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Joseph Frank: Dostoevsky: The Mantle of the Prophet, 1871-1881

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Introduction

The last ten years of Dostoevsky's life, the subject of the present volume, mark the end of an extraordinary literary career and of a life that touched both the heights and depths of Russian society. It became customary during these years, even among people who disagreed (and sometimes quite violently) with Dostoevsky on social-political issues, to regard him with a certain reverence, and to feel that his words incarnated a prophetic vision illuminating Russia and its destiny. One of his favorite poems, which he often read aloud, was Pushkin's powerfully evocative "The Prophet"; and each time he did so, his mesmerized listeners invariably felt that he was assuming this function himself. The unprecedented stature he attained astonished even his friends and admirers, and transcended all personal and political boundaries. In the eyes of the vast majority of the literate public, he became a living symbol of all the suffering that history had imposed on the Russian people, as well as of all their longing for an ideal world of (Christian) brotherly love and harmony.

A number of factors contributed to the unique status that Dostoevsky enjoyed during the 1870s. His now little-read *Diary of a Writer*, a monthly periodical written entirely by himself for two years, commented on the passing scene with passion, verve, and eloquence, and also included literary reminiscences, short stories, and sketches. This personal periodical was an enormous success, reaching a larger audience than any previous journal of comparable intellectual seriousness; and although many of its ideas do not represent Dostoevsky at his best, they elicited a wide response that made him the most important public voice of the time. It was the *Diary of a Writer*, in combination with his appearances on the platform as reader and speaker, that helped to create his "prophetic" status. Moreover, during the last two years of his life he held all of literate Russia spellbound with the monthly installments of his greatest novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*. Its gripping theme placed the murder of a father in a vast religious and moral-philosophical context; and no Russian reader of the time could avoid associating its deeply probing pages with the increasingly frequent attempts then being made to assassinate the Tsar.

Nor was Dostoevsky averse to assuming such a prophetic role, one

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that he could well have felt had been accorded to him by destiny itself. His life had placed him in an extraordinary position from which to understand the problems of Russian society, and his artistic-ideological evolution embodies and expresses all the conflicts and contradictions that made up the panorama of Russian social-cultural life. Moreover, at no moment was Russian opinion more ready to seek guidance than in the crisis period the country was then living through. This stormy and unsettled time reached its climax, just a month after Dostoevsky's own death, with the assassination of Alexander II, the Tsar-Liberator whom he revered.

To place Dostoevsky's triumphal apotheosis in a proper perspective, let us glance briefly at his life up to this point. Born in 1821, he belonged to a family legally classified as nobility according to the table of ranks established by Peter the Great. But this was simply a civil service ranking and did not provide his family with a social status equal to that of the established gentry class of landowners from whom, for example, Turgenev and Tolstoy—Dostoevsky's most important literary contemporaries—were descended. Mikhail Andreevich, Dostoevsky's father, was an army doctor who had risen through the ranks, and his parents had belonged to the provincial clergy, a group in Russia whose prestige was far from elevated. The family of his mother was of the merchant class, and though it had acquired a certain degree of cultivation, this origin still placed it on the lower rungs of the Russian social ladder. Dostoevsky's own position in the Russian hierarchy was thus ambiguous. He was legally, but not socially, equal to the scions of the gentry; and from remarks in a letter about Turgenev, we know how greatly he resented the superficial amiability of his typically aristocratic manners. The intensity of Dostoevsky's feeling for the theme of humiliation thus very probably sprang from the anomalies of his own situation.

Whatever the personal moral defects of Dostoevsky's father, which have been amply explored elsewhere, Mikhail Andreevich conscientiously looked after his family and provided his sons with the best possible education. He sent them to private schools to shield them from corporal punishment, and tutors came to the house to give instruction in French and religion. Dostoevsky recalled having learned to read from a religious primer, and he also remembered the annual pilgrimages with his pious mother to the monastery of the Trinity and Saint Sergei, about sixty versts from Moscow, as well as the visits to the many cathedrals within the city itself. He was thus taught to revere the Russian religious tradition, and attributed a decisive influence on his later development to these early impressions. This religious aspect of his education again sets him off from the usual pattern of the gentry class (though not all, to be sure, since the devout Slavophiles were of the same stock). But for

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the most part, religious faith among the upper class had been undermined by Voltaire and eighteenth-century French thought, and gentry children received very little, if any, instruction in religion, whose precepts of self-sacrifice and reverence for martyrdom they absorbed mainly from their servants.

Dostoevsky's father had destined his two older sons, Mikhail and Feodor, for military careers, and Feodor succeeded in passing the examination for entrance into the Academy for Military Engineers in St. Petersburg. He thus received the education of an officer and a gentleman, though he had no interest whatever in military engineering and apparently no talent for it either. Luckily, the academy also included courses in Russian and French literature, and he emerged with both a genuine appreciation of French Classicism (he particularly admired Racine), as well as an increased knowledge of the very latest productions of socially progressive writers like George Sand and Victor Hugo, with whom he was already partially familiar. Literature had been his passion ever since learning to read, and he had long ago decided that he wanted to become a writer like his idol, Pushkin; he said that if he were not already wearing mourning for his mother, who died in 1837, he would have worn it when Pushkin was killed in a duel in the same year. One of Dostoevsky's greatest public triumphs, just a year before his death in 1881, was the speech he made at the ceremonies accompanying the dedication of a monument to Pushkin in Moscow.

Long believed, according to local rumor, to have been murdered by his serfs, though officially reported as being overcome by an apoplectic stroke, Dostoevsky's father went to his grave in 1839. Some recent investigation has cast doubt on the murder story, based entirely on hearsay and rejected by a judicial investigation at the time; but it has been extremely popular since Freud's famous article on "Dostoevsky and Parricide." It cannot be established whether Dostoevsky himself believed the rumors, well known to the family, that his father had been murdered. A small income from the estate allowed him to resign his army commission in 1844, primarily, no doubt, to devote himself to literature, but also because one of his official duties—the supervision of the disciplinary punishment of flogging—had revolted him to the core. He had begun to write seriously years before, and two of his poetic tragedies, the most prestigious literary genre of the time, have regrettably been lost. He was soon swept up, however, in the new literary movement sponsored by the fiery critic Vissarion Belinsky, who had become converted to Utopian Socialism. Belinsky urged the members of the new Russian literary generation to turn their attention to the world around them, and particularly to follow the lead of the Gogol of *The Overcoat* and *Dead Souls* in revealing the glaring injustices of Russian society. Gogol was very far

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from being a progressive (quite the contrary!), and his intention was satirical and comic rather than subversive; but his sharp eye for the incongruities of Russian society objectively exposed all of its morally abhorrent reality.

The young writers who grouped themselves around Belinsky's program came to be known as the Natural School, and they included many of the important creators of the nineteenth-century Russian novel—Turgenev and Goncharov as well as Dostoevsky, not to mention the “civic” poet Nekrasov. Dostoevsky's first novel, *Poor Folk* (1845), was hailed by Belinsky as the most important work so far produced under his inspiration, and it immediately brought the young author into the forefront of the Russian literary scene. His personal acquaintance with Belinsky—a vibrantly powerful personality, who left an indelible impression both on his friends and on his time—was to prove of the utmost importance for shaping his own moral-spiritual and ideological evolution. The *Diary of a Writer* abounds in references to Belinsky, and one article in particular, recording a conversation with the great critic some thirty years earlier, contains the nucleus of what was to become the Legend of the Grand Inquisitor.

Poor Folk already exemplifies certain features that were to continue to distinguish Dostoevsky's literary artistry. Written in the form of an exchange of letters, it illustrates his preference for a poetics of subjectivity in which his characters directly express their innermost thoughts and feelings; and he will continue to favor dramatic monologues or dialogues, rather than third-person expository narration, in all of his later novels. Even when he uses a third-person narrator, as in his next work, *The Double*, this narrator is never a purely objective, detached observer; he blends with the character's consciousness in a manner anticipating later developments of the stream-of-consciousness technique. *The Double* was not a success, however, being roundly pummeled by Belinsky for centering on an atypical “psychopathic” character—a criticism that continued to be leveled against him throughout his life. Between 1845 and 1849 he tried his hand at various types of stories, but these did not succeed in raising a reputation badly damaged by Belinsky's strictures. They failed primarily because they no longer provided the obvious social pathos so movingly expressed in *Poor Folk*; but Dostoevsky had not lost interest in the social issues then agitating the Russian intelligentsia. He was, rather, experimenting with artistic modes that expressed them more indirectly through their effect on character and personality.

In 1847 he began to frequent the meetings of the Petrashevsky circle, a group of young men who gathered once a week for conviviality and conversation, and who were known as disciples of one or another school of Utopian Socialism (the theories of Charles Fourier predominated).

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Dostoevsky did not become a convert to any of these schools and shared the opinion of his friend, the young literary critic Valerian Mai-kov, that each placed too many constraints on the freedom of the individual to be completely acceptable. (This concern for the freedom of the individual was later to become one of the dominating leitmotifs of Dostoevsky's work.) Nonetheless, he received a thorough schooling in Socialist thought, and this indoctrination left a permanent impress on his ideas and values. The notion of a utopian transformation of earthly life into what would be, in effect, a realization of the Christian ideal of Paradise as a realm of mutual love never ceased to haunt his imagination—though it is very far from clear to what extent he literally believed this might be possible.

The somewhat desultory discussions at the Petrashevsky gatherings became much more animated as a result of the European revolutions of 1848, and the wave of uprisings that swept over Europe did not fail to lap, though feebly, at the shores of Russia. The Petrashevsky, to be sure, were dedicated to peaceful persuasion; but Nikolay Speshnev, probably the prototype of the character of Stavrogin in *The Devils*—and whom Dostoevsky at this time called his “Mephistopheles”—formed a small, secret society inside the larger circle. The purpose of this underground group was to circulate propaganda among the peasantry aimed at stirring up a revolution against serfdom. Dostoevsky rarely participated in the theoretical public discussions of the larger gatherings; but on the few occasions when he did speak, it was to castigate, with passionate indignation, the intolerable injustice of this keystone of the Russian social order. It is thus not surprising that he joined Speshnev's revolutionary group and tried to recruit others to the cause.

In 1849 the Petrashevsky were rounded up by the secret police of Nicholas I, who had decided, in view of the revolutionary groundswell sweeping over Europe, not to tolerate any longer even the discussion of such subversive ideas. However, the existence of the genuinely revolutionary organization in their midst, though suspected, was not discovered in the investigation that ensued, and only uncovered in 1922; indeed, it was not until 1956 that the names of all the seven members came to light. Dostoevsky lived all his life with the knowledge that he had once himself been a revolutionary, who had not recoiled at the idea of bloodshed; and his profound understanding of the psychology of characters attracted to radical ideas may surely be attributed to such a history.

His arrest and its aftermath unquestionably became one of the defining moments (perhaps *the* defining moment) of his life. He was submitted—along with all the others—to the ordeal of a mock execution, and he stood in the second row of those presumably to be shot. He was

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convinced that his life was shortly to be snuffed out; but though the terror of the moment is communicated in *The Idiot*, it is clear, from the recollections of a fellow Petrashevist, that he also believed in some form of afterlife. To the convinced atheist Speshnev, he said, "We shall be with Christ." But the latter only replied ironically, pointing to the ground, "A handful of dust." This confrontation with eternity marked the transition between the Dostoevsky of the 1840s—a Christian, to be sure, but one essentially focused on the problems of earthly life—and the later Dostoevsky, for whom the origins of the world and of human existence, as he wrote in *The Brothers Karamazov*, lay in other, unearthly realms. The religious-metaphysical Dostoevsky of the great novels emerged from this sadistic charade staged by Nicholas I, though its effects would take a long while to be assimilated and mastered for artistic purposes.

The next four years are of equal importance, but on a different level. Dostoevsky was sent to Siberia and lived in a prison camp, mainly with peasant convicts, many of whom had committed murder. Dostoevsky was thus placed in a situation that few other members of his class had ever been forced to endure, and he always attributed the greatest importance to this exposure—on the basis of a status of equality if not inferiority—to the grim realities of Russian peasant life. He felt that he had acquired a special insight into the Russian folk character as a result of his travails, and that his Calvary, as he later wrote in the *Diary of a Writer*, had led to "the regeneration of [his] convictions."

Dostoevsky had assumed that members of the upper-class intelligentsia could lead the social revolution that he and the Speshnev group had been planning. Through bitter personal experience, he now discovered that the cultural and spiritual gap between the classes was so enormous that no genuine understanding between them was possible; and he became convinced that no tolerable Russian future could begin until this gap was bridged. On a more personal level, his intuition of the importance for the human personality of a sense of its own freedom, already present in his rejection of Socialist blueprints, was immensely broadened and deepened. His observations of his fellow convicts revealed that freedom of the will was not only a social desiderata, not only a religious postulate, but a primordial need of the human personality. Acts that might seem senseless or irrational to a superficial observer sprang irresistibly, among the imprisoned convicts guarded night and day, from "the poignant hysterical craving for self-expression, the unconscious yearning for [one]self, the desire . . . to assert [a] crushed personality, a desire which suddenly takes possession of [someone] and reaches the pitch of fury, of spite, of mental aberration" (4: 66–67). Dostoevsky compared this uncontrollable fury to the reaction of a man bur-

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ied alive and hopelessly beating on the lid of his coffin; the certain knowledge of futility would not restrain his visceral desperation. From that time on, the notion that rationality or reasonableness could be counted on as a controlling and dominant force in human life seemed to him the height of folly.

At first appalled by the barbarities of his peasant fellow prisoners, Dostoevsky's attitude toward them gradually changed. He came to understand that many of their crimes had been provoked by, and were a revolt against, the pitiless cruelties they had been forced to endure; and he began to detect (or believed he could detect), underneath the brutalities of their surface behavior, the kindness and gentleness he had encountered long ago among the peasants on his father's small estate. In a revelatory sketch, "The Peasant Marey," Dostoevsky depicts his revulsion at the spectacle of the drunkenly carousing peasant convicts on a feast day; but then he recalled the tenderness of Marey, his father's serf, who had calmed and blessed him as a frightened child. Were not all these roisterous savages so many Mareys, if one could look into their hearts? All the more so because, whatever their crimes, they always recognized them as such, and "when [at Easter], with the chalice in his hands, the priest read the words 'accept me, O Lord, even as the thief,' almost all of them bowed down to the ground with the clanking of chains" (4: 177). Dostoevsky's faith in the innately Christian virtues of the Russian peasantry, which he felt he could discern even under the repellent exteriors of hardened peasant criminals, was never shaken in the future and became a crucial—if highly questionable—cornerstone of his later ideology.

On returning to Russia in 1860, after serving for six years as a common soldier and an officer in the Russian Army, Dostoevsky found the social-cultural atmosphere entirely changed. He belonged to the generation of the 1840s, which had been inspired by a French Utopian Socialism imbued with a veneration for Christ, and whose philosophical ideas had been absorbed from the spacious metaphysical horizons of the German Idealism of Hegel, Schelling, and Schiller. A new generation, that of the 1860s, now dominated Russian cultural life; and its leaders, Nikolay Chernyshevsky and N. A. Dobrolyubov, were the sons of priestly families. Educated in religious seminaries but disillusioned with the church, they had been converted to social-political radicalism and sought their philosophical nurture in the atheism of Feuerbach, the materialism and rationalism of eighteenth-century French thought, and the English Utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham. Russian radicalism thus acquired a new ideological basis, which was formulated by Chernyshevsky as a doctrine of "rational egoism."

At the same time, the social-political climate of the country was also

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undergoing a momentous change. The new Tsar, Alexander II, had decided to abolish serfdom, and this great event, which took place relatively peacefully in 1861, made a profound impression on Dostoevsky. He had been sent to Siberia because of his hatred of this detestable enslavement of the vast majority of the population, and it had been eliminated by “the hand of the Tsar”—without the bloody revolutions that had been required to improve the conditions of the lower classes in Europe (not to mention the Civil War then raging in the United States). Dostoevsky was thus confirmed even more strongly in his conviction, which he had expressed as early as his Petrashevsky days, that Russia need not look to Europe for the solution to its indigenous social problems. Moreover, he had long since become convinced that the Russian people (the peasants) would not respond to revolutionary agitators from the intelligentsia propagating essentially European panaceas. What he feared most was that such agitation would slow down or obstruct the reforms that the Tsar-Liberator was pursuing, not only with regard to the serfs but also in the army, the court system, and other areas of government.

Dostoevsky returned to the literary life of the early 1860s as the editor of two journals, *Vremya (Time)* and *Epokha (Epoch)*, which advocated a doctrine called *pochvennichestvo* (from *pochva*, native soil). It urged the Europeanized Russian intelligentsia, and the upper class in general, to return to the values of their native soil. In their turn, the intelligentsia would bring home from their European education the presumably civilizing benefits of their cultivation; but this latter aspect of the program became less and less significant as time went on. For Dostoevsky, the alienated intelligentsia were obligated to take the first step toward bridging the abyss by assimilating the beliefs and psychology of the people, rooted in their traditional religious faith. The radicals, on the other hand, having become dissatisfied with the economic terms under which the serfs had been liberated, were attempting to stir up trouble; and Dostoevsky opposed their agitations because they were provoking the reaction that he feared. More important, though, the doctrine of “rational egoism” clashed sharply and profoundly with the reshaping of his convictions that had resulted from his arrest and prison camp years. To believe that all the needs and desires of the human personality could be satisfied by reason was for him the most short-sighted naïveté; and to take egoism as the basis of a moral philosophy was not simply self-contradictory but could justify the worst abuses. After Siberia, Dostoevsky had come to regard the Christian values of love and self-sacrifice as an ineradicable possession of the Russian moral-social psyche, and as the sole ray of light shining in the midst of the surrounding moral darkness.

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House of the Dead, a semifictional autobiography of his prison camp experiences, was hailed unanimously and restored Dostoevsky's literary reputation. Written in a style totally different from the psychological explorations of his novels, it also reveals the versatility of his talent; and this sharply observed and objectively written memoir was greatly admired by Tolstoy, who was quite critical of certain features of the better-known fiction. No one before had ever exposed this secluded world of the prison camps, or exhibited so much understanding and sympathy for its inhabitants. Dostoevsky's next important work, his novella *Notes from Underground*, went largely unnoticed, but is now rightly considered a highly original creation. The predecessor of a whole line of modern portraits of cynical and atrabilious characters, it is also the prelude to Dostoevsky's own great creative period.

Here he launches a full-scale attack against the premises of radical ideology by dramatizing its consequences on the personality of his now-famous underground man. He penetratingly depicts a character filled with repressed resentment and rage against both himself and others, and traces all his malignant traits to the acceptance of certain radical ideas. No other writer equals Dostoevsky in his ability to portray this relation between ideas and their effects on the human personality. What would it really mean for human behavior if one *accepted*, as does the underground man, Chernyshevsky's denial of the reality of freedom of the will? Part 1 of this work, the most influential, portrays the underground man's struggle as a human being to reconcile himself emotionally to all the real-life implications of such a doctrine (though it does so in such a tortuous and involuted fashion that this ideological source can be easily overlooked). Nonetheless, this discovery of the relation between ideology and psychology, or rather, Dostoevsky's genius for portraying all the subtle intricacies of their involvement, became the hallmark of his particular talent and opened the way for his great novelistic creations.

The three novels he wrote between 1865 and 1871 all follow in the path first trodden by *Notes from Underground*. *Crime and Punishment* takes its point of departure from the Utilitarian component of radical ideology—"one death and a hundred lives in exchange, it's simple arithmetic"—combined with the ideas of another influential radical, Dimitry Pisarev, who had sketched the outlines of a new proto-Nietzschean hero, an embryonic Superman, for whom good and evil, including murder, is only a matter of taste and personal inclination. Raskolnikov had thus imagined himself as "a great man" dedicated to improving the lot of humanity; but he discovers that a true great man cares nothing for others, and that he cannot become one precisely because he is psychically unable to eliminate the moral component of his personality.

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Caught in this treacherous dialectic of radical ideas, Raskolnikov finds it impossible to suppress his inherited Christian conscience; and the portrayal of his inner struggle has no equal this side of *Macbeth*.

In *The Idiot*, Dostoevsky attempts to depict his own ideal as “a perfectly beautiful man,” the Christ-figure of Prince Myshkin, whose radiance inspires others but who himself comes to grief because the universality of his Christian compassion proves incompatible with the limitations of his earthly nature as a human being. In the only direct statement he ever made of his religious convictions, jotted in a notebook while keeping a vigil at the bier of his first wife, Dostoevsky wrote: “To love man like *oneself*, according to the commandment of Christ, is impossible. The law of personality on earth shackles one. The *Ego* stands in the way. . . . [B]ut Christ was a perpetual eternal ideal to which man strives and, according to the law of nature [presumably human nature], should strive” (20: 172). These melancholy reflections are dramatized in the history of Prince Myshkin, certainly the most poignant Christian hero in all of modern literature, whose psychology is shaped by Dostoevsky’s own ponderings over the meaning of Christ’s incarnation for human life.

The Idiot was written during Dostoevsky’s four-year sojourn abroad (1867–1871), originally planned as a short vacation trip but prolonged for fear of being thrown into debtor’s prison on return. These were years of genteel poverty and isolation, relieved only by the companionship of Anna Grigoryevna, his staunchly loyal, devoted, and much younger second wife, who became his amanuensis as well. It was also the period of his gambling fever, a sporadic indulgence given far too much attention by biographers searching for the key to his work in some pathological aspect of his personality. One might keep in mind that in these years he wrote *The Idiot* under extremely difficult practical circumstances, as well as two brilliant novellas, *The Gambler* and *The Eternal Husband*. He also sketched out notes for a never-written major work in several volumes, *The Life of a Great Sinner*, on which he drew for both *The Devils* and *The Brothers Karamazov*.

He began to write *The Devils* while still abroad, and with this coruscating creation, probably the greatest novel ever written about political conspiracy, he returned to the attack on radical ideology initiated earlier. In *Crime and Punishment*, Dostoevsky had only *imagined* that radical ideas could lead to murder, but now an underground group led by Sergey Nechaev had assassinated one of its own members, presumably through fear of betrayal. Dostoevsky seized on this event as a confirmation of his own worst fears about the morally dangerous effects of radical principles, which during his years of exile he had come to regard as an infection of European society now spread to the Russian body poli-

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tic. Intending at first to dash off a quick “political pamphlet” about the Nechaev affair, he found the work growing in scope and complexity; and it took much longer to complete than he had planned.

Ultimately, it became in part a reworking of the conflict-of-generations theme so impressively handled by Turgenev in *Fathers and Children*, but grasped at a later stage. The weak-willed, ridiculous but charming, and fundamentally humane Liberal Idealist Stepan Trofimovich Verkhovensky personifies the generation of the 1840s; the totally cynical and ruthless machinations of his son Peter (who applies Nechaev’s pitilessly Machiavellian ideas and provokes the murder) represent the disastrous culmination of the “rational egoism” of the generation of the 1860s. This theme is combined with that of Stavrogin, a character taken over from *The Life of a Great Sinner*—a glamorous Byronic dandy à la Eugene Onegin, who has lost his religious faith and futilely seeks for a cause to which he can devote his strength. *The Devils* is the most intellectually rich of the great novels, practically an encyclopedia of Russian nineteenth-century culture filtered through a witheringly derisive and often grotesquely funny perspective. No other novel so amply displays Dostoevsky’s underestimated talents as a satirist.

Dostoevsky returned to Russia in 1871 with *The Devils* only half written, and its completion in 1872 began a new phase in his artistic-ideological career. For he discovered that Russian radicalism had now developed views that, at least partially, were far closer to his own than in the past. Notably, the radicals were now willing to accept the validity of Christian moral values (though not the religion itself). These were the very values previously scorned and discarded, and which Dostoevsky had defended and propagated in his works all through the 1860s. His writings during the 1870s would thus be strongly affected by this mutation in radical ideology, and even lead to a temporary alliance with the left-wing Populists, in whose journal *Otechestvenniye Zapiski* (*Notes of the Fatherland*) he published his next novel. The prophetic status that Dostoevsky now attained may be attributed in part to this alteration in the radical point of view, whose adherents would no longer automatically reject out of hand any utterances couched in terms of Christian morality. But this brings us to the beginning of the present volume, and to these astonishing last ten years of Dostoevsky’s life, which culminated, not only in personal triumph, but in *The Brothers Karamazov*, his artistic response of genius to all their tormenting agitations.