

A World Apart

Notes for the programme of Welsh National Opera's production of Janáček's *From the House of the Dead* (October-November 2017)

Writing in the 1960s of the generation of Russians who had returned from long sentences of hard labour in the appalling conditions of Stalin's Gulag, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn said, 'only now could an educated Russian write about an enserfed peasant *from the inside* – because he himself had become a serf.' Yet more than 100 years previously, Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky wrote about his own experience of incarceration and hard labour in a Siberian prison, and in the process transformed not only his own literary career, but Russian literature as well. Imprisoned alongside some of the most violent criminals in the country, Dostoevsky understood that because of the division between the elite and the peasants who made up the vast majority of the prison population, he was gaining a unique access to a world that was generally inaccessible to educated Russians. He knew that one of the main attractions of his quasi-fictionalized account of his imprisonment, *Notes from the House of the Dead*, would be 'the portrayal of characters previously *unheard of* in literature', as he said in a letter to his brother Mikhail in October 1859. The impact of this was undeniable. The publication of *Notes from the House of the Dead* in 1861 – the year the serfs were emancipated – sparked off the 'prison theme' in Russian literature, and the book became a template for the memoirs of subsequent generations of political prisoners in both the Imperial and Soviet eras. And the insights Dostoevsky gained into the minds of criminals in the prison informed his depiction of murderers and fanatics in his great psychological novels including *Crime and Punishment* and *The Brothers Karamazov*.

Dostoevsky's literary career was barely out of its infancy when he was arrested in 1849. Born in Moscow in 1821, the second son of an army doctor working at a hospital for the poor, he was sent to St Petersburg to study at the Academy of Military Engineers as preparation for an army career, but turned to literature soon after he graduated. In 1846, his first original work, the sentimental novel in letters *Poor Folk*, was published to great acclaim. But his next publication, *The Double*, just a few months later, was not a success. The story of the psychological disintegration of a low-grade civil servant depicted from within, the novella was widely misunderstood, and received universally poor reviews. Thereafter the reception of the various short fictional works Dostoevsky published was mixed, and his career appeared to be stalling.

During the oppressive reign of Nicholas I, when oppositional political activity was banned and the censorship was extremely strict, philosophical discussion groups became the main outlet for educated Russians to debate social and political reform. Dostoevsky was a member of the moderately radical Petrashevsky circle, which met at the home of its founder, Mikhail Petrashevsky, to discuss socialist ideas. In April 1849, the entire group was arrested, ostensibly because Dostoevsky had read to the circle an open letter by the radical literary critic Vissarion Belinsky to the author Nikolai Gogol, in which he criticized serfdom and Gogol's expressions of support for the tsarist autocracy. The men were imprisoned in St Petersburg's Peter and Paul fortress, and after a short investigation convicted and sentenced to death for sedition. In December 1849 they were subjected to a mock execution. The first three men were hooded and tied to the scaffold in front of the firing

squad when a message from the Tsar arrived commuting their sentences to periods of imprisonment and hard labour. Dostoevsky was in the second group awaiting execution. Unsurprisingly, the experience affected him profoundly, and he viewed his new sentence as a chance for a new life; later he said the mock execution and his time in prison led to the rebirth of his religious convictions. He served four years of hard labour in the penal fortress in the Siberian city of Omsk, and was then exiled as a common soldier to Semipalatinsk in what is now Kazakhstan. In 1859 Dostoevsky resumed publishing literary works and was allowed to return to European Russia. He founded a literary journal with his brother and, with no other source of income beyond his publishing ventures and writing, needed a success with *Notes from the House of the Dead* in order to re-establish his reputation as a writer. Although it never reached the fame of some of his later works, its influence was enormous.

The novel is presented as the 'notes of an unknown person', Aleksandr Petrovich Gorianchikov, a nobleman sentenced to ten years' hard labour for the murder of his wife – a ruse to beat the censorship which would never have allowed publication of a work depicting a prisoner convicted for a political crime. But the degree of fictionalization is minimal in any case. The structure of the novel is loosely based on the narrator's first year in prison, but his focus is not on his own crime or experience of incarceration. In one of the first letters he wrote after his release from prison in 1854, Dostoevsky said, 'What a store of types and characters from the common people I took away from hard labour! ... How many stories of vagrants and brigands and of all that black, wretched existence generally! Enough for whole volumes.' It is these characters and stories that make up the bulk of the novel, with the narrator acting more often as an observer than a participant.

The result is a montage of sketches that tell the individual stories of the convicts the author encountered – some are composite characters, but their basis in fact was independently verified by one of several Polish noblemen incarcerated in Omsk for political reasons. Extraordinary, vivid pictures of prisoners convicted of the most monstrous crimes leap from almost every page, rendered all the more believable by Dostoevsky's incorporation of examples of the convicts' language he recorded in prison. Gazin, the enormous and epically strong Tatar rumoured to be a multiple child murderer, becomes terrifyingly out of control when drunk, and is subdued by a beating that would kill other men. Shishkov spends a night in his hospital bed casually relating to his neighbour the story of how he viciously abused his wife Akulka and ultimately slit her throat. The chapter devoted to this tale is the only extended story of an individual crime amidst the fragments of all the others we see, and it is so repugnant in its graphic depiction of senseless violence and cruelty that few readers can ever forget it. There is no attempt to downplay what any of these men have done, or what they are capable of. Yet there is also sympathy for many of the peasant convicts, an understanding that the brutality of their lives as serfs, and the suffering they experience as a consequence of their enslaved condition, lies behind their crimes. Despite their violence, the peasants retain their humanity, and we see glimpses of their capacity for faith and goodness.

The many individual portraits and voices, thrown together in the forced communal conditions of the convict barracks, build into a tense crowd constantly on the verge of eruption into horror, but also frequently relieved by the convicts' humour. The bathhouse

scene is a hellish cacophony, with the clanking of the prisoners' heavy iron fetters, and the mass of bodies covered in livid scars and facial brands (the practice of branding prisoners was discontinued only in the 1860s), in the filth and steam of the town's public baths. Elsewhere an unexpected harmony emerges, notably in the convicts' Christmas theatrical performance. The artistry, wit and self-expression on the stage transport the audience away from the prison to give a momentary taste of freedom. It is precisely in the loss of liberty, and the treatment of prisoners by the authorities as an undifferentiated crowd, that the essential requirement for freedom in creating and sustaining the individual personality is revealed to Dostoevsky. This insight, and the ease with which that need for liberty can turn into self-assertion at the expense of others, underlies the author's exploration of both radical ideologies and crime in his major novels.

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