



***IVAN
PANIN***

***LECTURES
ON RUSSIAN
LITERATURE:
PUSHKIN,
GOGOL,
TURGENEEF,
TOLSTOY***



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Ivan Panin

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

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PREFACE.

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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.

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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 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, Turgenef, 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 Turgenef's account of Nezhdanof'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.

"Nezhdanof 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