

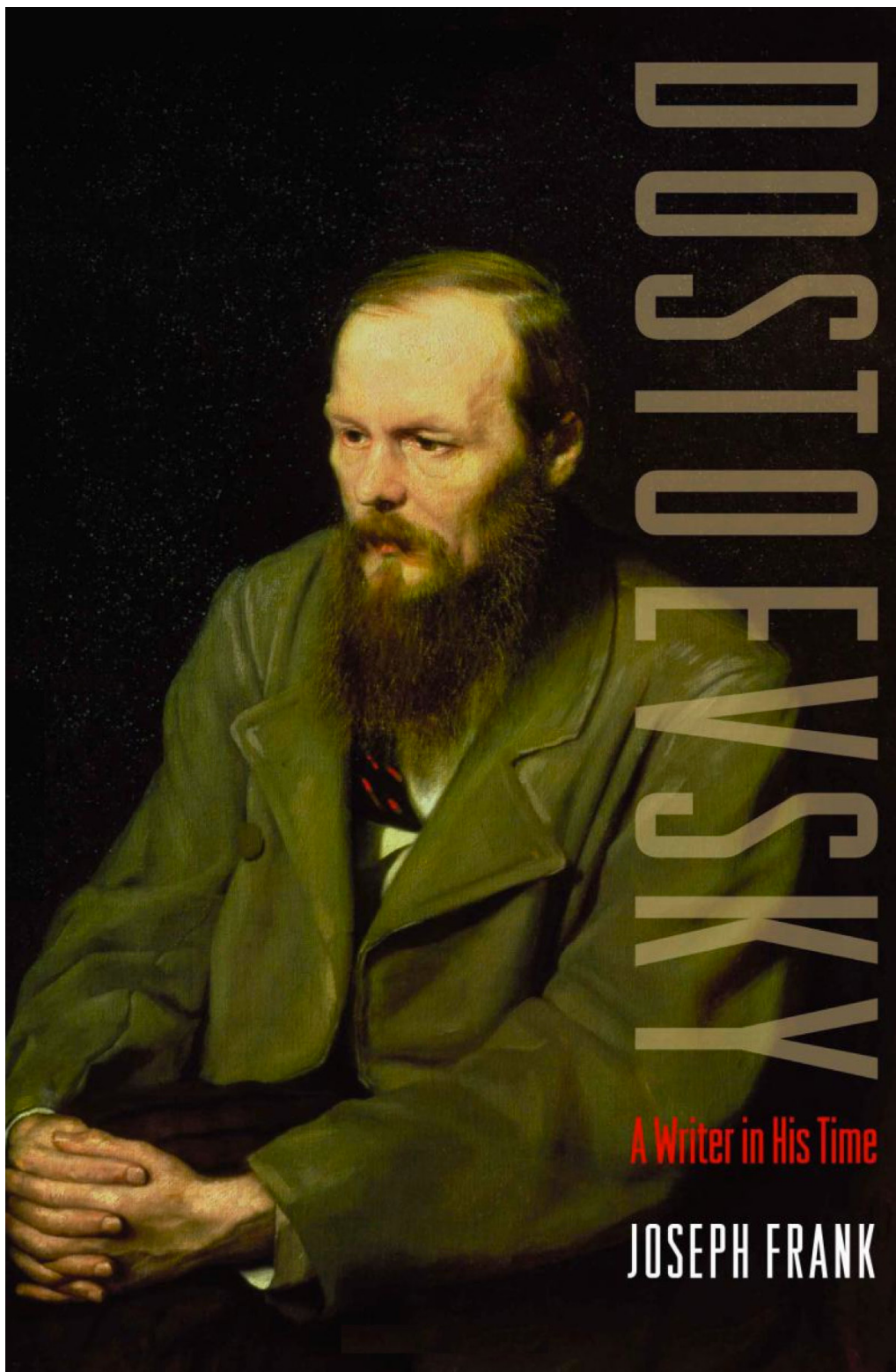
Dostoevsky: A Writer in His Time

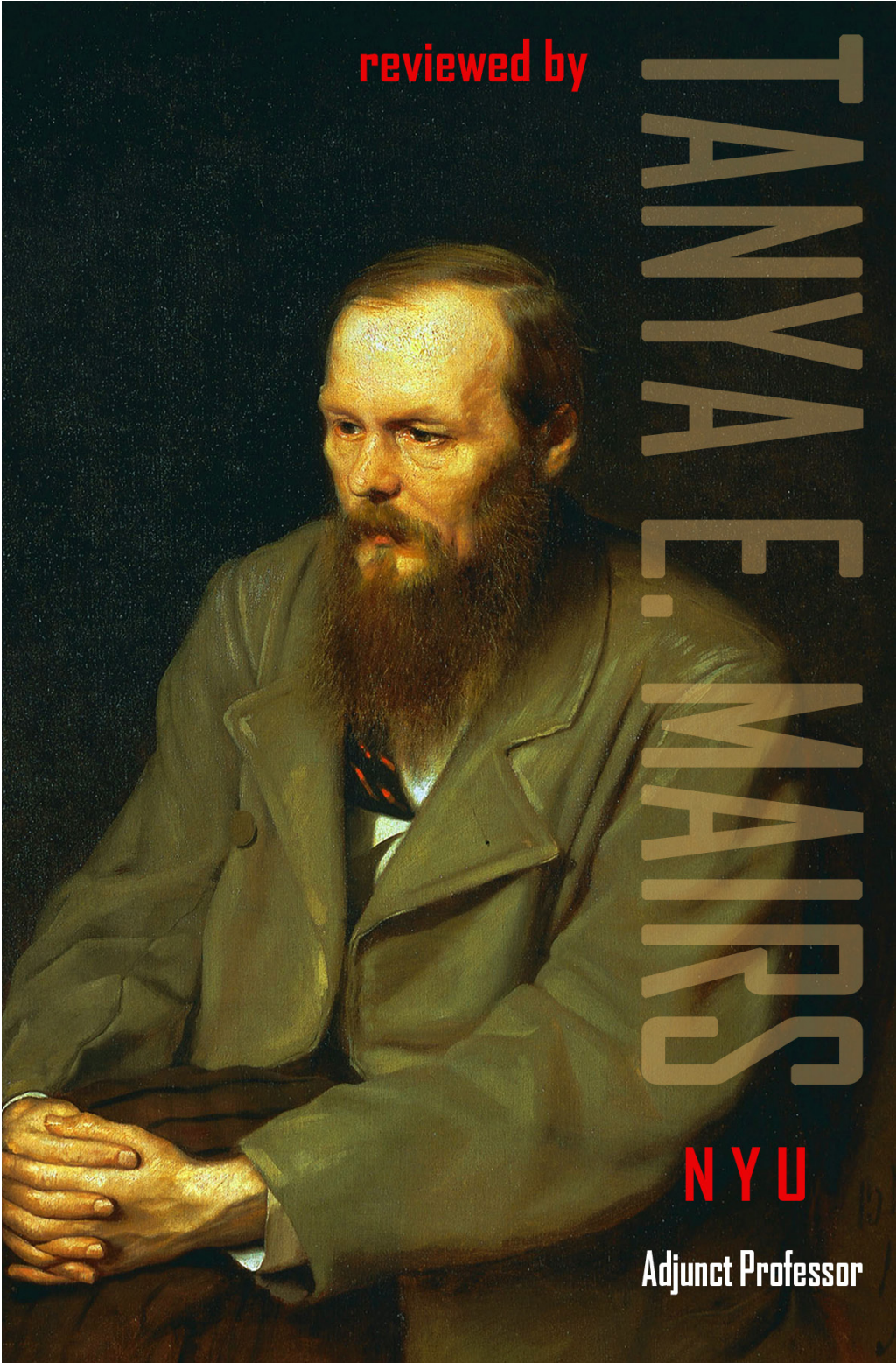
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On the future of aesthetics





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Joseph Frank's five-volume study of Dostoevsky, the definitive study of Dostoevsky in the English language and one of the finest works of scholarship in any language, has been condensed into one volume, *Dostoevsky: A Writer in His Time*. Joseph Frank's Dostoevsky study presents us not only with an illuminating expose of Dostoevsky's life, times, and works, but a new critical approach in the field of Russian literary criticism. This is an "ideological" approach, Frank working on the assumption that Dostoevsky's works cannot be fully understood without considering the intellectual and political history of the time. Critics of Russian literature had hitherto been influenced by the New Critics here and the formalists in the Soviet Union and Russia. The New Critics emphasized form over content. They focused on the inner dynamics of a work of literature and considered exterior factors as peripheral in analyzing a work. Joseph Frank departed from the New Critics to claim that the historical and ideological realities in Dostoevsky's works were not only not peripheral but were essential to understanding Dostoevsky's *oeuvre*. Frank was himself associated with the New Critics at the time of the publication of his book *The Widening Gyre*, but his "ideological" approach emerged when he began working on Dostoevsky. He combines his recounting of the political and intellectual movements of Dostoevsky's time with his analyses of how these movements influenced and were reflected in Dostoevsky's literary works. And he does so brilliantly. It is the meticulousness and insightfulness that Frank demonstrates in analyzing how the ideologies of Dostoevsky's time affected his works that make Frank such a great writer and critic. As Allen Tate wrote, "Joseph Frank has the disquieting gift of going to the heart of whatever matter he undertakes to expound."

The idea of reducing Frank's five-volume study of Dostoevsky to one volume came from Princeton University Press, according to Joseph Frank himself, modeled on Leon Adel reduction of his five-volume study of Henry James to one volume. And Frank's one volume reads seamlessly. The cuts made were primarily chapters that detail Dostoevsky's personal life rather than historical material, so that the impact of Frank's ideological approach is never lessened.

But Dostoevsky's own life is the chronological backdrop against which all else is set in this book. And Dostoevsky's life was as dramatic as that of any of his characters. Born in Moscow in 1821, he was the son of a doctor. His family

was very religious but also held education in very high regard. Dostoevsky attended the prestigious Chermak School in Moscow, and then he was sent to the Academy of Military Engineers in St. Petersburg. Upon graduating in 1843, however, Dostoevsky decided to become a writer. And two early masterpieces were *Poor Folk* (1845) and *The Double* (1846).

Frank details how Dostoevsky became part of the St. Petersburg intelligentsia in the 1840s, which organized itself into “circles.” The 1840s was a volatile time in Russia, with the repressive regime of Czar Nicholas 1 on the one hand, and the young writers and intellectuals who were influenced by Romantic Idealism and Socialist utopias on the other. Dostoevsky first frequented the Belinsky circle, Vissarion Belinsky being the major literary critic in Russia in the 1840s, as well as a Feuerbachian socialist. Dostoevsky then switched to the Petrashevsky circle, Petrashevsky being a Fourierist.

Frank chronicles Dostoevsky’s involvement with the Petrashevsky circle, which would send Dostoevsky to prison, but also details Dostoevsky’s involvement with Speshnev, whom Frank calls a revolutionary, and Dostoevsky a revolutionary by association as well. At a meeting of the Petrashevsky circle in April of 1849, Dostoevsky read aloud Belinsky’s letter to Gogol in which Belinsky criticizes tsarism, serfdom, and the Russian Orthodox Church. He was arrested and sent to prison for four years. Frank gives a gripping account of Dostoevsky’s years in prison. He calls prison Dostoevsky’s “conversion experience,” wherein Dostoevsky entered prison a radical, underwent a religious reawakening in prison, and then emerged with a rejection of his former radical beliefs and with a renewed faith in the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian people, as well as a devotion to the new Czar, Alexander II. To radicalize Dostoevsky in the 1840s and call him a radical or revolutionary is the tendency of Western critics. Russian and Soviet tend not to go that far. They take the position that Dostoevsky called for the end of serfdom and for judicial reform but never advocated the overthrow of the tsarist regime or social reorganization.

Frank discusses Dostoevsky’s release from prison in 1853 and his years in exile before his return to St. Petersburg in 1859 (during his exile Dostoevsky married Marya Isaeva). He then gives an extensive account of the development of the radical movement in Russia in the 1860s and 1870s and how it influenced Dostoevsky’s writing. Dostoevsky’s opposition to the beliefs and actions of the radical movements would become central to some of his greatest works—*Notes from Underground*, *Crime and Punishment*, and *The Possessed*. Dostoevsky’s focus in all three is his polemics challenging the ideas propagated by the radicals—Chernyshevsky in *Notes from Underground*, Pisarev in *Crime and Punishment*, and Nechaev in *The Possessed*, through the words and actions of his characters. All of the radicals of the 1860s and 1870s advocated the overthrow of the tsarist regime and

believed in socialism as the basis for the new reorganization. Dostoevsky dramatized in his works what he believed to be the evil implications inherent in socialist and radical thought.

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky's last and, according to Frank, greatest novel, Dostoevsky presents most directly and articulately his alternative to the beliefs of the radicals of the 1860s and 1870s. Dostoevsky believed that faith in God and Christ, as practiced by the Russian Orthodox Church, would morally elevate and strengthen the individual and in turn society as a whole. He emphasized the necessity of faith, love, self-sacrifice, and suffering in opposition to the utilitarian and socialist bases of radical thought. For Dostoevsky, progress could be achieved only through the betterment of the individual by way of religion, not through reform or political and social reorganization.

Dostoevsky's greatness has been attributed to different things by different critics. Dostoevsky has often been called a "novelist of ideas," and Joseph Frank falls into that category of critics. For Frank, it was the way Dostoevsky dramatized the ideological debates of the time that made him such a great writer. To quote Frank, "[Dostoevsky's] unrivaled genius as an ideological writer was his capacity to invent actions and situations in which ideas dominate behavior without the latter becoming allegorical. He possessed what I call 'an eschatological imagination,' one that could envision putting ideas into action and then following them out to their ultimate consequences."

Frank details two of the most dramatic events of Dostoevsky's life—his epilepsy and his gambling. Dostoevsky experienced his first epileptic seizures while in prison. His seizures were severe and continued throughout his adult life. Two of his major characters are afflicted with epilepsy—Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot* and Smerdyakov in *The Brothers Karamazov*.

The other very dramatic episode in Dostoevsky's life was his gambling. He began gambling in 1863 during his trips to Europe (gambling was illegal in Russia) in his pursuit of Apollonaria Suslova, with whom he was romantically involved. His gambling continued when he lived in Europe in 1867-1871 with his second wife (his first wife died in 1864, and in 1866 he married Anna Grigorieva Snitkina). Gambling is clearly the focus of Dostoevsky's novella, *The Gambler* (1865). Frank presents an excellent account of Dostoevsky's uncontrollable urge to gamble (he rarely left the roulette table until he lost everything he had). Frank describes this urge as "gambling mania," "uncontrollable excitement," "irresistible obsession," while Dostoevsky called himself "stupidly weak." Whatever the reason, Dostoevsky's gambling was one of the most dramatic episodes of his life.

There are two personal qualities to which Frank connects Dostoevsky's greatness. One was Dostoevsky's belief in his own excellence as a writer

and his unwillingness to compromise the quality of his writing for the sake of expediency. And the other was his resilience. Dostoevsky took four years of prison not as a debilitating experience but as a new beginning. And his claim to having “the vitality of a cat” describes his resilience after the deaths in one year (1864) of his first wife Marya and his beloved older brother Mikhail, one of the most difficult and traumatic periods of Dostoevsky’s life.

Joseph Frank’s limitless admiration for Dostoevsky the man and Dostoevsky the writer is evident throughout this volume. And Frank’s putting Dostoevsky’s works within the context of the writer’s own life and the political and intellectual movements of that time makes reading *Dostoevsky: A Writer in His Time* all the more compelling and reveals Frank’s own genius.