Poetics. Self. Place
Essays in Honor of Anna Lisa Crone

Edited by
Catherine O'Neil
Nicole Boudreau
Sarah Krive

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Strakhov's World as a Whole: A Missing Link between Dostoevskv and Tolstoy

Donna Orwin

If 19th-century Russian thought has been criticized as excessively anthropocentric and concerned with ethics, that is because it was engaged in the practical task of defining modern man (anthropology) and his relation to society (ethics). While statesmen during the period were reforming various institutions, writers and artists were creating a new Russian reality based on modern principles by discussing and modeling these in their books. One of the laborers in this project was Nikolai Nikolaevich Strakhov (1828-96), a prolific writer as well as a great conversationalist. In the course of a career of almost forty years, he published numerous articles, as well as twelve books, four of which had more than one edition. (Most of the books were collections of essays previously published separately in journals.) After his death he was largely forgotten except as a literary critic, but his contemporaries appreciated his popular articles on other subjects as well. With his vast erudition, Strakhov mapped out the European philosophic and scientific landscape for Russians, and thereby posed the question of the relation of the individual and society at the highest level of complexity.

The son of a priest, Strakhov came from the same milieu as the raznochintsy materialists and positivists whom he fought in the 1860s. From 1838 to 1844 he attended the local seminary in Kostroma, and then entered St. Petersburg University, where he first studied law, and then mathematics. In the 1850s, while teaching natural history at a gymnasium, he did graduate work in biology; in the meantime, he was writing romantic poetry and acquiring a

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2. In 1899, Vasily Rozanov published an essay entitled "Literaturnaia iichnost' N. N. Strakhova" (The Literary Personality of N. N. Strakhov) in his Literaturyme ocherki (Literary Sketches). It had been originally published as a response to the reissuing of Strakhov's Bor'ba s zapadom v nashei literature (The Struggle with the West in Our Literature) in 1890 and entitled "O borbe s Zapadom, v sviazi s literaturnoi deiatel'nost'iu odnogo iz slavianofilov" (On the Battle with the West in Connection with the Literary Personality of One of the Slavophiles). It is Rozanov, in this article, who supplies the list of Strakhov's books. For a complete list of Strakhov's publications, see A. L. Budilovskaiia and B. F. Egorov, "Bibliografija pechatnykh trudov N. N. Strakhova," Uchenye zapiski Tartuskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta 184 (Trudy po russkoii i slavianskoi filologii 9) (1966): 213-19.
solid knowledge of German philosophy and European literature. In his biography of Dostoevsky he wrote that the goal of his own education had been "to understand Hegel and to know Goethe by heart."3 After completing his master's degree in biology in 1857, he wrote a series of short essays for Russkii mir on the philosophy of science. These essays attracted the attention of A. P. Miliukov, who invited Strakhov to write for his new journal Svetoch. Through Miliukov, he met the Dostoevsky brothers, and eventually collaborated with them on their journals, first Vremia and then Epokha. He became one of Fyodor Dostoevsky's closest intellectual friends and the man whom his widow Anna Grigorievna chose to write his biography in 1883, after his death.

In 1871, Strakhov began a friendship with Leo Tolstoy that lasted until his death in 1896. For ten years, until Dostoevsky's death in 1881, he was close to both authors, and their mutual interest in his ideas connected them even though they themselves never met or corresponded. One such connection, the subject of this essay, helps explain why there are respects in which Anna Karenina seems more "Dostoevskian" than War and Peace.4

"The Content of Human Life"

In 1872, Strakhov published a book called The World as a Whole (Mir kak tseJle). Tolstoy reported to his new friend that he had read it pencil in hand, unable to put it down, and, in a letter dated 12 November and 17 December 1872, he sent Strakhov a detailed critique of it.5 He had it in mind when he began Anna

3 N. N. Strakhov, Biografiia, pis'ma, i zametki iz zapisnoi knizhki F. M. Dostoevskogo (St. Petersburg, 1883), 173.
5 Tolstoy to Strakhov, 12 November and 17 December 1872, in L. N. Tolstoi, Polnoe sobranie sochinenii, ed. V. G. Chertkov, 90 vols. (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo
Kareniina a few months later, and he reread it, again with enthusiasm, as he was publishing and working on the novel late in 1875.6

The World as a Whole comprises an unnoticed link between Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. It came out in 1872, but everything in it except the introduction was written and published between 1858 and 1866. In separate articles over these eight years, Strakhov explained and commented on contemporary opinion about organic and inorganic nature. Dostoevsky met Strakhov in 1860, and, whether or not he read the articles from the 1850s that comprise part of The World as a Whole, he most certainly discussed their content with his new friend. As for the articles from the 1860s, the ones written from 1861–63 would have been among those to which he listened intently during those sessions reported by Strakhov in his biography; and the rest would have been well known to the man who in 1873 attributed half his thoughts to Strakhov.7 These were articles that laid out the “facts” of science so eagerly absorbed by Dostoevsky. In an 1868 letter from abroad to a mutual friend, poet A. N. Maikov, Dostoevsky nostalgically remembered his sorely missed conversations with Strakhov about science and literature.8 During the entire existence of the journal Vremia (1861–63), Strakhov reports that he and Dostoevsky met at least once a day for “endless conversations ... the best conversations in my life.” In these sessions, Dostoevsky would always ask Strakhov to read aloud from whatever essay he was writing, he would urgently press Strakhov to keep reading, and, so Strakhov claims, he disagreed with an essay only once.9 The conversations also addressed those abstract questions about “the essence of things” that, according to Strakhov, so fascinated Dostoevsky. The answers proposed by Strakhov were Hegelian. According to an introduction to The World as a Whole written in 1872, “the true essence of things consists in various stages of the spirit as it becomes incarnate.”10 The question that most concerned both Dostoevsky and Strakhov, what it meant to be human, is the

“Khudozhestvennaia literatura,” 1928–58), 61: 345–49. Henceforth this edition will be referred to as T·PSS.
6 T·PSS 62: 235.
7 See Strakhov, Biografia, 244, 225, 228.
8 F. M. Dostoevskii, Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem, ed. V. G. Bazanov, 30 vols. (Leningrad: Izdatel’stvo “Nauka,” 1972–88), 28.2: 327–28. Henceforth this edition will be referred to as D·PSS. In the letter to which Dostoevsky was responding, Maikov had reported a conversation with Strakhov about “an explanation about facts of physiology, science, and literature” (D·PSS 28.2: 488).
9 Ibid., 225.
10 Strakhov explains in his biography how Dostoevsky loved to talk about “the most abstract questions ... about the essence of things and the limitations of knowledge.” “[And],” he continues, “I remember how it amused him when I would place his arguments under the various views of philosophers known to us from the history of philosophy” (ibid.). Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.
subject of the last chapter of section 1, part 1 in *The World as a Whole*. It was originally published in *The Torch*, as the ninth of Strakhov's "Physiological Letters" ("Fiziologicheskie pis'ma"). Dated February 1861, it was undoubtedly known to Dostoevsky even before it appeared in print, and Dostoevsky may have been Strakhov's intended ideal reader.

The chapter is entitled "The Content of Human Life" ("Soderzhanie chelovecheskoi zhizni"). Coming after "The Content of Organic Life," its goal is to define the "essence" of human nature, or that which distinguishes it from all other things, organic or inorganic. This turns out to be its "indefinability": "man is the most undefined of all beings; in him there are no peculiarities that make up his nature; and in this, one would have to agree, consists his greatest peculiarity." Man is "all possibility." This means, says Strakhov, that at any given moment a human being can be nothing, "meat, blood and bones", while at other moments, those which the artist should describe, he can be "his very self." When asking what a man is, we must look at how he acts: "Instead of essence, one must take activity. Instead of the constant, the variable; instead of the soul—life.... There is no being more diverse, less subjected to limits of any kinds, more general, and consequently accommodating within himself more contradictions, than man."

As they progress from lower to higher, according to Strakhov, organisms are less uniform, and therefore more dynamic. Man, the highest organism, is all "activity." For this very reason, human beings are the most open to external influences of all organisms. Strakhov gives a highly poetic account of the many things in nature and human civilization that attract human beings and mold them. There are so many, in fact, that no single one of them can be said decisively to form the character of an individual who, moreover, is saved from excessive dependence on any one influence by his very susceptibility to others. The future is always open, according to this scenario, and change is always possible.

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11 N. N. Strakhov, *Mir kak iseloe: Cherty iz nauki o prirode* (St. Petersburg, 1872), 158-59: "chelovek est' samoe neopredelennoe iz vsekh sushchestv; v nem net osobennosti, kotorye-by sostaviali ego prirodu; i v etom, kak legko soglasit'sia, sostoit ego velichai-shaia osobennost'."

12 Ibid., 159; "vse v vozmozhnosti."

13 Ibid., "miasa, krovi i kostei."

14 Ibid., 160; "vsem samim soboiu."

15 Ibid., 160-61; "Vmesto sushchnosti nuzhno vziat' deiatel'nost'. Vmesto postoian-nogo—peremennoe, vmesto dushi—zhizn' ... net sushchestva bolee raznoobraznogo, menee podchinennogo kakim-by to ni bylo ogranicheniam, bolee obshchego, i sledo-vatel'no sovmeshchayushchego v sebe bolee protivorechii, chem chelovek."

16 Ibid., 161; "deiatel'nost'.

17 Ibid., 161-65.
Unlike lower animals, "indefinable" man is free to create his own destiny, and therefore freedom is the first defining characteristic of the truly human. The second one, however, is pursuit of a goal. For human beings, mere life is not an end in itself. Once a child has reached adulthood, he does not rest on his laurels; instead he looks around for something else to do. For this reason, "life is not only self-gratification, but also self-destruction, dissatisfaction with the self." 18

As long as there is a problem not yet solved, as long as there is a project not yet completed, as long as there is a goal not yet achieved: up to that point activity is possible. And consequently the sufferings of the soul spur us ahead, toward the unsolved and the uncompleted. These are the sufferings of birth. The new that is coming into the world, the mysterious future that is beginning—this is not happening without us. We ourselves are giving birth to it. 19

A.S. Dolinin links this particular passage directly to Dostoevsky's Underground Man, who declares that under certain circumstances he would prefer suffering to happiness. 20 Here, like a newly created Frankenstein monster laid out in expository prose, lies Dostoevsky's as yet inanimate character, all future, all possibility, all freedom, but unconsciously yearning for a goal. When Strakhov recommended that the artist should portray the human individual at that moment when he displayed his true nature, the specific artist he may have had in mind was his friend Fyodor Dostoevsky. Strakhov's whole chapter as I have summarized it so far provides a philosophic basis for tendencies in Dostoevsky's mature writing. Strakhov declares outright that man is by nature contradictory: utterly suggestible, and yet obsessed by freedom and determined to preserve it even at the price of his life; intended by nature to experience "self-satisfaction" (samoudovletvorenie) and yet in the name of freedom attracted to "self-destruction" (samorazrushenie). He applies Hegelian dialectical method to psychology to explain a process of growth and understanding that integrates contradictory impulses in one individual. The whole series of opposing movements within the Underground Man, as desire for friendship alternates with declarations of freedom from erstwhile friends, or love for Liza is replaced by loathing for her, is an expression of this dialectic.

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18 Ibid., 173; "zhizn' ne tol'ko est' samoudovletvorenie, no i samorazrushenie, samoneudovol'stvo."

19 Ibid., 175; "Pokaj est' zadacha, kotoraya ne razreshena, poka est' zamysel, kotoryi ne ispolnen, poka est' tsel', kotoraya ne dostignuta,—do-tekh-por vozmozhna deiatel'nost'. I sledovatel'no muki dushi pobuzhdaiut nas vpered, k nerazgadannomu i nesovershen-nomu. Oni sut' muki rozhdeniia. To nozho, chto prikhodit v mir, to tainstvennoe budushchee, kotoroe nastupayet,—ono prikhodit ne pomimo nas; my sami ego rozhdaem."

20 Dolinin, "F. M. Dostoevskii i N. N. Strakhov," 247.
The second part of Strakhov’s argument would have impressed Dostoevsky alike for what it says and what it omits. The content of life (as opposed to its form, which is the dialectic), according to Strakhov, is pursuit of a goal, not the goal itself. The reason we need a goal, it seems, is to keep moving, and, although Strakhov does not explicitly say so, to move purposefully. This second fundamental principle of our being seems to reflect the fact that we have minds that require meaningful activity. Strakhov therefore argues, here as elsewhere in his early articles, that human beings are incorrigible idealists, who want, not bread, but a goal for which to strive. From Notes from Underground onward, Strakhov’s argument about the need for an ideal is part of Dostoevsky’s philosophical system, repeated throughout his oeuvre, and especially in Zosima’s teachings in The Brothers Karamazov.\textsuperscript{21} Strakhov, however, does not define the goal toward which men strive; it is therefore left to the Christian Dostoevsky to begin in 1864 to elaborate his own vision of a dialectic opposing and reconciling the “I” with the “All.”\textsuperscript{22} At the same time, in the Underground Man Dostoevsky brilliantly imagines a character who, because he lacks a conscious goal, is a prisoner of the dialectic itself. Unlike man as Strakhov envisaged him, the Underground Man is going nowhere. He knows what he is against—the laws of nature, which forever foil him—but he does not know what he is for, except an infinite freedom that prevents him from wholeheartedly embracing any goal.\textsuperscript{23}

The portrait of the Underground Man reflects a key disagreement between Dostoevsky and Strakhov. In his first book, On the Method of the Natural Sciences and Their Meaning in General Education (O metode estestvennykh nauk i znachenii ikh v obshchem obrazovanii, 1865), Strakhov took a Hegelian position that the essence of man was reason, and that the goal of mankind was to become perfectly reasonable. When this happened, the world too would achieve perfection. Strakhov equated the self with mind and believed that the (Kantian) categories of theoretical reason according to which we make sense of the physical world do in fact correspond to metaphysical categories to which we

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 247-48.

\textsuperscript{22} I refer to the notes Dostoevsky jotted down in 1864 while sitting at the bier of his first wife, which begin “Masha lezhit na stole...” (D-PSS 20: 172-75). Note the resemblance of Strakhov’s ideas about the role of human beings in shaping their own destiny to Herzen’s famous statement about the individual’s role in creating history. Herzen’s passage comes from “Robert Owen,” published originally in the sixth issue of Poliarnaiia zvezda in 1861, that is, after Strakhov had published his letter in February. The two men share a dynamic, Schellingian understanding of human nature, but in his article Herzen declares himself to be an atheist, while as a positivist and scientist Strakhov leaves open the exact nature of the goals—sacred or profane—that men pursue.

\textsuperscript{23} James P. Scanlan, Dostoevsky the Thinker (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 75.
have no direct access. While he and Dostoevsky were together in Florence in 1862, a friendly quarrel arose between them over rationalism, and Strakhov recorded both the conversation and his reflections on it in diary fragments discovered in 1973 in his archive in Kiev. As the diary relates, on parting a short while before, Dostoevsky had told Strakhov that there was "an inadequacy in the direction of my thoughts" that he, Dostoevsky, "hated, despised and would persecute his entire life." Strakhov, as he subsequently fleshes out their disagreement in his diary, had wanted to divide the Russian intellectual world into right and wrong, with villains who argue fruitlessly that "two times two equals three, or five." Dostoevsky, according to Strakhov, countered that there must always be a grain of truth in every position, no matter how weak, or even illogical it was: therefore, in human matters at least, sometimes two times two does not equal four. Strakhov conceded Dostoevsky's point, but he went on to contend that such a maxim would grant the relative merit of all positions but make it impossible to discover the truth. Having scored this debater's point, however, Strakhov in part 2 of the first diary fragment switches to a more confessional tone. He admits that he is emotionally drawn to fiery youths who insist that two times two equals five, even although he cannot intellectually side with them. As for Dostoevsky, we may conclude that what he "hates" in his friend's mode of arguing is his insistence on logicality even in discussions on human nature.

The two friends, who had parted with warm handshakes, were arguing about the relative merits of an individual point of view and a generalizing one. Dostoevsky, that product of the 1840s, was defending the little man: like Ludwig Feuerbach, who had so impressed his left Hegelian friends in the 1840s, Dostoevsky would reject even philosophy, even reason, if it devalued the individual. In this conversation as Strakhov reports it, in fact, Dostoevsky sounds like the Feuerbach of Strakhov's 1864 article, who argues that there are as many "reasons" as there are heads. In keeping with Dostoevsky's dislike of materialism as explained to him by Strakhov among others, the Underground Man rebels against the mechanical laws of nature. Against his will, however, and in accord with his own rationalism, he finds himself subjected

24 N. N. Strakhov, O metode estestvennykh nauk i znachenii ikh v obshchem obrazovanii (St. Petersburg: Tipografiia Eduarda Pratsa, 1865), 10, 15-16, 19.
26 Ibid., 561.
27 Ibid., 561-62.
28 Strakhov confesses that in his conversations with Dostoevsky he does often resort to such proofs as the reductio ad absurdum. "You find it unforgivable that I often reduce our cogitations to the conclusion which one might express simply as: but it's really impossible that two times two not equal four" (ibid., 560).
to the laws of an inner logic, a dialectic of freedom that makes it impossible for him to commit himself to a loving relationship with another. This dialectic manifests itself psychologically in relationships with others. The Underground Man cannot help seeking approval, friendship, and love; but he quickly hates those to whom he is attracted, because he experiences the attraction as a form of enslavement. His relationship to his reader follows the same pattern: his confidences are followed by insults, declarations of independence, and even an insistence that he writes only for himself, not for a reader. The only thing that can free the Underground Man from his inner slavery to this dialectic would be a goal to which he could submit himself wholeheartedly and unself-consciously. Without this goal—in Dostoevsky's opinion, an irrational and Christian one—the dialectic is not the solution to his problems, but one cause of them. While agreeing with Strakhov that man was essence rather than "blood, meat and bones," Dostoevsky did not locate that essence in human reason, which operates by means of dialectic, but cannot by itself supply a moral goal.

**Tolstoy and The World as a Whole**

Tolstoy's reaction to *The World as a Whole*, registered in his 1872 letter to Strakhov, reflects an engagement with the book as intense as Dostoevsky's must have been when he had read the original articles in the previous decade and had debated them with the author.

I read it, unable to tear myself away and I read it attentively, with a pencil. I made marks in places which struck me and I reread those places. My general impression: 1) I learned much that was new and not incidental, but what one most needs to know. 2) Many questions which had vaguely occurred to me before were posed and resolved clearly, freshly, and forcefully. (I'm ashamed to recall that I took the book lightly only because all the articles had been published previously. I drew the wrong conclusion. They were published. Nothing was heard, hence there was nothing special about them. How strong habits are!) 3) Many, terribly many questions are not resolved. One senses how the author must resolve them (I clearly understood you for the first time from this book), and the reader wants to know how the author will resolve them, and fears for him. 4) There is an unpleasant impression of an unevenness of tone and even a certain inconsistency of subjects of the whole book.—Understand me. There is such depth and clarity in many places that it indicates a necessary, strict order of succession [posledovatel'nost'] in the world view of the author, but the book retreats [from] this order [posledovatel'nost'].

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30 Emphasis Tolstoy's; T-PSS 61: 346. Tolstoy's library contains the second, 1892, edition of *Miro kak tseloe* with a dedication by Strakhov to Tolstoy, but the first edition
As he had earlier done for Dostoevsky in articles and conversation, in his book Strakhov provides a systematic account of the contemporary scientific and philosophic understanding of man and nature. Thus Tolstoy appreciates (and underlines) the "depth and clarity" with which his new friend poses and explains "questions" that had previously occurred to Tolstoy only "vaguely." But despite his generally positive verdict, Tolstoy criticizes elements of the book’s tone and substance. Later in the letter, in his detailed critique, he singles out as defective in both respects the very chapter—"The Content of Human Life"—that may have influenced Dostoevsky; it he would simply have "discarded." I will argue nonetheless that this very chapter, with its radically new definition of man, is the focus of Tolstoy’s attention in the book. Unlike Dostoevsky, he would have hated the definition of man as essentially "undefinable," and I suspect that this is why he reacted so strongly against the chapter in his first reading. Like Dostoevsky, however, he would have found Strakhov’s account of the divided soul enlightening: it would have clarified a psychological dualism that is present in War and Peace. (I am thinking of Pierre’s unconditional love of life on the one hand, and his need for meaning on the other.) Again like Dostoevsky, he would not have been satisfied with Strakhov’s explanation of the dualism and, also like Dostoevsky, he would have rejected Strakhov’s rationalism.

Strakhov’s relations with Tolstoy, whom he considered his moral superior, were different from those with Dostoevsky, whom he treated as an artistic genius but a moral equal: therefore he assumes a different tone in his letters to Tolstoy. He does vigorously defend his ideas in letters to both men, and no doubt his honesty in this respect was invaluable to them. In his reply to Tolstoy’s assessment of The World as a Whole, Strakhov agrees that the arch tone that he had assumed in parts of the book is not successful and he promises in the future to eschew "attempts at profound and subtle playfulness." He also acknowledges that there is something wrong with his attitude toward the need for goals; Tolstoy “immediately picked up that I treat dissatisfaction with life too lightly and I don’t make any reference to religion.”

from 1872 has not survived. See Biblioteka L’va Nikolaevicha Tolstogo v Iasnoi Poliane, pt. 12 (Moscow: “Kniga,” 1975), 283.

He writes in the introduction that the book is intended as a summary, not a work of original philosophy (Mir kak tseloc, v). Given his role as a popularizer, this claim bolsters rather than weakens his authority.

For Tolstoy’s alternatives to Strakhov’s rationalism, see my Tolstoy’s Art and Thought, 166-70.


Ibid.; emphasis Strakhov’s.
place in *The World as a Whole* where Strakhov discusses "dissatisfaction with life" is in "The Content of Life": this shows that Tolstoy read it carefully and criticized it in particular. Despite what Tolstoy and even Strakhov himself say in their correspondence, neither in this chapter nor elsewhere in the book does he actually condemn this dissatisfaction and the need that fuels it. From Tolstoy's point of view, then, Strakhov is on the right road for the wrong reason. Later in the decade, I would suggest, Tolstoy sets the record straight with one of his most memorable creations.

In "The Content of Life," which, I repeat, may have been written with Dostoevsky in mind, Strakhov calls directly upon the artist to create man as he truly is in reality. In developing his argument, furthermore, he quotes extensively from poetry, and at one point he even interpolates a small fictional vignette into the text. Strakhov's brief excursion into fiction introduces a character who seems vaguely familiar to readers of Tolstoy. In creating him, Strakhov tries to isolate and portray the quality—indefinability—that he says is essential to man.

A man is walking. To be walking, moving—this would seem to mean toward something, to be approaching some kind of a goal. But a philosopher would be very mistaken if he began to pose the question of where this man is going and why. He is not going anywhere, and he has no reason for walking. He is walking just for the sake of walking.

The man has a hat. A philosopher might think that he had donned it for some reason [s kakoi-nibud' tsel'iu] and he would start to scrutinize it from this point of view. No doubt, evidently, it serves as a defense of the head against the cold, so that the head is the goal, and the hat—the means. Not at all: in the first place this person has very thick hair, so that his head does not need additional protection; while in the second place quite the opposite obtains—it is not the hat that serves the head, but the head that serves as underpinning for the hat. The hat was purchased to wear it during walks, and if this man wears a hat on his head, he does so just to be wearing it.

In just such a vain manner would we rack our brains if we took it upon ourselves to explain the form of this hat. Its form likewise has no inner meaning. The hat is given its form for the form's sake.

One can say the same about the rest of the man's costume. The magnificent coat is magnificent in and of itself, and not in order to especially comfortably protect the body of the stroller from the elements. The body of this man serves only as a prop on which he has draped his coat. Take a look at the expensive collar. This soft, silvery fur, about which teleologists would say that it is intended precisely to warm animals amidst ice and snow—this fur is exposed directly to

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the frost, to wind and snow: it doesn't even occur to the stylish barin that one can turn the collar up to cover the face.

Let's go closer. The barin has an aquiline nose, large glistening eyes, a majestic expression, magnificent side-whiskers. It would seem that here one might suspect some kind of content, some kind of deeper meaning. But no: here too everything is on the surface, everything exists for its own sake. This nose and these eyes do not give anyone the right to form an opinion that behind them something corresponding to them is hidden. Nature, it seems, loves beautiful forms for their beauty alone and created this nose and these eyes just so, for the sake of the nose and the eyes themselves, and not in concert with the inner qualities of the man. As for the side-whiskers, here there can be no doubt that they are a goal in and of themselves. And the majestic expression of the face has no more meaning than the side-whiskers. On the basis of it you do not have the slightest right to postulate any kind of majesty in this barin, you have no right to postulate even a striving for a certain majesty. The barin has no concern with majesty; he is striving exclusively only for a majestic expression. Now you see this expression; he exhibits it to you; do not seek for anything else here. The phenomenon takes place openly, clearly, directly before your eyes.

But now another barin, partly resembling ours, comes toward him from the other direction; they meet and converse. Will we find something out here? Won't something come out of this? Close scrutiny reveals, however, that nothing emerges. You think that they are communicating their thoughts to one another, that the conversation has a goal, that it seeks to clarify some question? Not at all. The words are spoken exclusively to be uttered. By the tone and gestures you are able to guess all the pleasure that is felt in the pronunciation of phrases. One of them does not want to impart his judgment to the other. He wants to pronounce it. The other does not try at all to assimilate the thought of his interlocutor; he listens to him only in order to reply, that is, to enjoy his own speech. In this consists the whole goal of the conversation; it is completely achieved, and then the conversation has not the slightest consequence; nothing at all emerges from it.

I could continue this analysis very far. The barin is gazing: from this it does not follow that he is examining something and that something will come out of this. He is gazing simply to gaze. He laughs not to laugh at something, but just to have a little laugh. He reads a book not to learn from it, but just to read. And, in a word, he lives not to get anything out of life but merely to live it out [не для то, чтобы жить, а просто для того чтобы прожить]. So that he gets nothing out of life but life itself.
Why does this seem strange to us? Why is this self-satisfaction and self-satiety so offensive, why does it so repel us? This inexhaustible flow of pleasure, which permeates every phenomenon of life, which is palpable in its every motion and every breath, why can it not satisfy us?

To tell the truth, man has a terribly strict view of life. Sometimes he would indeed like a hat to serve only as defense for the head, a coat—only to defend the body; he would like every step to have some kind of goal, say, the preservation of health; health itself has to serve something else, say, the possibility of acting, bustling about, talking; it is as if speech absolutely must contain thought; thought must have a purpose, be useful for something and so on. This destructive, caustic view pursues us obsessively and everywhere. No matter how luxurious someone's coat may be, no matter how elegant the Parisian pronunciation of his speeches, however light his carriage and fast his horses—we are not satisfied, we are prepared to ask this uncomfortable question: what does he want to say, where is he hurrying, and what will come of all this?\(^36\)

Who does this self-confident self-satisfied gent with shining eyes and sleek side-whiskers remind us of? Surely Strakhov has provided his readers—Tolstoy among them—with a sneak preview of Stiva Oblonsky, who chooses his ideas the way he chooses his clothes, and especially his hats: "[for Stiva] having views was as necessary as having a hat."\(^37\) This is how Stiva fineses the "need for activity" which otherwise might generate that "self-destructiveness" (samorazrushenie) which according to Strakhov coexists in tension with "self-satisfaction" (samoudovletvorenie).

Stiva Oblonsky has predecessors in Tolstoy's own prose, which so magnificently portrays and, yes, even, as John Bayley has claimed, celebrates "self-satisfaction" (samoudovletvorenie).\(^38\) The satirically portrayed general who struts before his troops at the review near Branau in War and Peace (book 2, chapter 1) is full of himself, but so is one of Tolstoy's most positive heroes, Pierre Bezukhov. Pierre's self-containment saves his life when, as a prisoner of war, he must resist the piteous summons of his friend Platon Karataev. In the same novel, the "senseless" young laughter of the Rostov teenagers, or even of Madame Rostova when Natasha tickles her in bed, overflows from the same self-satisfied joy of life. There are no giggles in Anna Karenina, however. Now Stiva Oblonsky, charmer and con man, represents life lived to the

\(^{36}\) Ibid., 169-72.

\(^{37}\) Anna Karenina pt. 1, chap. 3. Translations from Anna Karenina are by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Penguin Classics, 2000), but I modify these where necessary to clarify my meaning.

top, and Tolstoy embraces life for its own sake more cautiously. While Stiva is not as shallow as Strakhov’s barin, what characterizes him in Tolstoy’s portrayal is precisely his self-satisfaction and satiety. Tolstoy uses Stiva first to enchant his readers, and then to manipulate them into second thoughts about their own enchantment. Even at the end of the novel, Stiva still retains our sympathy as he weeps over Anna’s dead body. If he also sheds his mourning quickly, we are only slightly shocked, because we recognize his inner self-centered equilibrium as natural, if not admirable. Nonetheless, in the 1870s Tolstoy is no longer quite so indulgent toward our natural self-satisfaction. Stiva, with his complete lack of idealism, reflects this new ambivalence and therefore resembles Strakhov’s barin much more than does Pierre Bezukhov. For Stiva and the barin, ideas and hats are merely a matter of style and utility.

In Anna Karenina, life-loving but lean Konstantin Levin, a descendant of Andrei Bolkonsky, replaces Pierre at center stage, while Pierre’s ample descendant Stiva operates upfront but to one side. During a restaurant meal early in the novel Levin argues with Stiva about whether we should live for goals or rolls. This conflict (whose outcome in the novel is not clear-cut) too has origins in The World as a Whole and “The Content of Human Life,” to which we now return.

Continuing to develop his idea, Strakhov now turns to Pushkin to describe the conflicting impulses of the soul. On the one hand, we want the pleasures of life, which consist in love and the arts, and on the other, we have a restless yearning for “something” that makes us critical of the man with the hat.

Thus do we regard not only these minor joys, but in general all the joys of life. The life of a human being is rich. We have love—a kinship of souls, a bliss that makes us forget all else.

If it were not for the vague yearning
Of a soul athirst for something,
I would remain here,
Tasting pleasure in obscure quiet;
I would forget the trembling of all desires,
I would call the whole world a dream—
I would go on listening to this babble,
I would go on kissing these darling feet.39

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The poem is a fragment from 1833, known only by its first line:

Когда б не смутное влечение
Чего-то жаждущей души,
Я здесь остался б – наслажденье
Вкушать в неведомой тишине:
Забыл бы всех желаний трепет,
We have nature and the arts; dedication to these brings sublime joys. The same poet goes on to describe these:

I would account for myself to no one;  
I would serve and please only myself.  
Neither for power nor for the uniform of a lackey  
Would I bend my conscience, my thoughts or my neck.  
I would wander here and there according to my whim  
Marveling at the divine beauties of nature,  
And before creations of art and inspirations  
I would immerse myself, speechless, in joys of ecstasy—  
Here is happiness! Here rights!40

And all of this, all this wonderful life we are determined to sacrifice, to turn it entirely into a means, into an aid to something else. We are constantly driven by

the vague yearning
of a soul athirst for something.41

We are insatiable, our thirst is unquenchable; we despise self-satisfaction no matter how expressed; we demand work, motion, forever forward—where will this lead in the end?

To move forward means to have a goal [isel''] ahead; it means to be dissatisfied with the present and to strive toward the future; it means to battle with whatever does not agree with this striving, and to bring to fulfillment whatever conforms with our ideals. In a word, it means to act; essential to a human being is not only that he knows and feels,
but also that he acts. Life is not only self-satisfaction, but self-destruction, dissatisfaction with oneself.\textsuperscript{42}

This must be the place where, according to Tolstoy, Strakhov treats dissatisfaction with life “too lightly.” Strakhov’s hedonism and aestheticism in this passage would have irritated Tolstoy mightily, and Strakhov himself, reading it ten years after it was written and through the eyes of his new friend Lev Nikolaevich, was embarrassed by it. Furthermore, although Strakhov here presents goals as essential to human nature, he does not name these goals, and this too would have struck Tolstoy, as it did Dostoevsky, as a fault in the book. No doubt Tolstoy is referring to this problem in his letter to Strakhov when he says, in point 3, that many questions remain unresolved in the book and the reader (by which he means himself) fears that the author’s eventual resolutions will be wrong-headed ones.\textsuperscript{43} Strakhov does not mention religion as the ultimate source of the goals, and now, responding in 1873 to Tolstoy’s critique and admitting at the same time that he takes “dissatisfaction with life” too lightly, he acknowledges this as a failing.\textsuperscript{44}

With his robust moral clarity, Tolstoy proceeds in his letter to point the doubter Strakhov in the right direction. Not poets alone (as Strakhov would seem to have it in the passage from “The Content of Life”), but “millions of people”—Buddhists and Christians—are dissatisfied with life.\textsuperscript{45} Although in The World as a Whole Strakhov convincingly refutes materialists who do not sufficiently credit the “faculty of consciousness,” his own explanations “[fail] to take into account the essence of life;”\textsuperscript{46} which Tolstoy, like Dostoevsky, considers to be religious. Strakhov errs first in his praise of sensual and aesthetic pleasure as goods in themselves, and secondly in his inability to explain (as opposed merely to proclaim) the dissatisfaction with self that distracts us from these pleasures. I would suggest that in Anna Karenina Tolstoy corrects these deficiencies, and that he does so in the debate between Stiva and Levin at the restaurant.

Levin comes into the novel afflicted with a “vague yearning” (smutnoe vlenenie); his “soul athirst for something” (che.go-to zhazhdu.shchei dushi) does not allow him to rest even when he achieves family happiness. He is, in Stiva’s words at the restaurant, “a very wholesome man” who wants life to

\textsuperscript{42} Strakhov, Mir kak tseloe, 172–73.

\textsuperscript{43} T-PSS 61: 346; see the translation above.

\textsuperscript{44} Note Strakhov’s reference in The World as a Whole to “Divine Creation” (82). In his introduction, however, he explains that the sources for his book are the natural and mathematical sciences on the one hand, and Hegelian philosophy on the other (v–vi). He wants to provide an account of life that accords with science and thought, not religion.

\textsuperscript{45} T-PSS 61: 347.

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
have a moral purpose. Stiva on the other hand argues that pleasure is the end of human existence. He is a sensualist, of course—a lover of those nozhi (darling feet) mentioned in the poem in Strakhov’s chapter and so ubiquitous in Russian literature after Pushkin—and he takes his stand in the restaurant debate for love and beauty (part I, chapter 11):

“Yes, brother, women—that’s the pivot on which everything turns.... You’re a man with a goal. That is your virtue and your defect.... You also want the activity of the individual man always to have a goal, that love and family life always be one. But that doesn’t happen. All the variety, all the charm, all the beauty of life are made up of shade and light.”

The issues under debate come straight from Strakhov’s book: speaking of deiatel’nost’ (activity) and tseli (goals), Stiva even formulates Levin’s position in the language of The World as a Whole. Stiva argues implicitly for “self-satisfaction” (samoudovletvorenie) grounded in love and aesthetics as the main principle of human life; while Levin stands for the twin principles of “self-destruction” (samorazrushenie) and especially “dissatisfaction with oneself” (samoneudovol’stvo). Agreeing with Strakhov that men want both pleasure and goals, Tolstoy corrects what he regards as a facetious and insufficiently religious point of view by having Stiva—the man with the hat—argue for a life lived according to aesthetic rather than moral principles, while Levin, the dissatisfied man, seeks for religious wholeness. In Stiva, as in Strakhov’s account in “The Content of Life,” the need for a goal is merely mechanical, without moral content, and Stiva is able to subordinate it to his complacency and love of pleasure.

Dostoevsky Comments on Tolstoy’s New Man

Tolstoy’s response to Strakhov’s articles is akin to Dostoevsky’s; and this meeting of minds over the same text helps account for a similarity in two very different works by the two authors. In the 1860s, in Notes from Underground, Dostoevsky, inspired by Strakhov, had created a character who puts freedom ahead of happiness, and who yearns for a goal without knowing what it might be. In 1875, in notes related to his novel The Adolescent, Dostoevsky says of this same character that he knows the good but cannot do it.\(^4\) A decade

\(^4\) T-PSS 18: 44–46, passim. Tolstoy makes extensive poetic use of the fact that in Russian the words for goal (tsel’?) and wholeness (tsel’nost’?) are related. On this, see Orwin, Tolstoy’s Art and Thought, 166–67, 173. Inessa Medzhibovskaya studies Tolstoy’s use of the word “tsel’” in The Death of Ivan Ilyich in “Teleological Striving and Redemption in The Death of Ivan Ilyich,” Tolstoy Studies Journal 12 (2000): 35–49.

\(^8\) D-PSS 16: 329. He loses heart because he believes that all others are like him in this regard. As is well-known, the censor excised a passage from Dostoevsky’s manuscript
after Notes from Underground, responding at least in part to the same texts by Strakhov, Tolstoy also creates a character, Konstantin Levin, who longs for goodness but cannot simply be good. In the February 1877 issue of his Writer's Diary, Dostoevsky singles out a conversation in part 6, chapter 11 of Anna Karenina between Levin and Stiva that is a reprise of the one at the restaurant about pleasure and morality as possible goals of life. Not surprisingly, he praises Levin and wholeheartedly condemns Stiva. Dostoevsky, unlike Tolstoy, could have felt no sympathy for the man with the hat.

In this conversation, which takes place during a hunt, Stiva challenges the justice of Levin's life. It seems to be enough for Stiva to admit his own injustice in order to be able to go on committing it. He applies to his own case the adage that, since life is made up of dark and shade, one should enjoy, not judge it. Levin on the other hand says that he cannot live in a way that he perceives to be unjust. As he puts it, to live within his present situation, he must be able to say “I am not to blame.”

In his discussion of this passage in Diary of a Writer, Dostoevsky portrays Stiva as a villain, as an egotist, an “urbane Epicurean” whose motto is “Après moi le déluge” and who does not care at all about the future or any one else in the present, including his wife and children. For Dostoevsky, Stiva is the kind of landowner who in the days of serfdom would have sold his serfs as soldiers to pay his debts. This Stiva is evil, even demonic: Saul Morson, who agrees with Dostoevsky about Stiva, has suggested that the character resembles a modern day Mephistopheles. Dostoevsky begins the section about Stiva with praise for the scene in which Anna nearly dies after childbirth, and then he moves to the hunt. These two parts of the novel are connected in his exposition by the twin themes of moral responsibility and guilt. In the death scene, characters break out of their “petty and shameless life” to do something truly noble: “No one was found guilty; each admitted his own guilt without reservation, and in so doing he was at once acquitted.”

On the hunt, Stiva claims not to be guilty; Levin, however, must feel that he is not blameworthy in order to live a certain way. The two characters discuss fundamental assumptions underlying present reality and they represent widespread responses to these. The Levin type wants to live a completely principled life. This is the Dostoevskian view of Tolstoy’s “man with a goal”

that explicitly identified Christianity as the goal, or ideal, which the Underground Man would be able to wholeheartedly embrace. If Dostoevsky did not restore this passage in later editions of the work (when, because these were not in a journal, he could have done so), this is because he realized that the uniqueness of his creation lay in the Underground Man's lack of a goal, and the consequences of this for his psyche.


51 D-PSS 25: 52; Lantz, A Writer’s Diary, 2: 871.
He is "pure at heart," likely to give up everything and go wandering to collect alms the way the title character does in Nikolai Nekrasov's poem Vlas. The Stiva type merely toys with ideas while living egoistically. The Levin type (a Dostoevskian), by contrast, if necessary "will go to the very Pillars of Hercules," that is, he is a man of ideas who will live by them and follow them to their limits. Why then does Levin not go off wandering as Vlas did? "Something solid, direct, and real arises from his whole being and still holds him back from pronouncing the final verdict." What restrains Levin is chto-to, in other words, a thing, rather than his sacred personhood, even although this "thing" comes from inside him. It comes from his "nature" (iz vsei ego prirody), and it has the blunt and simple qualities of matter—"solid, direct, and real" (tverdoe, priamoe i real'noe). That last word—real'noe—refers to the practical as opposed to the theoretical or ideal side of human nature. Dostoevsky's language points back to its mechanical or material side, which we must overcome in order to do the right, the ideal, thing. He is referring, of course, to our bodies, which while we live restrain and distort the impulses of our souls. Dostoevsky especially values Tolstoy's insight into Levin's inability, despite his yearning for it, to be whole, to live the ideal which he wants to embrace. At this moment in the text, in Dostoevsky's interpretation, Levin resembles the Underground Man who knows the good but cannot do it.

Later in the chapter, after examining the European, historical solution to social injustice, Dostoevsky explains the Russian, Christian one, which must be based on mutual respect and morality, not law. Therefore, it is right for Russian gentrymen to give their lands to the peasants, but it is wrong for peasants to demand this as their right. He ends this particular entry to his Writer's Diary with recommendations to his readers that the "pure of heart" should follow their good impulses and beware of pride in any form. He says that "for the pure in heart I have one piece of advice: self-control and self-mastery before taking any first step." To fully master oneself would be to overcome the "solid, direct, and real" that holds Levin, but not Vlas, back. This is the path to true "freedom, equality and brotherhood" that Russia will show the world. Dostoevsky is careful to say at the same time that he does not expect to find many readers as purely idealistic as Vlas. Most will be unable to act completely unselfishly, but to the extent that they follow their unselfish tendencies rather than their selfish ones, they will be doing their part to create the Russian community based on love which is Dostoevsky's ideal.

52 D-PSS 25: 56; Lantz, A Writer's Diary, 2: 876.
54 As in English, the Russian word for nature (priroda) can apply to the external world as well as human beings, and Dostoevsky takes punning advantage of this fact in this passage.
The conversation in book 6 of Anna Karenina looks somewhat different from Tolstoy’s point of view in the 1870s. He would agree with Dostoevsky that Stiva is an egotist who justifies himself with a plea of not guilty. But in Anna Karenina at least, this position still has more validity than it does in Dostoevsky’s oeuvre. Levin sees that a continuum leads from him to Stiva. Alone after Stiva has joined Veslovsky in merry-making, Levin thinks again. He repeats his question from an earlier page—“Can one be just only in a negative way?” (by working not to increase the disparities between his life and that of the peasants) and he answers himself, “So? I’m not to blame.” Levin has come around partway to Stiva’s position in the restaurant discussion in part 1. To the extent that we have to satisfy our own legitimate needs first, all we can do is avoid egregious sins. We are morally limited but also morally excused by our animal natures, by our unconquerable attachment to our own.

It is important that this conversation and Levin’s response to it occur on the hunt. Hunting is an animal activity, the natural fulfillment of the animal need to expand, even to kill for the sake of affirming our own powers. Levin’s hunting companions are Stiva and Veslovsky—both are more attuned to nature in certain ways than Levin. And the next morning, Levin’s closest companion is Laska, his hunting dog. For her there are no moral dilemmas, no question of whether what she is doing is right or wrong. For her there is only “them,” it, the others whom it is her job to hunt and kill. Only human beings have to concern themselves with justice or even self-sacrifice, the relation between those others and themselves. When Levin asks his question, he is asking whether there is more to morality than limiting ourselves to natural needs—and on the hunt there does not seem to be.

But Tolstoy does not simply affirm the animal, egoistic side of human nature. In his scenario, Levin is not held back only by “something solid, direct, and real,” or not entirely by this. Levin justifies his life as a landowner because “I don’t have the right to give it up … I have an obligation to the land and to my family.” At the elections Levin runs into the conservative landowner whom he’d met at Sviiazhsky’s, and Levin explains his life this way: “[S]o we live without calculation, and we live as if we, like the ancient Vestal Virgins, have been appointed to guard some kind of flame.” Levin dedicates himself to the family, which in Anna Karenina is the concept that holds Russian society together.56

For his part, Dostoevsky would have recognized Stiva Oblonsky as a relative of his own man of “good heart” from his 1847 Petersburg Chronicle.57

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56 Part 6, chapter 24.

57 It may be that the “family idea” owes something to Strakhov’s discussion of the family in The World as a Whole. In it, Strakhov writes of two forces at work in human life. One is mechanical, and maintains life; while the other is organic and fuels its development. The major moments of this organic development are birth and death, neither of which, according to Strakhov, we can explain scientifically. As regards “phenomena of development,” “here everything is incomprehensible, everything is
All sincerity, this character acts from impulse alone, and often hurts others as a result. Dostoevsky cannot forgive Stiva his lack of social responsibility. A truly good man must grapple with selfish impulses either before or after the fact rather than simply giving into each of them in turn. Tolstoy presents Stiva somewhat more favorably, as representative of the naturally contradictory, naturally selfish man who likes others but will not sacrifice his pleasures for them. At the restaurant, Stiva, appropriately enough, declares his love of pure pleasure in verse.

Himmlisch ist's, wenn ich bezwungen
Meine irdische Begier;
Aber doch wenn's nicht gelungen,
Hatt' ich auch recht hübsch Plaisir!

Stiva is not a brute, but he is an animal to the extent that he does not use his mind and conscience properly. In Anna Karenina, Tolstoy still hopes to reconcile our animal and our spiritual natures. Stiva, with his understanding of others and himself, has something to teach Levin about his own lack of consistency, and to this extent at least he is Tolstoy's spokesman.

Dostoevsky condemns Stiva not because he is selfish, but because he is proud of that fact. When, in 1875, Dostoevsky calls the Underground Man his greatest creation, he says that he does so because the Underground Man wants to be good but cannot. He is all struggle, as Tolstoy (who never met Dostoevsky and therefore knew him only through his prose) claimed Dostoevsky himself to have been. When he said this in a letter to Strakhov after Dostoevsky's death, however, Tolstoy himself had already moved, in Anna Karenina, in a Dostoevskian direction. Levin does not discover how to be good at the end of the novel; rather he discovers that under the right circumstances the principle of goodness will be present in his life without ruling it absolutely. Dostoevsky certainly recognized the kinship of this idea to his own thought, and in his Writer's Diary he praises Tolstoy as a master of psychological realism precisely because he portrays Levin as caught between selfish and unselfish impulses. At the same time, he appeals directly to his readers to dedicate their own lives to the creation of an ideal society, a "Kingdom of Heaven" which, he insists, is not an impossible dream.58

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As I have said, Stiva reminds us of Pierre Bezukhov, but his incorrigible self-satisfaction is not combined, as in Pierre, with a need for goals. In War and Peace Pierre can be happy and good because there the relation of opposites is itself seen as having a mysterious moral content, and the yoking (soprisyanie) of these opposites that comes to Pierre in a dream reassures him that life itself has sacred status. In Anna Karenina Stiva rather than Pierre defends the dialectical nature of life now uncoupled from morality. Stiva’s defense rests, not on the moral and philosophical, but on the pleasant and aesthetic. The wholeness, tsel’nost’, that Levin craves becomes a goal, a tsel’, that he seeks but rarely achieves. The dialectic of life in which Levin mostly flounders has no moral content in and of itself, although sensitivity to stimuli and openness to change is necessary for morality. Levin must supply the “goal” that makes the dialectic a moral one. Like Pierre Bezukhov and Andrei, the two male heroes of War and Peace, Levin goes through a series of crises. His quest for perfection, however, does not lead to death the way it did for Andrei in the earlier novel; and neither can he simply accept, as Pierre did, the humanly inexplicable pairing of life and death in nature. If Pierre can accept this “yoking” the way simple soldiers do, he will be acknowledging the sacred status of life itself. Levin, like Dostoevsky’s heroes, is more of a rebel against Providence. His moment of reconciliation with his situation comes when he finds within himself a principle that allows him to transcend the flux of nature and order it in a comprehensible way. This whole paradigm is indeed less pantheistic and more Dostoevskian, and there is no place in it for Pierre, in whom self-satisfaction and love of others can occasionally be so harmoniously joined.

Although he condemned “The Content of Life” in The World as a Whole, the chapter helped Tolstoy formulate his own attitude toward the subject in Anna Karenina. He would have hated the idea that the essence of man is “indefinability,” but, like Dostoevsky, he would have seen the necessity of this in establishing the possibility of moral freedom. Like Dostoevsky, he would have focused more than did Strakhov on the need for and nature of the goal for which man strives. This is why, in his letter to Strakhov about The World as a Whole, he praises him for posing questions, but says that many of them “are not resolved” and that the book suffers from a certain frivolity of tone. In his reply to Tolstoy’s letter, Strakhov admits these faults, attributing them to a lack of religiosity, but significantly does not retract an explanation of man that so impressed Tolstoy with its “depth and clarity.” A decade apart, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky both benefited from this explanation and took issue with it in great works of literature.