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Lecture

Russian Literature and Psychiatry

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The subject of this paper is psychiatry, forensic psychiatry and Russian literature. It is well-known that people with literary talent often possess unusually keen psychological insight. Their literary portrayals of psychological analysis, descriptions of how the human mind and consciousness work and depiction of different psychic states, both normal and pathological, are of great value for psychology and psychiatry and have always attracted the active attention of specialists.

Russian literature has many authors of interest from this point of view. In this paper I shall examine briefly the psychological and psychiatric aspects of the work of three famous Russian prose writers – Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy and Chekhov.

Dostoyevsky

Pride of place in terms of importance for psychology belongs to Dostoyevsky. He possessed the unique talent of a great psychologist. In his works he also appears in the role of psychopathologist, describing psychic disturbances. His novels are also of interest to forensic psychiatrists, for many of them centre round the theme of crime and punishment. Before taking a look at them, we should perhaps note a few important facts of his biography.

Dostoyevsky was born in 1821 in a poor family of noble descent. His father, a doctor, had a despotic nature and was killed by his serfs when Dostoyevsky was eighteen. It was then that Dostoyevsky had his first epileptic seizure. In 1849, by which time he was already a popular young writer, Dostoyevsky was arrested for attending meetings of a secret revolutionary circle. Seven members of the circle, Dostoyevsky included, were sentenced to death. He was taken onto the parade ground to be shot, but at the last moment the Tsar announced a reprieve. The sentence was commuted to four years penal service in Siberia, followed by another five in exile. During this period he went through a spiritual crisis as a result of which he revised his views and found great support in the teaching of Christ.

Crime and Punishment

Dostoyevsky's novel *Crime and Punishment*, written in 1866, is of special interest. It contains a profound analysis of a crime, tracing it from the moment when the idea first occurs to the future murderer, up to the act itself and beyond, through various mental states to eventual repentance.

A young student called Rodion Raskolnikov has been expelled from university and is living in extreme poverty. Humiliated by his wretched condition, the young man spends all his time reflecting on the injustice of life. Necessity brings him to a money-lender, an old woman who has a considerable fortune. The old woman is mean and spiteful. Raskolnikov keeps thinking that the money lying to no avail in her coffers could be used to save young lives. He begins to question the right of "this contemptible insect" to exist. In a state of near starvation and despair, he gradually formulates a theory about sacrificing one's life "for the common good".

Raskolnikov decides to murder the old woman. It will not be a banal murder for the sake of personal gain, however. Raskolnikov is inspired by the idea of "doing good for his fellow men". Dostoyevsky is describing an 'ideological' crime, a murder based on theoretical considerations for the sake of a noble aim. It is not surprising that Raskolnikov seeks support for his theory in Napoleon, who believed that a select few had the right to violate the moral standards compulsory for 'ordinary' people. Raskolnikov develops the idea that a strong personality has the right to commit a crime. By committing murder he wants to prove to himself that he belongs to this category of 'supermen', but at the same time he vows that after the murder he will lead an honest and useful life.

Dostoyevsky gives a remarkable analysis of the way in which the idea of committing a crime affects Raskolnikov. His circle of interests narrows until he is concentrating solely on the idea of the murder, which becomes a psychological dominant, driving out all other thoughts. He plans all the details of the crime so as to avoid being suspect. The author stresses that immediately before and during the murder Raskolnikov lacks "freedom of will" and his actions are hypnotic, automatic. Dostoyevsky goes on to describe the acute mental condition that develops in Raskolnikov on the day after the murder, a condition characterised by fear, auditory and visual

illusions and hallucinations. The hallucinations are extremely vivid and take the form of nightmarish pictures of the murder accompanied by the "old woman's sarcastic but soundless laughter" and the voices and insults of the crowd which is pursuing him.

The psychosis described should be regarded as the reactive situationally-conditioned state that develops due to severe shock following an act committed, a condition well-known in forensic psychiatry. The clinical picture of this condition and its dynamics, characterised by a gradual reduction of symptoms, confirm the temporary and reversible nature of this psychotic state.

After the crime, however, Dostoyevsky describes the punishment as well. The punishment consists of brilliantly portrayed remorse and repentance. "Unexpected and unsuspected" feelings overwhelm Raskolnikov; he experiences a feeling of self-loathing and isolation from his fellow-men. Eventually he confesses to the crime and seeks punishment in order to expiate his guilt. The author shows how, in the process of repentance, the criminal comes to understand the invalidity of the ideas that led him to commit murder. Dostoyevsky sees Raskolnikov as a noble man who falls victim to a mistaken idea.

One of the questions the forensic psychiatrist may ask in examining this case is the extent to which Raskolnikov is responsible for his actions. The 'ideological', 'theoretical' justification of the crime may provoke doubt and disagreement. Analysis shows, however, that the motivation of the crime was not pathological, but rather based on a concept widespread at that time among young people. Raskolnikov's ideas and convictions assume the proportions of predominant ideas, but nevertheless do not exclude responsibility for the act. This conclusion is borne out by Raskolnikov's condition after the crime; in the process of repentance his ideas change quickly and he renounces the 'superman' morality.

Crime and Punishment was written during a period when the new revolutionary and utopian ideas of the 1860s, including terrorist theories, were very popular in Western Europe and Russia. Dostoyevsky attacks the proponents of these ideas in his novel. He makes it clear that he rejects fanatical revolutionary theories aimed at bringing about radical changes in society. After his years of penal servitude Dostoyevsky came to believe in the possibility of improving life without social revolutions.

The Idiot

Another novel by Dostoyevsky of interest to psychiatrists is *The Idiot*, written in 1868. As the writer himself put it, he had the idea of depicting "an absolutely fine and beautiful person". A young prince comes to Russia from Switzerland where he has been receiving treatment for epilepsy for several years. We are told that "he had the appearance of a saint, his manners were gentle, and his big blue eyes had a strange expression, from which one could easily guess that he was an epileptic".

An analysis of Prince Myshkin's epilepsy shows that the clinical picture of his disease is characterised, first and foremost, by grand mal seizures with loss of consciousness. The seizure is preceded by an aura with a sense of mystical rapture, ecstasy, acute elation and the sensation of understanding the meaning of life. He also experiences absences, *déjà vu* and *jamais vu*, and a special sense of foreboding, presentiment and 'revelations'. In such a state, for example, he has a presentiment that Ragozhin will try to kill him. His thinking is tangential and circumstantial, with a tendency towards excessively detailed description. His handwriting is calligraphic. Prince Myshkin is very dear to Dostoyevsky. It is no accident that he gives him the disease which he suffers from himself, a disease which, Dostoyevsky believed, helps a person to perceive the world more acutely and understand the sufferings and grief of others.

The Devils

Dostoyevsky's gift of prophecy manifested itself in *The Devils*, written in 1872. This novel is a synthesis of many of his ideas. His aim in writing it was to attack the logic that anything was permissible and to protest against all forms of revolutionary violence and terrorism. Again, as in *Crime and Punishment*, he raises the question of ideological murder.

With regard to the psychiatric content of the novel, this is connected primarily with the figure of the 'chief devil', Nikolai Stavrogin, the behind-the-scenes director and supreme ideologian of a secret society engaged in terrorism and the spreading of chaos. Dostoyevsky describes Stavrogin as a demonic personality, a beast of a man. He is indifferent and callous to all around him, cold-hearted and spiritually empty. In addition, he is both depraved and sadistic. He enjoys dominating other people. He has no political convictions, however, and engages in clandestine activities out of boredom and the irresistible urge to carry out diabolically cruel experiments on himself and others. Dostoyevsky describes the logical end to Stavrogin's criminal life–he commits suicide.

The question may be asked as to whether Stavrogin is mentally ill. Some psychiatrists believe

that he is schizophrenic and support this reference to his depravity, emotional frigidity, ideological ambivalence and lack of morals. Stavrogin is not an example of the norm, of course. He is a special type of person. But the absence of schizophrenia-specific symptoms and thought disorders makes it impossible to agree with such an opinion. It would be too simplistic to regard every cynic as being mentally ill. Stavrogin's insolent behaviour is quite deliberate. It is a challenge to society. In Stavrogin the writer returns to his study of the psychology of 'all is permitted', as in the case of Raskolnikov, but here he gives the theme a deeper and broader treatment.

The very title of the novel has an aspect linked with psychiatry. In a letter to a friend Dostoyevsky provided his own interpretation of the novel's title and philosophical conception. According to him, the title reflects the psychopathological phenomenon of being possessed by the devil. He explained it as follows: madness is when devils, i.e. the forces of evil and destruction, take possession of the sick person. He believed that this madness could affect society as well. It is a social, not a medico-clinical madness. Thus he wished to show the madness of an ideology that sought to bring about a radical reconstruction of society through violence and bloodshed.

Devilry, Dostoyevsky believed, is the fanatical idea of destruction disguised under the mask of doing good. The only way to treat it is to drive the devils out of sick society.

Tolstoy

Unlike Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy investigated the sphere of psychology rather than psychiatry in his writing. Limiting analysis here to his psychiatric themes, I will examine one figure only from his vast gallery of characters, namely Anna Karenina. Our choice is determined by the fact that here, beyond any shade of doubt, Tolstoy gives a clinically authentic description of Anna's psychogenic depression, as a result of which she eventually commits suicide. This depression develops within the framework of a long-term and objectively very traumatic situation. The basis of the situation is her unsuccessful, joyless marriage without love, her only affection being for her son, and then a sudden and completely overwhelming passion for another man.

Tolstoy describes Anna's passion with remarkable psychological insight. It is an elemental passion too powerful to be withstood. Clever, honest and good, Anna is incapable of hiding her love from the very start. Society will not forgive her, and everyone turns away from her. Anna leaves her husband, who refuses to give her a divorce, and goes to Italy with Vronsky. It is there that her greatest suffering begins. She misses her son dreadfully and feels guilty towards her husband. To this is added jealousy, as Vronsky seems to be cooling towards her. In this objectively insoluble situation Anna's depressive state develops. It progresses and is characterised by insomnia, anxiety, despair, irritation and weakness. Her jealousy becomes predominant. Immediately prior to the suicide act Tolstoy describes the particularly depressive sense of hopelessness, when Anna decides that the only way out of the situation is to kill herself.

As we can see, in Tolstoy psychology leads to philosophy, to moral and historical reflections. The novel's pathos lies in the fact that people have no right to judge one another. According to its famous Old Testament epigraph, the right to avenge and repay is not theirs. Anna's guilt is not an established fact for Tolstoy. Her passion is a destructive force which she cannot withstand. In the novel Tolstoy merely places the question of Anna's guilt or innocence on the philosophical plane, without providing a solution or an easy answer. He gives each of us the chance to solve it for ourselves. Herein lies his greatness as a psychologist.

Chekhov

The last Russian writer to be examined here is Chekhov. A doctor by profession, he frequently made use of medical knowledge in his prose. As Somerset Maugham once said, only a doctor could understand how the observations of Chekhov the doctor influenced the work of Chekhov the writer. All sorts of medical problems found reflection in Chekhov's prose, including medical ethics, social medicine and a description of different types of doctors–the hard workers and those who used their profession to get rich.

In his short stories Chekhov also showed his knowledge of psychology and psychiatry. At the same time, the value of his descriptions is not that they reproduce real life, for he did not set himself the aim of describing mental illness as such, but rather portrayed it to solve more general ideological or artistic tasks. Thus, some of the strongest impressions made by Chekhov's prose are from his descriptions of anguish and intense emotional pain resulting from a psychic trauma or moments of personal crisis (psychalgia). The degree of emotional intensity is particularly high when the writer is dealing with the suffering of children. In the short story 'Vanka' a boy of nine describes how unhappy

he is in a letter to his grandfather, which is in fact a clinical description of depression.

The short story 'Must Sleep' is of interest from the viewpoint of forensic psychiatry. A servant girl of thirteen, worked to the point of exhaustion in the day by the couple who employ her, is made to rock their baby's cradle at night. The girl is dead tired, but knows that if she dares to snatch some sleep she will be beaten. In this condition she starts hallucinating. She sees "clouds drifting over the sky that are crying like a child". Suddenly she becomes convinced that the only way to get some sleep is to kill the child. After smothering it to death, she lies down on the floor, laughing with joy and a moment later is fast asleep. This story describes an acute psychotic state resulting from lack of sleep. Solzhenitsyn was later to recall it in his description of how the inmates of Stalin's prison camps were tortured by depriving them of sleep.

The clinical aspect of psychiatry is reflected in Chekhov's story 'The Black Monk', in which he shows great skill in portraying hallucinations. In this story Chekhov presents the case history of Kovrin, a master of philosophy, who suffers from megalomania. The onset of the disease is described with great precision. Kovrin is tense and nervy, sleeps badly and is hyperactive. He begins to have hallucinations in the form of a black monk who tells him that he, Kovrin, is a genius, one of God's 'elect'. After treatment Kovrin finds life boring and ordinary. He becomes cruel and coarse to those around him. On his deathbed the hallucinations return, the black monk reappears and Kovrin dies with a smile on his lips.

The social aspect of medicine and psychiatry is reflected in Chekhov's story 'Ward No. Six', set in a remote provincial town. The town hospital has a special ward, number six, for mental patients. The ward's inmates are completely at the mercy of the watchman Nikita, who beats them. The hospital is filthy and the staff actually rob the patients. The point of the story is not just to give an authentic picture of the horrors of the hospital and the hopeless position of the patients in ward six.

The two main characters, Dr Andrei Ragin and the patient Ivan Gromov, are of special interest. When Ragin takes charge of the hospital, he sees all the above-mentioned horrors but is almost indifferent to them. His indifference is explained by his philosophy, which is that peace and happiness lies not outside, but inside a person, and are therefore accessible wherever the person may be. So there is no need to try and improve the conditions in which people live. On the contrary, suffering purifies a person's soul. It is useful to him. Chekhov shows that this type of philosophy of 'inner self-perfectionment', widespread among the Russian intelligentsia in the 1880s, was used to justify the most appalling social conditions.

Dr Ragin's philosophy does not prevail, however. The doctor himself is suspected of having gone mad and is put into ward six, where he is cruelly beaten by Nikita. After experiencing the sufferings and beatings himself, he eventually realises that one should not be indifferent to them, but shortly afterwards dies of a cerebral haemorrhage.

A foil for the doctor is Ivan Gromov, a former court official. He suffers from persecution mania. Chekhov describes the progression of the disease with remarkable precision, accompanied by fear and terror. In periods of remission, however, it is clear that Gromov is a highly educated and cultured person. At such times he is capable of rational discussion and reflection on injustice, evil and cruelty. He argues with the doctor, attacking his philosophical views, the philosophy of social indifference. Gromov is a noble madman. Thus, using his knowledge of psychopathology, Chekhov portrays characters who contain social generalisations.

To the three great classical writers examined here one could add many others who were also brilliant psychologists, such as Gogol, Goncharov and, in the 20th century, Andrei Bely and Mikhail Bulgakov. In their books they describe not only the healthy human psyche, but also many psychic disturbances. Yet they never copied blindly from nature and did not confuse the aims of their art with those of medical science. By examining and describing the depths of the human consciousness, they sought to proceed from the problems of psychology to philosophical questions.

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