and vanished. The entire landscape suddenly undergoes a change, and assumes a gloomy character. The ash woods quiver; the leaves take on a kind of dull whitish hue, and stand out against the purple background of cloud, and rustle and flutter; the crowns of the great birches begin to rock, and tufts of dry grass fly across the road. The water and white-breasted swallows circle about the britchka, and fly beneath the horses, as though with the intention of stopping us; daws with ruffled wings fly sideways to the wind: the edges of the leather apron, which we have buttoned up, begin to rise, and admit bursts of moist wind, and flap and beat against the body of the carriage. The lightning seems to flash in the britchka itself, dazzles the vision, and for a moment lights up the gray cloth, the border gimp, and Volodya's figure cowering in a corner. At the same moment, directly above our heads, a majestic roar resounds, which seems to rise ever higher and higher, and to spread ever wider and wider, in a vast spiral, gradually gaining force, until it passes into a deafening crash, which causes one to tremble and hold one's breath involuntarily. The wrath of God! how much poetry there is in this conception of the common people!

“The wheels whirl faster and faster. From the backs of Vasili and Philip, who is flourishing his reins, I perceive that they are afraid. The britchka rolls swiftly down the hill, and thunders over the bridge of planks. I am afraid to move, and momentarily await our universal destruction.

“Tpru! the trace is broken, and in spite of the unceasing, deafening claps of thunder, we are forced to halt upon the bridge.

“I lean my head against the side of the britchka, and, catching my breath with a sinking of the heart, I listen despairingly to the movements of Philip's fat black fingers, as he slowly ties a knot, and straightens out the traces, and strikes the side horse with palm and whip-handle.

“The uneasy feelings of sadness and terror increase within me with the force of the storm; but when the grand moment of silence arrives, which generally precedes the thunder-clap, these feelings had reached such a point, that, if this state of things had lasted a quarter of an hour, I am convinced that I should have died of excitement. At the same moment, there appears from beneath the bridge a human form, clothed in a dirty, ragged shirt, with a bloated senseless face, a shaven, wagging, totally uncovered head, crooked, nerveless legs, and a shining red stump in place of a hand, which he thrusts out directly at the britchka.

“Ba-a-schka!<sup>1</sup> Help-a-cripple-for-Christ's-sake!’ says the beggar, beginning to repeat his petition by rote, in a weak voice, as he crosses himself at every word, and bows to his very belt.

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<sup>1</sup> Imperfect pronunciation of *batiuschka*, “little father.”

“I cannot describe the feeling of chill terror which took possession of my soul at that moment. A shudder ran through my hair, and my eyes were riveted on the beggar, in a stupor of fright.

“Vasili, who bestows the alms on the journey, is giving Philip directions how to strengthen the trace; and it is only when all is ready, and Philip, gathering up the reins, climbs upon the box, that he begins to draw something from his side pocket. But we have no sooner started than a dazzling flash of lightning, which fills the whole ravine for a moment with its fiery glare, brings the horses to a stand, and is accompanied, without the slightest interval, by such a deafening clap of thunder that it seems as though the whole vault of heaven were falling in ruins upon us. The wind increases; the manes and tails of the horses, Vasili's cloak, and the edges of the apron, take one direction, and flutter wildly in the bursts of the raging gale. A great drop of rain fell heavily upon the leather hood of the britchka, then a second, a third, a fourth; and all at once it beat upon us like a drum, and the whole landscape resounded with the regular murmur of falling rain. I perceive, from the movement of Vasili's elbow, that he is untying his purse; the beggar, still crossing himself and bowing, runs close to the wheel, so that it seems as if he would be crushed. ‘Give-for-Christ's-sake!’ At last a copper groschen flies past us, and the wretched creature halts with surprise in the middle of the road; his smock, wet through and through, and clinging to his lean limbs, flutters in the gale, and he disappears from our sight.

“The slanting rain, driving before a strong wind, poured

down as from a bucket; streams trickled from Vasili's frieze back into the puddle of dirty water which had collected on the apron. The dust, which at first had been beaten into pellets, was converted into liquid mud, through which the wheels splashed; the jolts became fewer, and turbid brooks flowed in the ruts. The lightning-flashes grew broader and paler; the thunder-claps were no longer so startling after the uniform sound of the rain.

“Now the rain grows less violent; the thunder-cloud begins to disperse; light appears in the place where the sun should be, and a scrap of clear azure is almost visible through the grayish-white edges of the cloud. A moment more, and a timid ray of sunlight gleams in the pools along the road, upon the sheets of fine, perpendicular rain which fall as if through a sieve, and upon the shining, newly washed verdure of the wayside grass.

“The black thunder-cloud overspreads the opposite portion of the sky in equally threatening fashion, but I no longer fear it. I experience an inexpressibly joyous feeling of hope in life; which has quickly taken the place of my oppressive sensation of fear. My soul smiles, like Nature, refreshed and enlivened.”

24. And for modesty, too, the literatures of England and Russia furnish instructive comparisons. Russia has no autobiographies of note. Men there were too busy with their art to have much time left to think of themselves. Turgenev writes *Reminiscences*, but only of others, and not of himself; and when he speaks of his own past, it is only incidentally, and with the delicacy of a maiden. Tolstoy gives, indeed, an autobiography as

sincere as Rousseau's and as earnest as Mill's, but only because he believes that an account of the spiritual struggles *he* went through would be helpful to other strugglers with the terrible problems of life. But of their *personal* history there is seldom more than a trace found. Compare with this the autobiographies of Gibbon, Leigh Hunt, Mill, or even the Reminiscences of Carlyle, and the widely-branching outpourings of Ruskin in his autobiographical sketches. Not that the English over-estimate their own worth and importance, but the Russians seem to have the instinctive sense of measure in personal matters.

25. Much of this purity of taste is due to a singular circumstance in its literary history. Unlike other countries, in Russia, for a long time, literature has been the favorite solely of the educated and wealthy classes. Almost all the great names of Russian literature, Pushkin, Lermontof, Herten, Turgenef, Zhukofsky, Griboyedof, Karamzin, Tolstoy, were aristocrats, if not always by birth, at least by surroundings. The men of letters sprung from the people, nourished by the people, living among the people, the Burns, the Bérangers, the Heines are unknown in Russia. I have already stated that originality must not be looked for on Russian soil; that Russian literature is essentially an imitative literature in its forms, hence imitative force must have time to look about, examine, copy, and for this leisure, wealth is necessary.

26. This absence of originality has thus proved a source of blessing to Russian literature which well-nigh makes up the loss.

For literature thus being in the hands of men of leisure, free from the struggle for bread, was never governed in Russia by the law of supply and demand, and the dollar never became, as with us, the potent, even though the temporary arbiter of its destinies. Hence the singular purity of Russian literature in point of style. Dickens needs the dollars, and he therefore spins out his satires to a length of distance to be traversed only by seven-league boots, and in verbosity is equalled only by Thackeray. Gogol, however, not only compresses his chapters, but even burns the whole second part of his masterpiece, "Dead Souls," as unworthy of his best art. George Eliot, writing for a standard which requires three volumes for each novel, must fill her story with all manner of description which does not describe, and reflection which does not reflect; but Turgenev files and files until he is reproached more for omitting too much than for adding too much. And America's greatest living writer (I say greatest, because he is purest in spirit, gentlest in heart, and freest in mind) can still go on from year to year producing one novel annually with the regularity of a baker's muffin at breakfast. Compare with this his own master, Tolstoy, who for months forsakes his masterpiece, "Anna Karenina," because of a fastidious taste! Hence the question why Mrs. Astor never invites to her table literary men, which agitated them recently, could not have even been asked in Russia. Such a question is only possible in a country where the first question a publisher puts of a book is not whether it is good, but whether it is likely to pay.

27. Faithfulness of labor and finish of form are therefore characteristic of whatever has any reputation in Russia; and as works of art, there are few works of the Russian masters that are not veritable masterpieces. I say this with confidence of Turgeneff, Tolstoy, Gogol, and Pushkin; but I think this remark would hold even of the lesser lights of Russian literature. A sincerity, a truthfulness, a realness, is thus found in Russian literature, which makes it *be* a thing of beauty instead of doing some deeds of beauty. On reading "Uncle Tom's Cabin," you involuntarily ask, "What effect has this book had on slavery in America?" On reading Turgeneff's *Memoirs of a Sportsman*, though it accomplished as much for the serf, you no longer ask, "What has the book done for the serf?" You do not think of the serf any more now that he has ceased to be. But you do think of the innumerable things of beauty that roll out from his pages before you as if from a kaleidoscope. And if to be is greater than to do, then Russian literature is truly original, even though its forms be borrowed; since instead of seeming it *is*, and whatever truly *is*, is original.

28. From this sincerity of Russian writers comes the third great virtue of Russian literature, a virtue possessed as yet by other literatures in but a small degree. The Russian writer is first of all in earnest, and he has no time to give to *mere* entertainment, mere amusement. The Goldsmiths with their *Bees* and their *Citizens of the World*, the Addisons with their *Spectators*, nobly writ though these be, yet written mostly with no higher purpose

than to make the breakfast-roll glide down the throat more softly, – these exist not in Russia. Things of beauty, things of entertainment, like Addison's Essays, are indeed found in Russia; but not for entertainment alone were these writ, hence not in the strain of mirth. Rather are they writ with the blood of the heart; for to the Russian, "Life is real, life is earnest," not a mere pastime, and it was given to a Russian painter to make the all-known but singularly-forgotten observation that Christ never – laughed!

29. But while the native endowment of the soul, its spiritual capital, is the chief guide of the fate of literature, other forces also affect its course, the chief among which is the political government of the people. In most countries the influence of government upon literature has been slight. Shakespeare's plays, Milton's Paradise, were not affected by the political struggles of England. The sole writing of Milton which was affected by English politics, his prose, belongs to literature only in so far as it throws light on the author of Paradise Lost. Dante's Divine Comedy, charged though it be with the political electricity of his times, was but little affected by the state of government. In other countries the government of the people was as much itself an effect of the native endowment of the soul as its literature; and government and literature flowed therefore side by side, in two parallel streams, seldom interfering with each other's course. In Russia, however, government has extended a powerful influence on literature, and the most marked effect of its influence is

the short-livedness of most Russian authors. The calm, peaceful existence of the literary man has already been sung by Carlyle as a life-lengthener. In Russia, however, the same fatality which has pursued its political rulers has also pursued its spiritual rulers; and as most conquerors have died an unnatural death, so most writers have died an unnatural death, or only after an unnatural life. The witticism of Mark Twain, that the bed must be a most fatal place, since most people die in bed, is not applicable to Russian emperors and Russian writers. Few of them can be said to have died in their beds. Griboyedof is assassinated; Pushkin and Lermontof are murdered; Gogol is found dead from bodily starvation, and Byelinsky is found dead from spiritual starvation; Batushkof dies insane; Dostoyefsky and Chernishefsky are in prison the best years of their lives; Turgenef can find the length of his days only in exile, and Tolstoy the length of his in ploughing fields. For such a strange disharmony in the lives of Russian men of letters, the government is largely responsible. An autocracy which feels itself called to wrap literature tightly in swaddling-clothes, and establishes a censorship which does not shrink even from making verbal changes in the works of the artist to improve his style, can accomplish little more than the shortening of literary lives. For literature is a flower which can only wither at the touch of unhallowed hands, and the rude hands of the censor are far from being hallowed.

30. Hence Russian literature not only *is* a mere fragment, a mere brick of the vast edifice which it is capable of becoming; it

is even bound to remain a mere fragment for a long time to come. For as Socrates lived in Plato, Plato in Aristotle, and Aristotle in the Schoolmen, as Lessing lived in Goethe, Goethe in Heine, and Heine in young Germany, so great literary fathers reappear in the progeny of the next generation; the reproduction is indeed of puny enough, still the reproduction is there. But in Russia, while Pushkin lived in Gogol, and Gogol in Turgenev, the generation which was to inherit the kingdom left by Turgenev and Tolstoy is now buried in fortresses and dungeons. And as in America mammon has so eaten away literary aspiration as to leave Emerson and Hawthorne, Prescott and Motley, intellectually childless, so in Russia, autocracy has so eaten away the literary material as to leave the great masters childless.

31. Fortunately, though deprived by despotism of all power of propagation on Russian soil, the noble spirit of Russian literature has by a force I cannot but call divine been allowed to be propagated on foreign soil; and if the literature of the west, which is now stagnating in the pools of doubt, irreverence, mammon, and cold intellectualism, misnamed culture, is to be purified, the purification must come from the breath of Life which blows from Russia. This is the true meaning of the present craze for Russian authors. There is a force in them which the mass instinctively recognizes as divine; it feels for it, gropes for it, and the Devil, as usual, is the first to seize for his purposes whatever noble impulse comes over men, and this search for the divine of the mass becomes a sham, a fashionable craze. Hence the rage, the

boom. This is the inevitable stage of falsehood through which every noble aspiration must pass. By and by the stage of truth must come, and come it shall, in due time. Russian authors will then be read not because it is the fashion and the craze, but because they have a message from the very heavens to deliver unto him that hath eyes to see and ears to hear: the message of sincerity, the message of earnestness, the message of love. Then will have been reached the stage of truth.

32. Out of this crampedness of Russian literature by government developed that virtue of its masters, which with their sincerity and simplicity, or moderation, forms a most beautiful trinity of graces; I mean their freedom. You will indeed hear full many a yard-stick critic as he goes about with his load of pigeon-holed boxes to take measure of each author, and label him, and duly relegate him to convenient pigeon-hole, – such critic you will hear discourse much about classicism, and romanticism, and realism, and of their prevalence at different times in Russian literature. Believe it not! The Russian author who is at all worth classifying is slave of no school; he is free, for he is a worshipper of the truth which alone maketh men free, he is a school unto himself. Is Gogol a realist? He gives you indeed the reality, but he breathes into it a beauty only visible to idealizing eyes. Is Turgenev a realist? When thrilled with the unspeakable beauty of the sky, he depicts it so as to realize for you the ideal. And when Tolstoy is thrilled with a moral emotion, he depicts it so as to idealize the real for you. The Russians thus refuse to be

classified. And they belong to only one class, – the class of those that cannot be classified.

33. Thus has it come to pass that the west, to which Russian literature owes its nourishment, is now in its old age to be nourished by its foster child. The child is to become the father of the man; and Russian literature is henceforth to be the source of the regeneration of the western spirit. As the future fighters for freedom will have to look to the Perofskayas, to the Bardines, and the Zassulitshes, and to the unnamed countless victims of the Siberian snow-fields for models of heroism, so methinks henceforth writers must look to the Russians for models in their art: to Gogol for pure humor, to Turgenef for the worship of natural beauty, to Tolstoy for the worship of moral beauty.

# LECTURE II.

## PUSHKIN

1. I have stated in the first lecture that I should treat of Pushkin as the singer. Pushkin has indeed done much besides singing. He has written not only lyrics and ballads but also tales: tales in prose and tales in verse; he has written novels, a drama, and even a history. He has thus roamed far and wide, still he is only a singer. And even a cursory glance at his works is enough to show the place which belongs to him. I say belongs, because the place he holds has a prominence out of proportion to the merits of the writer. Among the blind the one-eyed is king, and the one-eyed Pushkin – for the moral eye is totally lacking in this man – came when there as yet was no genuine song in Russia, but mere noise, reverberation of sounding brass; and Pushkin was hailed as the voice of voices, because amidst the universal din his was at least clear. Of his most ambitious works, “Boris Godunof” is not a drama, with a central idea struggling in the breast of the poet for embodiment in art, but merely a series of well-painted pictures, and painted not for the soul, but only for the eye. His “Eugene Onyegin” contains many fine verses, much wit, much biting satire, much bitter scorn, but no indignation burning out of the righteous heart. His satire makes you smile, but fails to rouse you to indignation. In his “Onyegin,” Pushkin often pleases you,

but he never stirs you. Pushkin is in literature what the polished club-man is in society. In society the man who can repeat the most bon-mots, tell the most amusing anecdotes, and talk most fluently, holds the ear more closely than he that speaks from the heart. So Pushkin holds his place in literature because he is brilliant, because his verse is polished, his language chosen, his wit pointed, his prick stinging. But he has no aspiration, no hope; he has none of the elements which make the writings of the truly great helpful. Pushkin, in short, has nothing to give. Since to be able to give one must have, and Pushkin was a spiritual pauper.

2. And what is true of his more sustained works, is equally true of his lesser works. They all bear the mark of having come from the surface, and not from the depths. His "Prisoner of the Caucasus," his "Fountain of Bachtshisarai," his "Gypsies," are moreover weighted down with the additional load of having been written directly under the influence of Byron. And as health is sufficient unto itself and it is only disease which is contagious, Byron, who was sick at heart himself, could only impart disease and not health. Byron moreover had besides his gift of song the element of moral indignation against corrupt surroundings. Pushkin had not even this redeeming feature.

3. Pushkin therefore is not a poet, but only a singer; for he is not a maker, a creator. There is not a single idea any of his works can be said to stand for. His is merely a skill. No idea circulates in his blood giving him no rest until embodied in artistic form. His is merely a skill struggling for utterance because there is

more of it than he can hold. Pushkin has thus nothing to give you to carry away. All he gives is pleasure, and the pleasure he gives is not that got by the hungry from a draught of nourishing milk, but that got by the satiated from a draught of intoxicating wine. He is the exponent of beauty solely, without reference to an ultimate end. Gogol uses his sense of beauty and creative impulse to protest against corruption, to give vent to his moral indignation; Turgenev uses his sense of beauty as a weapon with which to fight *his* mortal enemy, mankind's deadly foe; and Tolstoy uses his sense of beauty to preach the ever-needed gospel of love. But Pushkin uses his sense of beauty merely to give it expression. He sings indeed like a siren, but he sings without purpose. Hence, though he is the greatest versifier of Russia, – not poet, observe! – he is among the least of its writers.

4. Towards the end of his early extinguished life he showed, indeed, signs of better things. In his “Captain's Daughter” he depicts a heroic simplicity, the sight of which is truly refreshing, and here Pushkin becomes truly noble. As a thing of purity, as a thing of calmness, as a thing of beauty, in short, the “Captain's Daughter” stands unsurpassed either in Russia or out of Russia. Only Goldsmith's “Vicar of Wakefield,” Gogol's “Taras Bulba,” and the Swiss clergyman's “Broom Merchant,” can be worthily placed by its side. But this nobility is of the lowly, humble kind, to be indeed thankful for as all nobility must be, whether it be that of the honest farmer who tills the soil in silence, or that of the gentle Longfellow who cultivates his modest muse in equal

quietness. But there is the nobility of the nightingale and the nobility of the eagle; there is the nobility of the lamb and the nobility of the lion; and beside the titanessness of Gogol, and Turgenev, and Tolstoy, the nobility of Pushkin, though high enough on its own plane, is relatively low.

5. Mere singer then that Pushkin is, he is accordingly at his best only in his lyrics. But the essence of a lyric is music, and the essence of music is harmony, and the essence of harmony is form; hence in beauty of form Pushkin is unsurpassed, and among singers he is peerless. His soul is a veritable Æolian harp. No sooner does the wind begin to blow than his soul is filled with music. His grace is only equalled by that of Heine, his ease by that of Goethe, and his melody by that of Tennyson. I have already said that Pushkin is not an eagle soaring in the heavens, but he is a nightingale perched singing on the tree. But this very perfection of form makes his lyrics well-nigh untranslatable, and their highest beauty can only be felt by those who can read them in the original.

6. In endeavoring therefore to present Pushkin to you, I shall present to you not the nine tenths of his works which were written only by his hands, – his dramas, his tales, his romances, whether in prose or verse, – but the one tithe of his works which was writ from his heart. For Pushkin was essentially a lyric singer, and whatever comes from this side of his being is truly original; all else, engrafted upon him as it is from without, either from ambition or from imitation, cannot be called *his* writing,

that which he alone and none others had to deliver himself of. What message Pushkin had to deliver at all to his fellow-men is therefore found in his lyrics.

7. Before proceeding, however, to look at this singer Pushkin, it is necessary to establish a standard by which his attainment is to be judged. And that we may ascertain how closely Pushkin approaches the highest, I venture to read to you the following poem, as the highest flight which the human soul is capable of taking heavenward on the wings of song.

## **HYMN TO FORCE**

**BY WM. R. THAYER**

I am eternal!  
I throb through the ages;  
I am the Master  
Of each of Life's stages.

I quicken the blood  
Of the mate-craving lover;  
The age-frozen heart  
With daisies I cover.

Down through the ether

I hurl constellations;  
Up from their earth-bed  
I wake the carnations.

I laugh in the flame  
As I kindle and fan it;  
I crawl in the worm;  
I leap in the planet.

Forth from its cradle  
I pilot the river;  
In lightning and earthquake  
I flash and I quiver.

My breath is the wind;  
My bosom the ocean;  
My form's undefined;  
My essence is motion.

The braggarts of science  
Would weigh and divide me;  
Their wisdom evading,  
I vanish and hide me.

My glances are rays  
From stars emanating;  
My voice through the spheres  
Is sound, undulating.

I am the monarch  
Uniting all matter:  
The atoms I gather;  
The atoms I scatter.

I pulse with the tides —  
Now hither, now thither;  
I grant the tree sap;  
I bid the bud wither.

I always am present,  
Yet nothing can bind me;  
Like thought evanescent,  
They lose me who find me.

8. I consider a poem of this kind (and I regret that there are very few such in any language) to stand at the very summit of poetic aspiration. For not only is it perfect in form, and is thus a thing of beauty made by the hands of man, but its subject is of the very highest, since it is a hymn, a praise of God, even though the name of the Most High be not there. For what is heaven? Heaven is a state where the fellowship of man with man is such as to leave no room for want to the one while there is abundance to the other. Heaven is a state where the wants of the individual are so cared for that he needs the help of none. But if there be no longer any need of toiling, neither for neighbor nor for self, what is there left for the soul to do but to praise God and glorify creation? A hymn like the above, then, is the outflow of a spirit which hath a

heavenly peace. And this is precisely the occupation with which the imagination endows the angels; the highest flight of the soul is therefore that in which it is so divested of the interests of the earth as to be filled only with reverence and worship. And this hymn to Force seems to me to have come from a spirit which, at the time of its writing at least, attained such freedom from the earthly.

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