

LOOKING AT BEGINNINGS AND ENDINGS

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Thanks very much for the opportunity to say a few words about my career. Perhaps there is material here to support Alexander Herzen's remark that "in life there is a predilection for a recurring rhythm, or the repetition of a motif."

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My talk falls into three parts: first, some words about my beginnings and background; then some remarks on my years of higher education between 1941 to 1954; and finally an overview of the nearly half century of my input and output at Yale from 1954 to retirement in 2002. I am still at work.

My field is Slavic Languages and Literatures. My specific research and teaching interests have been focused largely upon the Russian novel and short story of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a period that includes Soviet Russian literature and criticism from 1917 through the 1930s.

The thought of entering the Russian field or even of studying Russian did not enter my head until I entered Cornell in 1941. Chance and circumstance played a central role in my choice of Russian studies.

My parents were born in the United States of Jewish parents who had emigrated from Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire to the United States in the early 1880s. My mother's and father's outlook was shaped in the economic trials of poor immigrant families and in the social and cultural ferment of the first decades of the American twentieth century. They became libertarians, socialists, vegetarians, unionists, and teachers in the New York City's public high schools. My father was a founder of the NYC Teacher's Union, Local 5. As a chairman of Modern Languages in Samuel J. Tilden High School in Brooklyn and an active member of the Foreign Language Association he played a prominent role in language teaching in the city. My mother was a painter and art teacher who first studied art at Cooper Union's adjunct for women in 1912 (that was considered progress for women in those days).

At first quite vague and then increasingly sharp social and political memories of early years come to mind: Sacco and Vanzetti, the Depression, Nazi Germany, the Spanish Civil War, and heated debates about Soviet Russia and its policies. I had cousins who were supporters of Eugene V. Debs, Leon Trotsky, and Norman Thomas, and relatives who were liberal-conservative businessmen – architects and engineers who built Henry Ford's River Rouge plants and were sent by Ford in the Great Depression to build factories for Stalin's First Five Year Plan. In spite of major differences in outlook these people in the extended clan all saw a world as larger than the family, all had a marked sense of ethical and social responsibility.

The late George S. Pierson, Larned Professor of American History at Yale, once called Russian history an "exotic" area of academic study. I don't know why. George Vernadsky and Mikhail Rostovtzeff, world-renowned Russian historians of Russian

and ancient history, taught at Yale in the 1920s into the 1950s. In any case, things Russian were never exotic for me. I never developed any interest, however, in making a career of anything Slavic.

I went to a “progressive” middle school in New York City, the Walden School, which was heir in one degree or another to the educational ideas of John Dewey, Margaret Naumberg, the Spanish educator and anarchist Francisco Ferrer, and the Modern School at Stelton, not to speak of Ruskin, Tolstoy, and educational reformers such as Pestalozzi farther back. Walden, and the teachers in it, left a mark on me; I carried away ideas about experimental education, American history, transcendentalism, and Walt Whitman. When I was accepted at Cornell University in the spring of 1941 I had strong interests in history and psychology, and mulled over a pre-med program that would end, so I fancifully imagined, in psychiatry or psychoanalysis.

The year 1941 was a mind-changer. Hitler’s invasion of Russia on June 22 and the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7 brought forward, among other things, Russian Studies – a field of study at that time was almost non-existent outside of Columbia University, Harvard, and the University of California, Berkeley.

The year I entered Cornell in 1941 the government started a Russian language program there for the Army and Navy; too, Professor Ernest J. Simmons, just arrived from Harvard, inaugurated a Russian department and innovative summer “Russian Civilization” courses covering all aspects of the Soviet Russian society. The whole program consisted of a stimulating, if disparate mix of professionals, free lance lecturers, writers, travelers, teachers, journalists of ranging academic experience and political persuasions. All came to lecture, teach, and talk at length or briefly about Soviet Russia and its loud beginnings which were then, in 1941, still very much in earshot of the Goldwin Smith lecture halls at Cornell.

The summer courses mirrored the politically and culturally ambivalent relationship between the United States and Soviet Russia during World War Two. In any case, I gave up the idea of psychiatry, started to learn Russian and began to read Dostoevsky and Babel. No doubt I brought to Cornell an “exotic” interest in things Russian.

I graduated from Cornell early, joined the Merchant Marine for a brief period at the war’s end, was employed briefly to work on a War Department project to produce a Russian-English – English-Russian Military Dictionary. In September 1946, I began a double-barreled two-year M.A. and Certificate of the Russian [later Harriman] Institute program in Russian literature and Soviet studies at Columbia University.

The just-founded Russian Institute was staffed by a cadre of professionally-trained American scholars in all major fields of Russian, Soviet and East European studies. They were joined by distinguished European and Russian scholars, such as Roman Jakobson. The political landscape was rapidly changing. A confrontation with Soviet Russia was in the air. Setting the tone for the work of the Institute the historian of Russian serfdom, and former head of USSR Analysis for Wartime Intelligence in

Washington, D.C., Professor Geroid T. Robinson, remarked: “Never did so many know so little about so much.”

The Russian Institute turned out to be one of the most important seeding grounds for the future development of professionals in our universities and government services. The members of our founding seminar on Soviet Russian Literary Criticism (Deming Brown, Edward Brown, Victor Erlich, Hugh McLean, Rufus Mathewson, and others) all became leaders and builders in the field of Slavic Languages and Literatures. Russian studies in general witnessed exponential growth in the years that followed, especially after the launching of the first Soviet satellite “Sputnik” and Khrushchev’s notorious critique of Stalin in 1956.

Emerging from the Russian Institute’s seminar on literary criticism, I began an outsized thesis on the “sociological method” of the Russian literary scholar V.F. Pereverzev (1882-1968 for my double degree program at Columbia. That thesis, later summarized in a lengthy published essay, brought me into contact both with the ideologically turbulent, but productive Soviet literary scene of the 1920s and with determinist social and psychological theories of literature that preoccupied both early European and Russian thinkers (Taine, Guyau, Potebnya, Plekhanov, etc.), as well as some later Soviet Russian theorists and critics of the 1920s.

No writer has the power to go outside of a psychologically and sociologically determined circle of images, Pereverzev maintained at a time when official party leaders were calling upon “bourgeois” writers to create authentic images of proletarian heroes. For his efforts, an odd mix of crude and subtle argument, Pereverzev was denounced and, in the purges of the middle 1930s, exiled to Siberia for twenty years.

Goethe once remarked that he had been strongly influenced by the Swedish naturalist, Carolus Linnaeus, the so-called father of taxonomy. Linnaeus was such a big influence, he wrote, “because he aroused so much antagonism in me.” That was pretty much the case in my encounter with the Marxisms and Determinisms of the early Soviet 1920s. Yet it led me to give serious attention to Dostoevsky’s ideas on freedom and fate, his anti-rationalist, anti-determinist, anti-utopian ideas.

In my years at Yale I was to write a good deal about Russian nineteenth century literature’s deep engagement with the issues of freedom and responsibility, fate and free will, chance and design. These issues were not abstract or academic ones to the Russian literary consciousness (and certainly not unique to Russian culture), but matters of social and psychological import. Embedded in Russia’s tragic history, these issues worked their way into Russian character and fiction “People without firm character,” Turgenev wrote in 1856, “like to invent a ‘fate’ for themselves; this relieves them of the necessity of possessing their own will and from responsibility towards themselves.”

I left Columbia University early in 1949 to work in Washington, D.C as an assistant editor-translator with Leo Gruliov at the *Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, an enterprise sponsored by the American Council of Learned Societies and financed (I

later learned) by the CIA. This weekly publication usefully surveyed Soviet Russian newspaper and journal coverage of all areas of Soviet life, economy, politics, science, the arts, etc. I left the *Digest* a year and a half later to begin work for a Ph.D. in Slavic Languages and Literatures at the University of California, Berkeley.

In the introductory part of my doctoral dissertation, “The Underground Man in Russian Literature,” published as a book in 1958, I analyzed Dostoevsky’s philosophical and polemical novel, *Notes from the Underground* (1864) in the context of Dostoevsky’s writings. The book’s major focus was on the reception of that work both in pre-revolutionary and post-revolutionary Russian literature and thought. In Dostoevsky’s novel the Underground Man, a bilious, skeptical and sharp-witted paradoxicalist launches a devastating critique of rationalist and determinist thought. He himself, however, turns out to be an exemplar of radical individualism, an embittered and disillusioned idealist of an earlier romantic generation that is divorced from the people and from faith.

Dostoevsky’s ideologically and psychologically ambiguous “anti-hero” appealed to some Russian writers for his cynicism; other writers, particularly the fellow-traveling Soviet writers of the 1920s, found in the Underground Man a useful character-type whom they could safely employ in their works as a critic of Soviet establishment, while at same time, as a cover, representing him as a doomed and decadent bourgeois type divorced from the people and the revolution. Such was the literary landscape in the Soviet Russian 1920s.

My *Underground Man in Russian Literature* (1958) reached the Soviet Union, but was placed in the so-called “repository for specialists” (spetskhranilishche) – a euphemism for a library lock-up of books that was not accessible to the public.

I made my first trip to the Soviet Union in 1958, attended a Congress of Slavists in Moscow, and traveled around Russia. A chance conversation with a Russian engineer, a stranger with whom I shared a compartment on the night train to St. Petersburg, provided me with a symbolic image of what Soviet Russia had passed through under Stalin. We talked about Stalin’s death just five-years earlier in 1953. My companion spoke perfunctorily of Stalin’s achievements. In a cautious effort to draw him out I asked him about the so-called “mistakes” of Stalin that Khrushchev had spoken of in his address – a euphemism for his brutalities. My engineer companion silently raised a hand that had been under the table: the fingers had been cut off at an angle. “That too was an accident, a ‘mistake,’” he remarked. The gesture underscored the disfiguration that Stalin had brought on Russia. A few years later I wrote an essay, “The Making of a Russian Icon,” on Solzhenitsyn’s powerful story, “Matryona’s Home” (1963), a tale in which a train accident serves as a metaphor for personal and social disfiguration and disaster in Soviet Russian life.

The 1958 trip was followed by many others, including longer stays there for work or research. In 1961 I drove by automobile from France across Eastern Europe to Kiev, across the steppes of Ukraine and Russia down to the Black Sea and Georgia and back

via the Georgian Military Road in the Caucasus'. I was accompanied by my wife, Leslie, a painter, and our two very young daughters, Robin and Kathy. Our seven week journey was a quest, a successful one, to supply our Sterling Library with some important Georgian books, but it provided us an extraordinary encounter with strangely porous Russia and its far-flung dependencies.

To return to my academic journey: after completing the doctoral exams on the "underground" at the University of California, Berkeley in 1953, I wrote to about fifty or so colleges and universities in search of academic work. The year was a bleak one for jobs in the Russian field. I did not find a teaching job for the academic year 1953. I had corresponded, however, with Yale's René Wellek, Professor and Chairman of Comparative Literature, who also headed the Russian Department. He liked my doctoral dissertation (which was then well underway) as well as my study of the sociological method of Pereverzev at Columbia University. There was no opening at Yale in 1953, but he anticipated one for the following academic year. I started teaching at Yale in 1954 and remained here until my retirement in 2002. I owe much to René Wellek, I may say in passing, both for his personal support and warm encouragement for my work, beginning with my study on Dostoevsky's esthetics and criticism.

My arrival at Yale inaugurated the most creative and productive period in my research and writing. My graduate and undergraduate courses provided valuable interchange with students, the rigorous test of thinking a thing through and conveying it. Close analysis of Russian texts became an important feature of my writing.

In the years between 1960 and 1990, a time when contacts and academic exchange with the academic world in Russia became more and more feasible, I helped to create, and often lead, professional literary societies (the International Dostoevsky Society, the North American Chekhov Society, the Vyacheslav I. Ivanov Convivium). These efforts were rich in experience and results. We made contact with individual scholars and institutions that were eager, in spite of obstacles put in their path, to break out of isolation. I began to know Russia from the inside.

In my writing and research, however, I moved away from the orientation to Soviet studies that had marked my pre-Yale work. Apart from occasional essays on individual Soviet Russian writers, I devoted my research and writing largely to the literature of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I was to write three more books on Dostoevsky (this last book of a comparative nature) and to write extensively on Pushkin, Gogol, Turgenev, Tolstoy, Chekhov, and other writers. I had a strong interest in the esthetic, and moral-philosophical positions of these writers. I had been struck, too, by the fact that the intense ethical and social concerns of the great Russian novelists and poets never seemed to involve any compromise with their artistry or artistic truth.

"It is worth living," the great poet of the early twentieth century Alexander Blok (1890-1921) once wrote, "if only to make absolute demands on life." Blok highlights here a feature of Russian nineteenth century writing and fiction, one most

typical of the work of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, that has been referred to as Russian “maximalism.” To make absolute demands on life is what Tolstoy and Dostoevsky called the “living life,” one involving a permanent war not only with what they regarded as evil, but also with routine, inertia and philistinism. Ubiquitous in Russian literature are the questions: “What is the purpose of life?” “How shall people live?” “What is to be done?”

Years ago a prominent emigré Russian critic, Fyodor Stepun, formulated the matter this way: “Russian art, with some exceptions, mostly in the twentieth century only, has never seen its fulfillment in absolute autonomy. It has never played, it has always worked in the sweat of its brow, seeing its ultimate meaning and purpose not in shaping and molding the perfect aesthetic object, but influencing and directing life.”

“I will have my say at the expense of art,” Dostoevsky once remarked in connection with his work on his polemical novel, *The Devils*. Yet the absolute ethical and spiritual demands he made on life remained inseparable from his faithfulness to art.

A few words on my Dostoevsky writings. My second book, *Dostoevsky's Quest for Form. His Philosophy of Art* (1966) reviewed, and analyzed Dostoevsky's copious critical writings on literature and criticism, the fine arts, realism and literary type, his critique of utilitarian art, his ideas on the relation of art and morality, art and Christianity, and on the place of higher beauty in art and life. Man “thirsts for [ideal] beauty,” he wrote. My term “quest for form” points to a core element of Dostoevsky's tragic idealism, one that unites somber realism with an existential moral-spiritual quest. “Man strives on earth,” Dostoevsky wrote in his notebook in 1865, “for an ideal that contradicts his nature.”

The Art of Dostoevsky. Deliriums and Nocturnes (1981) involved close analyses of the seminal writings of Dostoevsky's so-called middle period – *Notes from the House of the Dead*, *Notes from the Underground*, *The Gambler*, and other works. My study, *Dialogues with Dostoevsky: The Overwhelming Questions* (1993) juxtaposes Dostoevsky's art and outlook with a range of Russian and European writers (Tolstoy, Turgenev, Chekhov, Chateaubriand, the Marquis de Sade, Nietzsche, Bakhtin, etc.). In a trio of essays entitled the “ethics of vision,” I contrasted Dostoevsky's approach to executions with the views of Turgenev, Tolstoy, and Chekhov on the same topic. “Man on the face of the earth,” wrote Dostoevsky apropos of Turgenev's turning away from the actual decapitation of a criminal, in Paris, “does not have the right to turn away and ignore what is taking place on earth, and there are lofty *moral* reasons for this: *homo sum et nihil humanum, etc.*”

I have spoken of the “maximalist” demands Tolstoy and Dostoevsky made in their writings. The writings of Pushkin, Turgenev, and Chekhov, on the other hand, have been called “minimalist.” Turgenev, after Pushkin, wrote the Russian writer-critic D.S. Merezhkovsky at the twenty-fifth anniversary of Turgenev's death in 1908, is the “sole genius of measure, and therefore a genius of culture.” “If the Russian revolution of 1905 went astray,” Merezhkovsky insisted, it was “because there was too much of

Tolstoy and Dostoevsky in it, and too little of Turgenev.” Merezhkovsky might have added – “and too little of Chekhov.”

Measure is the hall-mark of Chekhov’s artistic temperament. And it is with a sense of measure that I draw my discussion to a conclusion. Chekhov with his “small forms” signals a movement away from the “fat” and frenetic novel of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, a shift downward from the metaphysical and sideways into the vast familiar world of everyday life. Chekhov is deeply philosophical, but he does not “philosophize,” he is not judgmental, and brings to art and life the perspective of humor and of a tonic skepticism.

I have written extensively about Chekhov and I am now gathering my essays into a volume. A retrospective book of some of my essays, old and new, *Close Encounters. Essays on Russian Literature*, will be published this spring.

My trajectory ends here or, as I should prefer to say, metamorphoses into a circle where, as Emerson explains, “every end is a beginning.”