

**DOSTOIEVSKY, HIS LIFE
AND LITERARY ACTIVITY;
A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH**

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Dostoevsky, his life and literary activity; a biographical sketch by Evgenii Soloviev & C. J. Hogarth

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EVGENII SOLOVIEV & C. J. HOGARTH

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A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH BY
EVGENII SOLOVIEV

TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN BY
C. J. HOGARTH

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DOSTOIEVSKY

HIS LIFE AND LITERARY ACTIVITY

I

INTRODUCTION—Dostoievsky and the *littérateurs* of the forties—His peculiarities—The “literary proletariat”—Dostoievsky’s constant poverty and literary bondage—The influence of city life—His urban characters and subjects — Dostoievsky as psychopathologist and psychopath.

THE name of Thedor Mikhailovitch Dostoievsky is usually coupled with those of Tolstoy, Turgenev, and Goncharov, and in any case no one will deny his right to be placed in the front rank of the “Glorious Band” of the forties of the nineteenth century. But, should we compare Dostoievsky with his contemporaries from the point of view of locality, period, and intellectual force, as well as of

Dostoievsky

community with Gogol in the matter of "literary descent," we shall encounter great difficulties, and still more so when we pass to the spirit, significance, and form of our author's works. These Dostoievsky owed solely to his personality and the strange circumstances of his private life: beyond question they were peculiar to himself, and reflect, as in a mirror, his sharply defined individuality, morbidly psycho-pathological genius, and originality of thought and fancy—both of which stand apart from, and on a different level from, all else in Russian literature. In fact, few persons will be found to disagree with N. N. Strakhov when he says in a letter to Dostoievsky: "In composition, richness, and variety of ideas you are the leading writer in Russia. Even Tolstoy is, by comparison, monotonous. Moreover, no one could gainsay that your work is tinged with a vivid colouring peculiar to yourself." Wherein, then, does this universally remarked, yet universally intangible, individuality of Dostoievsky's life and literary activity lie? Perhaps a parallel or two

His Life and Literary Activity

will help us to return an answer to that question.

In the works of Goncharov and, still more, in those of Turgenev, the first thing which strikes one is the surprising finish of their form. Everything in them is perfectly polished, gilded, and lacquered; every word in them stands in its right place; every phrase in them is not only rounded off, but shaped to a nicety. Not an unnecessary or a redundant detail is present; not a single page displays the least failing or inequality of talent. Particularly is this the case with Turgenev, whose every character, no matter how brief be its appearance on the stage, has the guise of being chiselled of marble, and with a perfection which makes addition to or subtraction from it impossible. In short, the whole would seem to have been conceived and re-conceived, written and re-written, at least a score of times, and, only when that had been done, to have been given to the public at leisure, and in a full assurance that the work would prove a success, and that no preliminary solicitation of favour would be

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needed. Splendid such a manner of working, and fortunate the artist able so to work ! Yet material affluence and self-restraint are necessary for such results : and Dostoievsky possessed neither. During his career he wrote only two works unhastily, and not in a race with time, namely, " Poor Folk," his first novel, and " The Brothers Karamazov," his last. Every other work was the outcome equally of want and of the necessity of coping with want—they were composed during the period when, plunged to the ears in debt, he was sojourning in Siberia or abroad. Hence, with but few exceptions, his works lack the mark of either sustained effort or careful finish. Sometimes a hundred pages will give the reader an impression as of *papier mâché* : then suddenly the author's genius will triumph over his failing energy, and, even as a flash of lightning pierces the clouds and illumines a landscape with a wild, fantastic gleam, so will Dostoievsky's power appear in all its grandeur. Nevertheless we see heaped upon one another thousands of unnecessary details, scores of detached plots, frequent changes of