

CHARLES A. MOSER

Esthetics as Nightmare

Russian Literary Theory, 1855-1870



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as
Nightmare*



*Russian
Literary Theory,
1855–1870*

CHARLES A. MOSER

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In memory of
Ernest J. Simmons
1903–72

I consider such problems as the legitimacy of poetry amid other human activities, poetry's moral significance, contemporaneity in our day, etc. to be nightmares from which we should long since have freed ourselves forever.

—*Afanasy Fet* (1859)

The reader will no doubt decide that esthetics is my nightmare, and in this case the reader will be quite right.

—*Dmitry Pisarev* (1864)

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Preface



ESTHETIC QUESTIONS WERE AT THE FOREFRONT of Russian intellectual life during the fifteen years or so following the conclusion of the Crimean War and Alexander II's accession to the throne. To be sure, the rigors of censorship had substantially abated after Nicholas I's death, which ended what has come to be known as the "epoch of censorship terror," but it was still difficult to discuss many religious, philosophical, and especially political problems in the public prints. As a result, many Russian intellectuals resorted to literature and literary criticism as a means of dealing with what were at bottom political questions. If a novel or short story "accurately" depicted Russian reality, then it could at least implicitly point to the reforms needed for the improvement of that reality; and literary critics, while purporting to discuss those same literary works, could deal with such reforms or changes directly. Thus some of Russia's best minds then occupied themselves at least some of the time with literature and literary criticism, and their political motivations go far to explain the violence of the controversies which arose over such key documents of the period as Ivan Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* of 1862 and Nikolay Chernyshevsky's *What Is to Be Done?*, published the following year.

One may take the argument a step further, however, and raise the more general problem of esthetics, though with

special reference to literature, the most intensely controversial form of art then. The riddle of the nature of art, the proper relationship between art and that reality which it depicted in some fashion, engaged not only the political passions which literature itself aroused, but in addition metaphysical ones having to do with the linkage between the ideal and the real. The disputants recognized this quite clearly at the time: as Evgeny Edelson wrote in 1867, when the debate was beginning to subside, "all the hostilities and sympathies of the contending parties were focused on this point, finding complete and unceremonious expression in the quarrel over art and esthetics."¹ Thus disputes over art during those years burned in Russia with an intensity which we in the West may find difficult to comprehend, but which also makes the period a very interesting one for investigation more than a century later, especially since many of the problems which their participants raised then in their fundamental form are still with us.

The controversy of the 1860s was the more intense also because it was even at the time perceived as conducted along liberal and conservative lines, with liberal and radical critics inclined to reject their conservative opponents' arguments out of hand, and vice versa. Upon this division was superimposed another, that between critics and writers: most of the prominent critics were political radicals, while many of the creative writers (and their number included such giants as Fedor Dostoevsky, Leo Tolstoy, Ivan Turgenev, and Ivan Goncharov) were conservative or at most moderate by political persuasion. The conservative critic Nikolay Solov'ev noted this as early as 1864 when he spoke of the "schism" between Russia's "most energetic thinkers" and her "most

¹ Evgenii Edel'son, "O znachenii iskusstva v tsivilizatsii," *Vsemirnyi trud* (January 1867), 220.

gifted artists."² A critic of quite different political viewpoint, Nikolay Shelgunov, who viewed literature through an obvious political prism (he denied that *War and Peace* contained anything worthwhile, for example, and ignored Dostoevsky), wrote in 1871:

In the 1840s we had Belinsky *alone* and an entire galaxy of writers; in our day, on the other hand, we have quite a few critics and journalists who attained prominence at about the same time, but hardly a single writer of fiction.³

Since Shelgunov is referring to men of liberal or radical persuasion when he talks of writers and critics, he and his archival Solovev agreed that literary criticism of the 1860s was chiefly in the hands of radicals, and creative writing under the control of conservatives. *Russky vestnik* (Russian Herald), the Moscow journal which first printed an extraordinary number of fictional works by such authors as Turgenev, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky that have since become classics of world literature, had no critics of repute among its contributors, while the radical journals *Sovremennik* (The Contemporary) and *Russkoe slovo* (Russian Word) published highly influential critical articles, but few fictional works known to anyone except literary historians today.

The radical journals did have a few writers still worthy of attention, however, and in like manner there were among the conservatives some critics who upheld the theoretical values of art and literature. It is the aim of this book to trace the leading ideas in the controversies over art and literature in Russia from 1855 to 1870 in their various combinations and permutations, as formulated both by critics whose names are still writ large in Soviet and Western scholarship—Ni-

² Nikolai Solov'ev, "Teoriia bezobrazii," *Epokha*, no. 7 (July 1864), 12.

³ Nikolai Shelgunov, "Sochineniia D. I. Pisareva" (intended for publication in 1871 but forbidden by the censorship), *Literaturnaia kritika* (Leningrad, 1974), 264.

kolay Chernyshevsky, Nikolay Dobrolyubov, Dmitry Pisarev—and by critics of more conservative persuasion who are often neglected in Soviet and Western research. Apollon Grigorev, to be sure, has received a fair amount of scholarly attention, but men like Evgeny Edelson, Nikolay Solov'ev, Efim Zarin, and others also advanced intriguing ideas, and moreover ideas whose validity should not be measured by their lack of popularity at the time, if only because they found support from contemporary creative writers who now rank among the greatest in world literature. Nor does this study limit itself to views expressed in formal literary criticism or theory: it also surveys the implicit or explicit doctrines of art and literature to be found in the fiction of that time. Art is far too important a subject to be left solely to the critics.

An examination of the leading ideas on literature and art set forth during the 1860s shows that some of the controversy over them sprang from simple misunderstanding, as N. V. Kashina remarks à propos of Dostoevsky and the radical critics with whom he conducted heated polemics.⁴ Theories on art cannot in the final accounting be separated along a neat conservative-radical spectrum, although this will do as a first approximation. One of this book's primary objectives is precisely to examine some of the finer points of the polarized debate of the 1860s.

A study such as this one must have a beginning and an end. The former is relatively easy to define, for the year 1855 saw not only a change of monarchs and an outburst of political optimism, it also witnessed the publication of what is surely the most influential master's essay in literary history and the founding document of the entire esthetic debate to follow: Nikolay Chernyshevsky's *Esteticheskie otnosheniia iskusstva k deistvitelnosti* (Esthetic Relations of Art to Reality).

⁴ N. V. Kashina, *Estetika F. M. Dostoevskogo* (Moscow, 1975), 215.

This small book defined the parameters of the entire discussion of the period, although its author claimed no special expertise in the field of esthetics, did not write a great deal more on the subject, and even virtually ceased to function as a practicing literary critic after 1859.

Indeed, as the controversy progressed its participants changed kaleidoscopically, and that is one reason why one should emphasize its ideas more than its participants, although one cannot of course disregard the latter entirely. Chernyshevsky yielded his place as leading radical critic to Nikolay Dobrolyubov, who had achieved prominence by 1859 but died a tragically early death in late 1861. By 1864 Dmitry Pisarev had raised the fallen banner of radical criticism, but he for all practical purposes left the critical arena when his journal *Russkoe slovo* was suppressed in 1866, and he died by drowning in 1868. By that time the cause of radical criticism had been partially taken up by Nikolay Shelgunov, an older man who had been associated with the Russian radical thinkers for many years but only began writing literary criticism in the latter half of the 1860s. The conservative critics, on the other hand, participated in the discussion for longer periods, but less intensely. Apollon Grigorev wrote sporadically on general esthetic topics from the controversy's inception in 1855 until his death in 1864. Evgeny Edelson wrote well but infrequently on esthetic matters, and his major statement on the subject dates from as late as 1867, not long before his untimely death in January of 1868. Nikolay Solovev first appeared in Dostoevsky's journal *Epokha* (Epoch) only in 1864, though he participated very actively in the discussion from then until 1867. In 1869 his collected esthetic writings appeared in three volumes under the title *Iskusstvo i zhizn* (Art and Life), to be extensively reviewed and rebutted by Shelgunov in 1870. After 1870 Solovev ceased to write literary criticism altogether, and Shelgunov moved mostly into other areas as the esthetic debate of the

1860s ran its course. It therefore seemed appropriate to set the upper margin of this study at 1870, the year which witnessed the final vigorous discussion of Pisarev's ideas by his staunch defender Shelgunov in a rebuttal of Pisarev's determined opponent Solovev.

In fact Dmitry Pisarev is in many ways the central figure of this study. Although I seek to encompass all critical viewpoints of importance set forth between 1855 and 1870, since both Soviet and Western scholars had written extensively on the radical critics and on the critical controversies of the later 1850s and early 1860s, I have by way of compensation here emphasized certain conservative critics such as Solovev, Edelson, and Zarin, and the years from roughly 1862 to 1870. But the principal antagonist of the conservative critics over those years was none other than Pisarev, who drew out the doctrines of radical literary criticism to their logical extremes, and thus forced his conservative opponents, his radical colleagues, and us, too, so many years later, to grapple with fundamental problems of the nature of art and reality.

Soviet scholars have traditionally been a trifle wary of Pisarev, and have paid less attention to him than they have to Chernyshevsky and Dobrolyubov, precisely because of the relentless logic of his argumentation which exposed the fundamental thrust of radical esthetic thought. Thus, for example, Pisarev's famous excoriation of Pushkin's work in its entirety was a logical development of the Chernyshevskian view of art, but it cannot be accepted by Soviet scholars who for powerful cultural reasons must revere both Chernyshevsky and Pushkin. If they are to be consistent, as Pisarev challenges them to be, they must reject either Chernyshevsky or Pushkin. Unwilling to do this, they negate the great negator himself: Pisarev.

Pisarev is not only an interesting esthetic theoretician; he is also a keen practical critic, by no means devoid of artistic sense, a lively writer and stimulating thinker, and a com-

plex personality. He deserves careful consideration of the sort he has received only infrequently in Soviet investigations or in Western scholarship, which is sometimes unduly influenced by prevalent Soviet attitudes.

This study deals with the esthetic controversies almost exclusively within Russian boundaries. No such controversy can take place solely within the confines of a single country, of course, and the ideas of French and especially German thinkers had a substantial impact upon Russian theoreticians (there could be little reciprocal influence simply because few Europeans read Russian at the time, and relevant works were slow to be translated). The Russian critics discussed in this book participated in a general European culture and drew upon its stock of ideas in formulating their arguments. They developed few if any strikingly original ideas in the course of the discussion, but this fact is of secondary importance. Instead, the particular channels which the controversy followed within the Russian context are of interest to students of Russian culture, and the general ideas which Russian thinkers derived from the common European intellectual fund and applied to the question of the relationship between art and reality make the discussion still today of concern to anyone who deals seriously with esthetics.

The first chapter of this study offers a roughly chronological overview of the principal participants in the debates from 1855 to 1870, as well as of the major documents in which they expressed their ideas. I assume a relatively high level of knowledge of the period on the reader's part, and therefore do not discuss the biographies of well-known figures such as Chernyshevsky, Dobrolyubov, or Pisarev, except when biographical details are directly relevant to the controversy. I provide some biographical information on lesser-known figures, though even then only when they played a prominent role in the discussion. Lesser-known writers who pub-

lished only one or two works are not given much biographical attention. In the first chapter I discuss primarily the particular circumstances in which a theoretical work appeared and avoid taking up its larger ideas, since I go into these in subsequent chapters.

The following chapters treat these leading ideas under three headings: Art and Rationality, Art and Morality, and Art and Reality. There is some unavoidable overlap among these divisions, but I have tried to keep it to a minimum. Although many of these ideas on art are nearly timeless, particular formulations were made at certain points in history, and I have sought to indicate the time and source for each such formulation: after all, the history of ideas has a chronology, which can be of crucial importance. Finally, to each of the three theoretical chapters I have appended an "Excur-sus" analyzing a literary work or literary works in the light of certain points made in that chapter and in a way appropriate to arguments made within that chapter.

Finally, I have compiled a brief bibliography in two parts. The first part is a listing of the principal editions used as primary sources, and then the journal publications which have served as primary sources. The second part lists secondary works. This listing is confined rather strictly to the most important books and articles on the specific subject of esthetics, i.e., art and literature in Russia during the period under discussion.

Small portions of this study have appeared in print earlier: "Stepan Trofimovič Verxovenskiĭ and the Esthetics of His Time," published in the *Slavic and East European Journal* in 1985 (reprinted by permission of AATSEEL of the U.S.); and "Nihilism, Aesthetics, and 'The Idiot,'" published in *Russian Literature* in 1982. I am grateful to these publications for permission to reprint.

Finally, I should like to express my thanks to the George Washington University for a sabbatical leave in the spring

of 1985 which enabled me to write most of this manuscript; to the Library of Congress, without whose extensive collections (especially of nineteenth-century Russian journals) I could not have carried out my research; to Valerye Hawkins for her typing of the original manuscript; and to Professors Hugh McLean of the University of California at Berkeley and Grigory Tamarchenko of Boston University, who were kind enough to read the manuscript at an earlier stage and give me the benefit of their comments. The faults which remain in this study are my responsibility.

Washington, D.C.
January 1988

A Note on the References



SINCE I WISHED TO MAKE THE SCHOLARLY APPARATUS of this study as efficient as possible, I have included page references directly in the text when this was feasible. These references are to collected editions, single- or multi-volume, listed in part I of the bibliography. Thus if the text offers a quote from Pisarev followed by (2:177), this means page 177 of volume 2 of his four-volume *Sochineniia* of 1955–56 listed in the bibliography as the basic reference in this study.

Writings which have not been reprinted or which have been reprinted but were unavailable to me (e.g., the works of Nikolai Solov'ev) have been cited from the journal publications listed in part II of the bibliography ("Primary Sources: Journal Publications"), and are given in the notes, usually with abbreviated titles after the point of first mention.

References to publications by Efim Zarin and Nikolai Solov'ev in *Otechestvennye zapiski* for 1865 and especially 1866 are provided by volume and page rather than by month and page, since during that time the journal published twice monthly instead of once a month. Each volume comprised four issues covering two months, and was paginated consecutively.

Apollon Grigor'ev receives special treatment in the apparatus. Although the basic text for references is his *Litera-*

turnaia kritika, published in Moscow in 1967, I have used the first volume of his *Sochineniia* published by Villanova University Press in 1970 as the source in the notes for certain articles not included in *Literaturnaia kritika*, and the journal publications as the source only for a few articles not reprinted in either volume.

In the notes and bibliography I have used the Library of Congress transliteration system without diacriticals; in the body of the text I have employed a less rigorous but more readable system of transliteration.

Esthetics as Nightmare



Chapter One



The Disputants and Their Journals

THE YEAR 1855 WAS A CRUCIAL ONE, FOR RUSSIAN history generally as well as for the development of Russian intellectual and literary life. Not only did that year witness the death of Nicholas I and the beginning of the reign of Alexander II; it also saw the issuance of two publications which intensified a relatively calm discussion of esthetic matters into what could be characterized as a debate or controversy over art and literature which would rage for some fifteen years before subsiding to a more reasonable level. It was no chance matter that the book which supplied the intellectual foundations for the radical arguments in that dispute was a discursive piece of literary and artistic scholarship: an essay presented by Nikolay Chernyshevsky (1828–89) to the faculty of St. Petersburg University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of master of arts. Its title: *The Esthetic Relations of Art to Reality*. And it was also appropriate that the publication which inspired the so-called “esthetic” critics should have been the first relatively complete edition of the works of Russia’s greatest poet, Alexander Pushkin, which appeared in six volumes (with a further volume to come subsequently) under the editorship of the critic, scholar, and memoirist Pavel Annenkov (1813–87). The differing natures of these two publications very

aptly symbolized the divergent viewpoints which the radical and esthetic critics would advance in the years following.

The 1850s: Defining Positions

Nikolay Chernyshevsky—who, like a number of his intellectual allies, came from a clergy family and studied in church schools before decisively rejecting religion—arrived in St. Petersburg from Saratov in May of 1853.¹ Before that point he had taught for a time in Saratov, and also acquired a family, which he had to find a means of supporting in the capital. By January 1854 he had obtained a teaching position in St. Petersburg too, but was disturbed very little when he retained it for less than a year since his real ambition was to become either a scholar or a journalist. To this end he had begun publishing in St. Petersburg newspapers and periodicals before 1853 was out, and within a mere month of his arrival had called upon the eminent Slavist Izmail Sreznevsky in order to begin the process of earning his master's degree at St. Petersburg University. He successfully passed his examinations in late 1853 and early 1854, then turned to the writing of his master's essay under the supervision of Professor Alexander Nikitenko. Nikitenko (1804–77), a self-made intellectual born a serf, a historian of Russian literature, and for many years an enlightened censor, had himself written a dissertation some twenty years earlier on a subject from esthetics (*On Creative Force in Poetry*), and thus was an appropriate mentor for Chernyshevsky.

Chernyshevsky worked very rapidly at his essay. He had begun writing by late July or early August of 1854 and produced only one text, which he did not revise. Thus he had

¹ This account draws upon the classic biography by Iurii Steklov, *N. G. Chernyshevskii: Ego zhizn' i deiatel'nost'*. 1828–1889. Second edition (Moscow-Leningrad, 1928), I:131–43.

completed his writing by September, and Nikitenko approved his thesis late that same month. The larger academic bureaucracy would not be hurried, however, and approved the text only some six months later, in April 1855. The thesis was printed on May 3 and publicly defended on May 10. Evidently the word spread that this was no ordinary master's essay, for a number of leading intellectual and literary figures of the day attended the defense. Among them were Pavel Annenkov—who had a way of being present on important literary occasions in Russian history—and Nikolay Shelgunov (1824–91), who had met Chernyshevsky soon after the latter's arrival in St. Petersburg and who left a detailed description of the occasion. Before this prominent audience Chernyshevsky uncompromisingly defended the major points of his argument, rather to the discomfiture of certain of his professors, who disagreed with his approach. As Chernyshevsky himself recalled the occasion afterward, he had expected to discuss substantive matters, but in fact the defense lasted only about an hour and a half and dealt with "trivialities." Nikitenko alone among his professors asked sensible questions, he thought, and the whole event was rather a formality.² After the defense, despite its doubts, the faculty recommended that Chernyshevsky be awarded his degree, but the minister of education at the time refused to accept their recommendation and withheld it. A new minister of education did confer it three years later, but by that time Chernyshevsky had abandoned all thought of a scholarly career and did not bother to accept it. It mattered little to him whether his contributions were officially recognized, for by 1858 he knew that the radical intelligentsia, the people he cared about, regarded itself as virtually obliged to accept the arguments he made in his essay: the volume had acquired something like the force of intellectual law, as an

² See Chernyshevsky's letter of May 16 [1855] to his family: 14:299–300.

unsympathetic commentator noted in 1866.³ Chernyshevsky could scarcely have hoped to exert a more powerful influence on Russian society than he in fact did through this short work.

The intellectual power of Chernyshevsky's essay sprang from the simplicity of its basic principles, and that simplicity in turn derived from his monistic, unitary approach. Chernyshevsky rejected from the start of his argument any notion of philosophical dualism, any true division between the natural and the supernatural, the real and the ideal. His thought is permeated by the monistic assumption: truth is unitary; there cannot be different ways of perceiving truth, and by extension reality: there can be only one way, to which the force of reason must ultimately bring everyone. Thus when Chernyshevsky turned to the subject of art, his first concern was the elimination of dualism from esthetic thought.

Dualism in esthetic thought could manifest itself in the dichotomy of form and content, or the notion of embodying a particular idea in a certain material form, an important element in the then dominant Hegelian doctrines of esthetics as elaborated, for example, by Friedrich Theodor Vischer, who published his monumental *Asthetik oder Wissenschaft des Schönen* in six volumes between 1846 and 1857. Chernyshevsky chose Vischer as his chief opponent, even though the *Asthetik* had not appeared in its entirety at the time Chernyshevsky wrote.

Chernyshevsky rejected the Hegelian argument that "the beautiful is the perfect correspondence, the perfect identity between idea and image," along with the related definition of the sublime as the "preponderance of the idea over the form": both these definitions provided excellent examples of philosophical dualism. But then Chernyshevsky

³ Konstantin Sluchevskii, *Iavleniia russkoi zhizni pod kritikoiu estetiki. II. Esteticheskie otnosheniia iskusstva k deistvitel'nosti, gospodina Ch.* (St. Petersburg, 1866), iv.

could also be inconsistent, as when he accepted the dualistic Hegelian definition of the comic as the "preponderance of the form over the idea." Chernyshevsky lacked a sense of humor himself, and found the idea of the comic so uninteresting that he devoted but one brief paragraph to it in his essay.

To the dualistic Hegelian definition of beauty, Chernyshevsky counterposed a monistic definition, one simple enough to become a political slogan, as it in fact did: "The beautiful is life." By equating the beautiful with life, and by extension with reality, Chernyshevsky laid the groundwork for a consistently monistic esthetic.

And yet, although Chernyshevsky's fundamental esthetic principle is monistic, dualism reappears as soon as he departs from that basic notion to grapple with the ideal, for then he writes: "That creature is beautiful in which we see life as it should be in accordance with our conceptions of it." In fact the kernel of the entire esthetic controversy of 1855-70 is contained in the contradiction between Chernyshevsky's two definitions of the beautiful: "the beautiful is life," in which case we must understand "life as it actually is"; and "the beautiful is life as it should be," in which he introduces the notion of an ideal. This is a dichotomy which has plagued all systems of monistic esthetics before and since, down to the officially propagated Socialist Realist doctrine of the Soviet Union in our century.

To this it must be added, however, that Chernyshevsky carefully distinguishes his notion of an ideal from any Platonic conception of an abstract ideal. He insists that an ideal must be firmly grounded in reality, and must also therefore be logically inferior to reality:

It can be mathematically demonstrated that a work of art cannot stand comparison with a living human face where the beauty of the features is concerned: everyone

knows that execution in art is always immeasurably lower than the ideal which exists in the artist's imagination. But this ideal itself cannot possibly be higher in terms of beauty than those living persons whom the artist has happened to see. (2:56)

At most, Chernyshevsky goes on to say, an artist can effect a mechanical combination of the best features of various individuals he has met in reality, and any such mechanistic approach leads to an impermissible dissolution of naturally created organic wholes. Or, as he puts it in another place, "the beauty of a statue cannot be greater than the beauty of a living individual, just as a photograph cannot be more beautiful than the original" (2:57).

From this it follows that the ideal is to be sought in reality, or at least in reality as it might conceivably be, and not in some unrealistically beautiful work of art. "A person with uncorrupted esthetic feeling," Chernyshevsky writes, "obtains full enjoyment from nature and does not find it lacking in beauty" (2:59). The demand for artistic perfection springs from human vanity and overheated patriotism: "Just as each particular nation exaggerates the virtues of its poets," he maintains, "so human beings in general exaggerate the importance of poetry in general" (2:72). Chernyshevsky does admit that art may serve as a surrogate for reality: we may content ourselves with a seascape if we cannot live at the seashore, or with a portrait of a beautiful woman if we cannot have her in actuality. But if a normal person is asked to choose between the image of an apple and a genuine apple, Chernyshevsky holds, then he will always select the latter.

Chernyshevsky does confess that art has certain uses, either as a surrogate for reality, as we have just seen, or as a means of generalization. Thus it is difficult for many people to analyze the actions or character of an actually existing individual because only a few can know him well enough for that, but a great many people can deal with the psychology