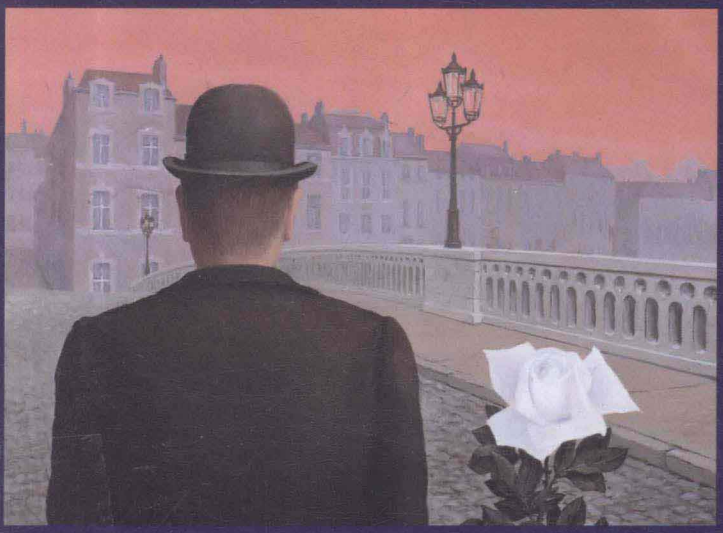
FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY



THE ETERNAL HUSBAND
AND OTHER STORIES

TRANSLATED BY
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WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY RICHARD PEVEAR

THE ETERNAL HUSBAND

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Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky

His life was as dark and dramatic as the great novels he wrote. He was born in Moscow in 1821, the son of a former army surgeon whose drunken brutality led his own serfs to murder him. A short first novel, *Poor Folk* (1846), brought him instant success, but his writing career was cut short by his arrest for alleged subversion against Tsar Nicholas I in 1849. In prison he was given the "silent treatment" for eight months (guards even wore velvet-soled boots) before he was led in front of a firing squad. Dressed in a death shroud, he faced an open grave and awaited his execution when, suddenly, an order arrived commuting his sentence. He then spent four years at hard labor in a Siberian prison, where he began to suffer from epilepsy, and he returned to St. Petersburg only a full ten years after he had left in chains.

His prison experiences coupled with his conversion to a profoundly religious philosophy formed the basis for his great novels. But his fortunate marriage to Anna Snitkina, despite a period of utter destitution brought about by his compulsive gambling, gave Dostoevsky the emotional stability to complete *Crime and Punishment* (1866), *The Idiot* (1868–69), *Demons* (1871–72), and *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879–80). When Dostoevsky died in 1881, he left a legacy of masterworks that influenced the great thinkers and writers of the Western world and immortalized him as a giant among writers of world literature.

PREFACE

> It is the road of every Christian man, who starts from the senses, who is endowed with reason as a dialectical principle which, in the drama of his earthly life, must make a decision between ever increasing participation and eternal defection.
>
> —Erich Auerbach,
> *Dante, Poet of the Secular World*

Dostoevsky's work represents a life-long meditation on the same few themes, motifs, and figures. The love triangle, for instance, with all its ambiguities of pride and humiliation, outward magnanimity, and inner rivalry, entered his work with his very first book, *Poor Folk*, finished in 1845, when he was twenty-four. Some ten years later, after passing through many of his early stories (*The Landlady, A Faint Heart, White Nights*), the motif entered the writer's own life in the form of his friendship with the Isaev family in Semipalatinsk and his later courtship of the widowed Marya Dmitrievna Isaev. Marya Dmitrievna eventually became his first wife, but before accepting his proposal she hesitated for a long time between Dostoevsky and a young schoolteacher by the name of Vergunov. Dostoevsky thus got to play two roles—the family friend who falls in love with the mistress of the house, and then the older rival of a handsome young suitor. The various moves of this elaborate game are detailed in the letters he wrote at the time, which read like pages from one of his own epistolary tales. So he found himself in situations he had already portrayed and would portray again and again in

his later novels, culminating in the three (or four) interlocking love triangles of *The Brothers Karamazov*. This close exchange between life and literature, with literature sometimes strangely anticipating life, is a Dostoevskian feature.

The figure of the "dreamer" also entered Dostoevsky's work with *Poor Folk*, took a central part in much of his early writing, both fiction and journalism, re-emerged quite changed in *Notes from Underground* (1864), and continued to appear in virtually all his later work. Mikhail Bakhtin notes in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics:* "Dostoevsky made very wide use of the artistic possibilities of the dream in almost all its variations and nuances. Indeed, in all of European literature there is no writer for whom dreams play such a large and crucial role as Dostoevsky." We must distinguish, however, between the dreamer and the dream, because dreaming takes two main forms in Dostoevsky. The first is the form of a reverie produced by the dreamer, who longs to transform the squalid reality around him into something nobler, loftier, more beautiful. The dreamer is a fervent idealist, a great reader of German romantic poetry, but his consciousness is isolated and he usually ends badly. Reality triumphs. Yet the dreamer's aspirations receive a backhanded vindication: aesthetically he is right; art and sensibility are exalted in his person above the meanness of the world. The bubble of this sort of romantic dreaming, which Dostoevsky himself indulged in as a young liberal of the 1840s, was definitively pricked in *Notes from Underground*. There the dreamer becomes a far more complex and contradictory figure; his tone changes from sentimental idealism to bitter sarcasm, much of the sarcasm directed against himself and his own former dreams: " . . . to tell long stories of how I defaulted on my life through moral corruption in a corner, through an insufficiency of milieu, through unaccustom to what is alive, and through vainglorious spite in the underground—is not interesting, by God; a novel needs a hero, and here there are

purposely collected all the features for an anti-hero . . ." Isolated consciousness has recognized its isolation. This recognition marked all of Dostoevsky's work after *Notes.*

The second form dreaming takes in Dostoevsky is that of an unexpected and intense vision, which comes to the dreamer in sleep as a gift or a final revelation, a "living image" that awakens him to a truth he had not suspected or had not understood before. Such are Alyosha's dream of the messianic banquet and Mitya's dream of "the wee one" in *The Brothers Karamazov.* These are confirming, saving dreams. They have a negative counterpart, ultimately serving the same purpose, in the nightmares of Raskolnikov and Svidrigailov in *Crime and Punishment,* of Stavrogin in *Demons,* and finally in Ivan Karamazov's "hallucination" of the devil.

With his second book, *The Double* (1846), another key motif of Dostoevsky's work appears. The story tells about the emergence of a "Mr. Golyadkin Jr." in the government office where the petty clerk Golyadkin serves, a parody and rival of himself who eventually drives him mad. Mr. Golyadkin Sr. is a proud man and keeps aloof from his fellow clerks; his double is the reverse. Golyadkin Sr. says of him: "He has such a playful, nasty character . . . He's such a scoundrel, such a fidget, a licker, a lickspittle," but then adds, "*such a Golyadkin.*" Here Dostoevsky first came upon the surprising truth that pride, far from unifying and fortifying the person, as we might think, is the source of all inner divisions. In *The Double* it literally splits Mr. Golyadkin in two. Dostoevsky did not repeat this bold artistic experiment, which in fact never satisfied him, but the motif of the double occurs in subtler forms throughout his work. It raises by implication the question of human unity, the oneness of the person and of mankind, which Dostoevsky explored all his life—politically in his involvement with revolutionary groups in the 1840s, spiritually in his subsequent religious meditations.

The phenomenon of the double in Dostoevsky's work is

not subject to purely psychological explanation. There is always a social nexus, an outer and collective world that is reflected in or impinges upon the inner, personal world. In *The Double* this nexus is the administrative bureaucracy introduced by the emperor Nicholas I, in which, as the critic Konstantin Mochulsky wrote, "the schema of human values was replaced by the table of ranks." Administrative unity is external and imposed; behind it there is a growing disintegration of human life. To dramatize this disunity, Dostoevsky often resorts to the device of the "scandalous feast" or "inappropriate gathering" (as one book of *The Brothers Karamazov* is entitled). So he does with the farewell party in *Notes from Underground*, the funeral dinner for Marmeladov in *Crime and Punishment*, and, more scandalous still, the gathering of all the main characters of *Demons* in Varvara Petrovna's drawing room. "Here," says Bakhtin, "everything is unexpected, out of place, incompatible and impermissible if judged by life's ordinary 'normal' course." Things usually hidden are brought to light, unspeakable words are spoken, people are exposed, denounced, humiliated; in tone and effect these scenes are somewhere between wild farce and hysteria. They are marked by a particular shamelessness.

Scandal scenes are loud and chaotic, but the true scandal, the "scandalous victim," is silent or inarticulate in Dostoevsky. Separation from "what is living" leads to violence against what is living, to a violation of the living, to violated innocence. Most often the victim is a child; in both *Crime and Punishment* and *Demons* it is a sexually abused little girl. Among all the thinkers, talkers, and writers who populate Dostoevsky's works, the child stands mute, unable to comprehend or protest. Certain women play a similar role—Sonya Marmeladov, for instance, and the half-mad Marya Lebyadkin. Through them the theme deepens until it touches, in Mochulsky's words, on "the eternal feminine principle of the world, the mystical soul of the earth."

Dostoevsky composed with these motifs and figures like a musician, playing variations on them, combining them in new ways, working them out in different keys and with different harmonies and tempos. In his novels they are formed into extremely complex structures. In his shorter works they appear in an uncombined state. That may be why some of the most penetrating commentaries on Dostoevsky—I am thinking particularly of Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* and two books by René Girard: *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* and *Dostoïevski, du double à l'unité*—give so much attention to the stories we have collected here.

Along with the consistency of its themes, Dostoevsky's work exhibits a constant formal inventiveness. This, too, can be seen in a pure state in his shorter pieces. Hailed by earlier critics (Vyacheslav Ivanov in his 1916 study *Freedom and the Tragic Life*, and Konstantin Mochulsky in his critical biography, among others) as the creator of the "novel-tragedy"—a concept fitting the high seriousness and dramatic form of his art—Dostoevsky has been called by Bakhtin the innovator of "a completely new type of artistic thinking, which we have provisionally called *polyphonic* . . . It could even be said that Dostoevsky created something like a new artistic model of the world, one in which many basic aspects of old artistic form were subjected to a radical restructuring." The stories in this collection support Bakhtin's findings in his discussion of the "characteristics of genre" in Dostoevsky—the presence in his work of elements of Menippean satire (the most well-known ancient examples are *The Golden Ass* of Apuleius and Petronius's *Satyricon*), of the allegorical mystery plays of the Middle Ages, of the Voltairean philosophical tale—all genres with a marked popular and comic spirit. This is not to say that Dostoevsky imitated old forms or combined them in some peculiar hybrid; his work is artistically of a piece and unmistakably his own; but the formal demands imposed on him by his vision forced him to expand the limits of nineteenth-

century realism. (Commenting on the scandalous drawing-room scene in *Demons*, Bakhtin notes: "It is absolutely impossible to imagine such a scene in, say, a novel by Leo Tolstoy or Turgenev. This is no grand drawing room, it is the public square with all the specific logic of carnivalized public-square life.") Dostoevsky's formal inventiveness came in part, then, from a listening to tradition. It was this that gave his work its historical depth and resonance. Behind these tales of the most ordinary, obscure lives, there are the broader features of the menippea—the free use of the fantastic, the polemicizing with conflicting ideas, and, above all, the testing of truths in extreme situations. Yet we also hear, suddenly, the tones of high tragedy. *The Meek One* reaches, in the end, the harrowing grief of Lear's last scene with the dead Cordelia (the story has, in fact, not a little in common with *King Lear*). At the same time, precisely in this story we also have one of Dostoevsky's boldest experiments in fictional form, what may be the first appearance in literature of the "stream of consciousness"—a point the writer himself comments on in his opening note. Most of Dostoevsky's writings contain direct or hidden comments on their own "poetics." There are no outpourings of psychic magma here, but the explorations of a highly conscious artist. Like each of his novels, each of these stories is formally unique, each is a fresh response to the expressive challenge posed by the thematic materials of his art.

The development of Dostoevsky's work was by no means the smooth, orderly unfolding of a successful writer's career. Here the biographical factor, to which I have already alluded, comes to the fore again. The turbulence of Dostoevsky's life is well known: his involvement in revolutionary politics during the late 1840s, his arrest together with other members of the Petrashevsky circle in 1849, his mock execution, stayed at the last minute on orders from the emperor, his four years at hard labor in the prison of Omsk, followed by six years of service "in the ranks" in

Semipalatinsk, his return to Petersburg and literary activity in 1859, the painful difficulties that ensued (deaths in the family, the failures of two magazines he edited with his brother, the accumulation of debts, the beginning of his addiction to gambling), his flight abroad in 1866 to escape his creditors, the precarious and nomadic existence he led there with his second wife, gambling away everything including her wedding ring and writing all the while (*The Idiot*, *The Eternal Husband*, the first drafts of *Demons*), his return to Russia in 1871, to find relative peace and eventual fame, which was at its height when he died in 1881 at the age of sixty. Yet the decisive break in this much-disrupted life is not to be found in any of these external events, not even the break in his career caused by ten years of prison and exile. Dostoevsky went on writing in more or less the same way after those ten years as before. The decisive break occurred in his "spiritual biography" some five years after his return, with the sudden discovery of what he called the "underground."

The emergence of the underground is the turning point in Dostoevsky's work. What he wrote before *Notes from Underground* was talented, certainly. What he wrote after was far more than talented. The shift in tone that signals the emergence of the underground indicates a deeper shift, an inner displacement, a peripeteia. As René Girard explains it, the love triangles and dreamers of Dostoevsky's early work *reflect* a certain state of affairs (not peculiar to Dostoevsky); with the underground, the reality behind that state of affairs is *revealed* for the first time. Error gives form to the truth that corrects it. The underground appears doubly in *Notes*, through the nameless hero as he tells his story, and through the author as he portrays this "man from underground." Despite the markedly personal tone of the writing, the two are not the same. The narrator is *in* the underground, Dostoevsky is some way out of it.

The underground brings out the rivalry hidden behind

romantic sentiments and ideals, the exchanges of pride and humiliation that govern the relations between people and even within the singular person, who turns out to be multiple. Spiritual pride, the separation from one's fellow creatures, the will to autonomy, *produces* the rival, and thus brings about its own humiliation. The scale of this imitative rivalry is a richly chromatic one, running through all degrees of envy, jealousy, and duplicity, conscious and unconscious. But the question, finally, is of the place of imitation in human life. Here matters of art and education come together with the highest spiritual endeavor, because the ideal offered to the Christian is also a way of imitation—the *imitatio Christi*, the "imitation of Christ." The sheer original does not exist; we cannot escape imitation. René Girard observes: "In the universe structured by the Gospel revelation, individual existence remains essentially imitative, even, and perhaps above all, when it rejects with horror any thought of imitation. The Fathers of the Church held as evident a truth that later became obscured and that the novelist wins back step by step through the terrible consequences of that obscuring" (*Dostoïevski, du double à l'unité*). The way of imitation revealed by the Gospels may be denied, rejected, but the structure remains, only turned another way. The original model is exchanged for another. Girard's term for this exchange is "deviated transcendence." The most extreme example in Dostoevsky is furnished by Kirillov in *Demons*, whose suicide for the salvation of mankind is a parody rather than an imitation of Christ, betraying the demonic wrenching of the deviation. Dostoevsky did not expound this as a whole and ready-made truth in his work; he came to it precisely step by step on his way through the underground.

The present collection represents, in miniature, the inner development of Dostoevsky's later work. The stories here, with one exception, were written after *Notes from Underground*. And even that one exception, *A Nasty*

Anecdote, written in 1862, may be described as verging on the underground. It is one of the broadest satires in Dostoevsky, and the most farcical of his scandalous feasts. The target of the satire is the spirit of reform that spread through Russia in the early years of the reign of the "tsar-liberator" Alexander II, who came to the throne in 1855. More specifically, the target is the "festival of reconciliation" that Dostoevsky himself had looked forward to even quite recently in his journalism. Here, when the wealthy liberal official Pralinsky, whose name in English as in Russian suggests the sweetness of praline, appears uninvited at the wedding party of his subordinate Pseldonymov, the "festival" actually takes place, with disastrous consequences. What erupts into Pralinsky-Dostoevsky's dream of all people "embracing morally" is a world that Pralinsky has never known but that Dostoevsky knew quite well—the world of wretchedly poor clerks and young nihilists, the underside of the bureaucracy of which Pralinsky and his fellow generals are the top, and along with that the world of carnival humor. Pralinsky wants to "embrace morally" while keeping his distance ("I'll delicately give a reminder that they and I are—different, sirs. Earth and sky"). He finds himself, however, in a very physical predicament: his first act is to step into a cooling galantine, and he ends with his face in the blancmange. No distances are respected; all distinctions break down. This is not the sort of union Pralinsky dreamed of. He gets drunk, and his great word, meant to bring all people together, the word "humaneness," comes out as "hu-humaneness." Instead of proving himself a statesman, he makes himself the subject of a "nasty anecdote." The structure of the story is particularly effective: by postponing his account of Pseldonymov's life until the end, Dostoevsky leaves us with two monumental portraits, absolutely irreconcilable, standing side by side.

These portraits are still single, anecdotal figures. Their opposition is mainly social and external. In the under-

ground, the divisions become internal and rivalry acquires a metaphysical dimension. This is shown clearly in *The Eternal Husband*, written in 1870. Dostoevsky said at the time, in a letter to his friend and editor N. Strakhov: "I thought of writing this story four years ago, the year of my brother's death, in response to the words of Apollon Grigoriev, who praised my *Notes from Underground* and said to me then: 'That is how you should write.' But this is not *Notes from Underground*, it is quite different in form, though the essence is the same, my usual essence, if only you, Nikolai Nikolaevich, will acknowledge that, as a writer, I have some particular essence of my own." The more spectacular ideological elements of Dostoevsky's work, such as the polemical monologue of the man from underground or the "poem" of the Grand Inquisitor, which have drawn so much commentary from critics and philosophers, are entirely absent from *The Eternal Husband*. They are not of the essence, then. What is of the essence, of his "usual essence," is the mechanism of metaphysical rivalry and deviated transcendence, which is portrayed here in its purest form, as a kind of duel, almost a prizefight, its rounds signaled by the ringing of bells.

There is a certain way in which the double makes his appearance in Dostoevsky's work. Raskolnikov, in acute anguish at the end of the third part of *Crime and Punishment*, dreams that he is murdering the old woman again, but this time she does not die but instead laughs wildly at him. Terrified, he attempts to cry out and wakes up:

> He drew a deep breath—yet, strangely, it was as if the dream were still going on: his door was wide open, and a man completely unknown to him was standing on the threshold, studying him intently.
>
> Raskolnikov had not yet managed to open his eyes fully, and he instantly closed them again. He lay on his back without stirring. "Is this the dream still going

on, or not?" he thought, and again imperceptibly parted his eyelashes a little: the stranger was standing in the same place and was still peering at him! . . . Finally it became unbearable: Raskolnikov raised himself all at once and sat up on the sofa.

"Speak, then. What do you want?"

"Ah, I just knew you were not asleep, but only pretending," the unknown man answered strangely, with a quiet laugh. "Allow me to introduce myself: Arkady Ivanovich Svidrigailov. . . ."

Similarly, Ivan Karamazov finds himself in an inexplicable state of anguish as he approaches his father's house:

Above all this anguish was vexing and annoyed him by the fact that it had some sort of accidental, completely external appearance; this he felt. Somewhere some being or object was standing and sticking up, just as when something sometimes sticks up in front of one's eyes and one doesn't notice it for a long time, being busy or in heated conversation, and meanwhile one is clearly annoyed, almost suffering, and at last it dawns on one to remove the offending object, often quite trifling and ridiculous, something left in the wrong place, a handkerchief dropped on the floor, a book not put back in the bookcase, or whatever. At last, in a very bad and irritated state of mind, Ivan Fyodorovich reached his father's house, and suddenly, glancing at the gate from about fifty paces away, he at once realized what was tormenting and worrying him so.

On the bench by the gate, idly enjoying the cool of the evening, sat the lackey Smerdyakov, and Ivan Fyodorovich realized at the first sight of him that the lackey Smerdyakov was also sitting in his soul, and that it was precisely this man that his soul could not bear.

Or there is the moment a little later in the same novel when Alyosha, in great grief and temptation over the death and "disgrace" of the elder Zosima, meets the dubious novice Rakitin:

> . . . some vague but tormenting and evil impression from the recollection of the previous day's conversation with his brother Ivan now suddenly stirred again in his soul, demanding more and more to come to the surface. It was already quite dark when Rakitin, passing through the pine grove from the hermitage to the monastery, suddenly noticed Alyosha lying face down on the ground under a tree, motionless and as if asleep.

Rakitin seems suddenly to materialize from the evil impression in Alyosha's soul, evoked by the abrupt shift in point of view. So Smerdyakov "sticks up" in Ivan's soul, and so Svidrigailov emerges from Raskolnikov's dream and steps across his threshold. There is the same premonitory anguish, the same mingling of inner and outer reality, when Pavel Pavlovich, the "eternal husband," appears in the way and only then in the memory of the "eternal lover" Velchaninov. But here the confrontation is more elaborately and mysteriously delayed, being more exclusively the subject of the story.

Formally, *The Eternal Husband* is the most classically proportioned and perfectly constructed of Dostoevsky's works. There are no digressions, no subplots, no secondary characters, no personified narrator, no accompanying commentary or analysis. With an extreme economy of means, Dostoevsky is able to portray people acting in ways they themselves do not understand, so that we see both their acts and their own incomprehension, and glimpse through their partial explanations the puzzle of their true motives. The question of who knows what and how much remains open almost to the end of the story. But behind that *obvious* ques-

tion is a vanishing sequence of others. Narrative omniscience is limited to Velchaninov, a sort of underground Pralinsky (he twice uses the term "underground" himself, once referring to Pavel Pavlovich, the second time referring to himself as well). The "eternal husband" of the title remains more shadowy, impenetrable—buffoon, victim, avenger, rival, admirer, and even lover of the handsome younger man. Yet the final mystery lies in Velchaninov, who is unable to free himself from the mechanism of his own behavior, who is as automatic in his gallantry as Pavel Pavlovich is in his cuckoldry. He knows that some power contradicts him at the very center of his personality, and the knowledge humiliates him, but only at moments. Then he glides on his way. The death of "their daughter Liza" in the middle of the story is a loss the meaning of which is beyond the grasp of both protagonists. They seem to forget her almost at once, Pavel Pavlovich in his new courtship, Velchaninov in his own self-admiration. Sentimental complacency has seldom been so chillingly portrayed as in the scene of Velchaninov's visit to the cemetery:

> It was a clear evening, the sun was setting; round about, near the graves, lush green grass was growing; not far away amid the eglantines, a bee buzzed; the flowers and wreaths left on Liza's little grave by the children and Klavdia Petrovna after the burial still lay there, half their leaves blown off. Even some sort of hope, for the first time in a long while refreshed his heart. "What lightness!" he thought, feeling the silence of the cemetery and gazing at the clear, serene sky. A flood of some pure, untroubled faith in something filled his soul. "Liza sent it to me, it's she talking to me," came the thought.

This passage epitomizes the expressive concision of style in *The Eternal Husband.*