

LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR:

My book *Dostoevsky and the Healing Art* was recently reviewed by Louis Breger (*Slavic Review* 45 [Winter 1986]: 735–737). While I appreciate his kind remarks, there are a few points on which I would like to comment. Referring briefly to my chapter on medical literature of Dostoevskii's time, your reviewer states, "While it is no doubt true that Dostoevskii was familiar with this material, it is also true that there is precious little in it of any value. Probably the most important thing that this reading taught him was to avoid these doctors and their treatments, which were either useless or harmful." From this one might mistakenly conclude that my sources deal only with outmoded therapies, or that medicine held no interest for Dostoevskii except the hope of a cure, or that there were no significant advances in the understanding of epilepsy during his lifetime. In fact those decades witnessed major developments in the description of psychiatric symptoms often linked with epilepsy (as in Dostoevskii's case), and the first applications of forensic medicine to criminal cases involving epilepsy. Somewhat less than half of my long chapter on the "morbus sacer" surveys these two areas of progress, and the rest of the chapter is devoted mainly not to therapy but to various contending theories and popular beliefs. These topics are listed in my table of contents as follows: classics of psychiatry and neuropathology; body, mind, and psyche; psychopathology and social history; epileptic behavior and personality; epilepsy and Russian jurisprudence. Dostoevskii was of course vitally interested in all of these issues, both as a victim of epilepsy and as a creative writer. I have no illusion that I have done full justice to the medical sources, but I believe their diverse importance for Dostoevskii has been adequately shown.

Breger, as an authority on psychoanalysis, finds my occasional conjectures in that direction to be "of a surprisingly old-fashioned psychoanalytic sort." I do not contest this apt and good-natured reproof, but the point deserves some amplification. Although psychoanalysis of texts lies beyond the scope of my book, readers might be interested to know that it does include an excursus on "Freud and His Russian Antecedents," reviewing a number of sources for his famous essay on Dostoevskii and conveying my sense of the master's motives and limitations in treating the Russian psyche. The problem of how to psychoanalyze Dostoevskii and his fiction today, when the materials are far richer and better organized, remains to be solved anew. An obvious point of departure for psychoanalysis is "The Peasant Marei," an ambivalently hedged confession, to which I return again and again in my book. These passages are noted in the index. The biographical and textological complexities of this cunningly fabricated narrative called for fuller treatment, which is presented in my article "The Peasant Marei: Some Residual Problems," soon to appear in *Russian Literature and Psychoanalysis* (edited by Daniel Rancour-Laferriere for John Benjamins).

Finally let me say that in writing the book I had no intention of offering a "narrow disease-as-cause explanation" for Dostoevskii's personality or his art and regret having given any such impression.

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