

On Dostoevsky’s Shoelaces and the Vicissitudes of Literary History

MICHAEL ANDREW NICHOLSON, *University College*
 michael.nicholson@univ.ox.ac.uk

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ABSTRACT

The article relates broadly to the English reception of Russian literature at the beginning of the twentieth century, and to the friendship between celebrated representatives of two generations of intermediaries and historians of Russian literature for the English, Maurice Baring and Dmitry Svyatopolk-Mirsky. More specifically it focuses on Baring’s recollection of an encounter in 1907 during which the young Mirsky allegedly expressed his passionate admiration for Dostoevsky and declared Tolstoy unworthy to untie Dostoevsky’s shoelaces. Baring’s own high regard for Dostoevsky had been manifest years before the Dostoevsky “craze” swept England in the teens of the century. Mirsky’s celebrity dates from the 1920s when, after Revolution and Civil War and aided by Baring, he lived in emigration in London, earning renown as author of arguably the finest history of Russian literature ever written for the English reader. However, Mirsky’s consistent opinion of Dostoevsky and his assessment of the relative eminence of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy in the writings of those years, far from cementing a bond with Baring, seem almost diametrically opposed to the latter’s recollection of their first encounter some 15 years before. Nevertheless, traces of the lost Dostoevskyphile youth of Mirsky offer tentative vindication of Baring’s version. At the same time, though alien to the works by which Mirsky is best known, the exalted tenor of the surviving piece of juvenilia points obliquely ahead. It is macabrely suggestive of the expression of Mirsky’s growing Marxist and Leninist certainty from the late 1920s on, and of the faith or vision that in the 1930s took him back to the Soviet Union and his death.

Keywords: Maurice Baring, Dmitry Svyatopolk-Mirsky, Fyodor Dostoevsky, English reception of Russian literature, Twentieth-century literary criticism.

In autumn 1907 there occurred a chance meeting between two men whose influence on the reception of Russian literature in England in the early twentieth century was to be immense. One of them, Maurice Baring, describes the occasion, which occurred during a tea-party held in the estate of Gievka, not far from Kharkov:

The village doctor, an ardent Tolstoyist [...] had been expressing his hero-worship in emphatic terms, when the son of my host, a boy at school, only seventeen years of age, yet familiar with the literature of seven languages, a writer, moreover, of both English and Russian verse, fired up and said: “In fifty years’ time we Russians shall blush with shame to think that we gave Tolstoy such fulsome admiration, when we had at that time a genius like Dostoevsky, the latchet of whose shoes Tolstoy is not worthy to unloose (Baring, 1910: 80-81)”.

This lavish praise on the part of the precocious Dostoevskyphile (to whom we shall return) could hardly have fallen on more receptive ears. Not that Baring was hostile towards Tolstoy, but for years his growing fascination with Russia and her language and literature had been attended by mounting despair over the neglect of Dostoevsky in literate English-speaking circles. In the 1880s Tolstoy had been principal literary beneficiary of the surge of interest in Russia provoked by the threat of Anglo-Russian hostilities in Central Asia, and his English reputation swiftly came to rival that of the agreeably moderate, aesthetically accessible Turgenev, whose reception, in Baring’s view, had swollen into an “exaggerated cult (Baring, 1910: 75)”. Meanwhile (incomprehensibly to Baring) Gogol’ and even Dostoevsky

languished largely inaccessible and unread.

The Honourable Maurice Baring, son of a Baron, had been born in 1874 into the family of Baring Brothers merchant-bankers, but he consistently eschewed the banking business. Educated at Eton and Cambridge, he went on to become a prolific novelist, poet, playwright and English man of letters, as well as a close friend of G.K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc. He also showed an early flair for languages, a passion for their literatures and, in his young adulthood, an insatiable curiosity about the language bearers themselves, the humbler the better. After the usual Latin, Greek, French, German and Italian, followed, less predictably, by Danish and Modern Greek, it would be the turn of Russian. Baring, it should be borne in mind, had been too young to respond to the first wave of British interest in Dostoevsky, and, by the time he reached adolescence in the 1890s, that interest was already fading. In 1901, during a short-lived diplomatic career, Baring accepted an invitation from his close friend, the remarkable Count Benckendorff, to visit the family estate at Sosnovka. That trip, the first of many, not only fired his enthusiasm for the Russian language, but also gave him his first inkling of the resurgent interest in Dostoevsky within Russia. Merezhkovsky's essay of 1901, pitting Dostoevsky, the *tainovidets dukkha*, against Tolstoy, the *tainovidets ploti*, was amplified by the huge uproar over Tolstoy's excommunication from the Orthodox Church. In Baring's eyes, Merezhkovsky praised Dostoevsky "with complete comprehension and with brilliance of thought and expression" (*Ibid*: 85). But back home in London, he could not even find copies of Dostoevsky's major novels beyond *Crime and Punishment*. The remainder were out of print or had never been translated into English in the first place. In his frustration Baring, already proficient at Russian, approached the publishers Heinemann of London in 1903 and offered to do the job for them. The publisher declined with an indulgent smile, telling him: "there would be no market for such books in England. Dostoevsky had not yet been discovered (Baring, 1987: 261)".

In 1907, when he recorded the shoe-latchet gibe with which this paper began, Baring already stood out from his fellow-countrymen by dint of his first-hand experience of Russia and the Russians, and even more for his ability to communicate with them in Russian. In particular, he had covered the Russian side of the Russo-Japanese War of 1905 as a journalist, often at decidedly close quarters, immediately followed by a year living and travelling in Russia itself. This had provided the basis for the first two of his four pre-war books on Russia, *With the Russians in Manchuria* (1905), *A Year in Russia* (1907), *The Russian People* (1911) and *The Mainsprings of Russia* (1914). Meanwhile, his influential *Landmarks in Russian Literature* (1910) and *Outline of Russian Literature* (1915) were already germinating and would help lay the ground for that extraordinary explosion of enthusiasm for Dostoevsky and all things Russian which swept Europe and the English-speaking world in the second decade of the century. Baring's enthusiasm for *Brothers Karamazov* contributed to the appearance of Constance Garnett's fêted rendering in 1912, followed in successive years by her translations of others of Dostoevsky's major novels, and in 1916 by Middleton Murray's vigorous advocacy of Dostoevsky as artist and thinker in his widely read *Dostoevsky: A Critical Study*.

As for Baring's anonymous young acquaintance, who put the "Tolstoyist" village doctor to rout, and whose mettle and literary acumen Baring so admired, this was the future Prince Dmitry Petrovich Svyatopolk-Mirsky. Under the name 'D. S. Mirsky', he would go on to earn enduring renown in the West in the 1920s as author of a two-part *History of*

Russian Literature (1926, 1927), in which erudition and a sense of historical coherence are worn lightly and interlaced with exhilarating vignettes and textual aperçus. It was the most remarkable and abidingly influential history of Russian literature written in the twentieth century in the English language, or, as Vladimir Nabokov would have it, in *any* language, including Russian (Smith, 200: 295).

The episode Baring describes might seem to offer a convenient and pleasing symbolic tableau — kindred spirits, representatives of consecutive generations of Russian literary intermediaries (actual and embryonic), united in this snapshot in their shared evangelizing admiration for Dostoevsky. At once, however, a significant complication arises, which calls for a brief comparison of Mirsky’s Dostoevsky with that of Baring.

Maurice Baring’s books emerged between the failed 1905 revolution and the effective risings of 1917, a period eminently hospitable in England to effusions over what one contemporary, Winifred Stephens, termed Russia’s “noble but sometimes unfathomable soul (Soboleva & Wrenn, 1917: 44)”. In this company, however, Baring figures not simply as another dewy-eyed English worshipper of the Russian soul, at least not without substantial qualification. His encounters with Russia did not merely confirm views pre-formed in the salons of Bloomsbury. Indeed, it was some time before he could come to terms with the monotonous “brown immensity”⁷⁴ of Russia, and his prejudices were tested in the brute reality of war and in innumerable encounters with Russians of all stations, which he eagerly sought out during his time among them. Tracing the ‘landmarks’ of Russian literature, he wrote in 1910:

I have tried to put myself into the skin of a Russian, and to look at the literature of Russia with his eyes, and then to explain to my fellow-countrymen as clearly as possible what I have seen. (Baring, 1910: xi)

More specifically, Baring’s efforts in his critical writing to convey to English readers the qualities of Russian verse, especially its tangible, matter-of-factness, may have been linguistically foredoomed, but still read as admirable in their tenacity and good sense.

Baring’s path to Dostoevsky was a bumpy one for purely practical reasons. After failing to move the hearts of obdurate publishers in 1903, he finally laid his hands on Russian editions of both *Brothers Karamazov* and *The Idiot* some two years later. By then he was in China as a war correspondent, sharing lodgings with the officers of a Russian cavalry brigade during the build-up to the Battle of Mukden in the Russo-Japanese War. As he devoured them, Baring recalls being uncertain about their qualities as literature, but stunned by the impact they made upon him: “these two books were a revelation (1987: 283)”. *The Idiot* he described to Vernon Lee in 1906 as “the most astonishing book I have ever read in my life (2007: 63)”. Soon afterwards the war caught up with Baring, and he found himself close to the action in battles culminating in one of the largest the world had yet seen. More than half a million men were locked in battle around Shenyang until, with Russian casualties running at one third of their combatants, Russian hopes of holding Manchuria ended. Baring (1987: 300-301) recalls one scene:

The men had been wounded by bullets and bayonets; they were torn, mangled, soaked in blood

⁷⁴ Baring, “Why does the burden of your mystery...” poem, cit. in Letley (1991: 81).

[...] The floor was in every case so densely packed with writhing bodies that one stumbled over them in the darkness. Some of the men were sick from pain; others had faces that had no human semblance at all.

But equally characteristic in the lines that follow is Baring's urge to make 'symbolic' sense of the carnage about him, to find if possible some enduring, even transcendent quality in the patient suffering of the Russian soldiers he was trying to help.

Horrible as the sight was, the piteousness of it was greater still. The men were touching in their thankfulness for any little attention, and noble in the manner they bore their sufferings [...] One seemed to have before one the symbol of the whole suffering of the human race: men like bewildered children, stricken by some unknown force for some unexplained reason, crying out and sobbing in their anguish, yet accepting and not railing against their destiny, and grateful for the slightest alleviation and help to them in their distress. (*Ibid.*: 301)

For all that Baring's russophilia was rooted in greater experience than that of many, and despite his wariness of unctuousness and sententiousness, there was a strong religious strand to his make-up. Indeed, he would later acknowledge that his attraction to Russia and Russian Orthodoxy had paved the way for his eventual conversion to Roman Catholicism. When Baring stands back to generalize about the essence and achievement of Russian literature, its "naturalness" and "love of reality" compete with sweeping notions of suffering, compassion and spiritual illumination. Svetlana Klimova (2012: 217) is surely right in setting Baring firmly in the tradition of de Vogüé, for whom "compassion glorified by the spirit of the Gospel" is the distinguishing feature of the spirit and literature of Russia. Mirsky, as we shall see, would make the same association in his appraisal of Baring. Thus, in the closing pages of Baring's *Outline of Russian Literature*, we read that Russia's literature, though comparatively recent, "seems to be spiritually the oldest". Herein may lie "the value of its contribution to the soul of mankind", which, in its turn, is an expression of "the grief and wisdom which comes from a great heart, a heart that is large enough to embrace the world and to drown all the sorrows therein with the immensity of its sympathy, its fraternity, its pity, its charity and its love (1915: 249-50)".

As for Dostoevsky, he "reveals the Russian soul by flashes of lightning, and lays bare its innermost secrets. But the watchwords of his works were faith, hope, and love, and the whole of Russia felt this (1911: 279)".

Baring will concede that Dostoevsky's work may be shapeless, his characters abnormal almost to the point of absurdity, yet "Dostoevsky is great because of the divine message he gives, not didactically, not by sermons, but by the goodness that emanates, like a precious balm, from the characters he creates (1915: 221-22)". And, as a final example, in the very year of his meeting with the Mirsky, Baring sums up, quoting Matthew Arnold:

A great writer should see "life steadily and see life whole". Dostoevsky does not see the whole of life steadily, like Tolstoy, for instance, but he sees the soul of man whole and perhaps he sees more deeply into it than any other writer has done (1907: 126) since the whole of humanity is suffering and groaning beneath the same burden of life, the people who in literature are the most important to mankind are not the most normal, but those who are made of the most complex machinery, and of the most receptive wax and are thus able to receive and to record the deepest and most varied impressions (*Ibid.*: 124)... if we mean by a great writer a man who has given to

mankind an inestimable boon, a priceless gift, a consolation, a help to life, which nothing can equal or replace, then Dostoevsky is a great writer and perhaps the greatest writer that has ever lived (Ibid.: 123).

Such — albeit in necessarily selective and abbreviated form — were the literary inclinations of the Baring who listened appreciatively as the young Mirsky defended Dostoevsky against the Tolstoyan acolyte in 1907. As for Mirsky’s own views of Dostoevsky at the time, we are denied any contemporary amplification or confirmation beyond this one scene in Baring’s rendition. Looking ahead almost twenty years to Mirsky’s *History of Russian Literature* (Mirsky, 1926, 1927), we find in its pages a startlingly different appraisal of Dostoevsky. Mirsky paints him as a complex figure of great and uneven talents. “Dostoevsky’s dialogue and personative monologue,” in particular, “are incomparable for his wonderful art of individualization (1927: 350)”. But discordant notes abound. While Dostoevsky’s early, Gogolian amalgam of grotesque and sentimentality still invokes intense sympathy, it adumbrates those “wrecking visions of pity that are such a lurid feature of the Dostoevsky of the major novels (228)”. All is not well with the spiritual side of Dostoevsky’s makeup: “His Christianity in particular is of a very doubtful kind” and “did not reach into the ultimate depths of his soul (354)”. It is, like all his solutions a contrivance of his “smaller self”, an attempt to shirk the irreducibility and insolubility of the tragedies he presents. And beyond Mirsky’s specific praise and reservations looms the double-edged judgement that:

Dostoyevsky is one of the most significant and ominous figures in the whole history of the human mind, one of its boldest and most disastrous adventures in the sphere of ultimate human quest (344, emphasis added).

He was the first and the greatest symptom of the spiritual decomposition of the Russian soul in its highest levels which preceded the final break-up of Imperial Russia. [...] the real Dostoyevsky is food that is easily assimilated only by a profoundly diseased spiritual organism. (357-88)

As for Tolstoy who, in Baring’s account, did not deserve to loosen Dostoevsky’s shoelaces, a single quotation from Mirsky’s *History* will suffice to indicate the mature Mirsky’s order of precedence:

The actuality, the influence, of Tolstoy may have its ebb and flow [...] but the star of Tolstoy will never be eclipsed by any other body. Humanly speaking, it is impossible to deny that he was the biggest man (not the best, nor perhaps even the greatest, but just morally the bulkiest) that trod the Russian soil within the last few lifetimes. (319-20)

Far from allowing any suggestion of the Dostoevskyan baton passing between Baring’s and Mirsky’s generations, Mirsky’s later pronouncements starkly pit those generations one against the other. De Vogüé’s study of the Russian novel may still figure in his bibliography as a “classic”, but by 1927 we find Mirsky already looking back with evident disdain at “numerous partisans among the older generation” to whom Dostoevsky is “the prophet of a new and supreme ‘universal harmony’, which is to transcend and pacify all the discords and tragedies of mankind (354)”. As for the new generation, “our organism has grown immune to his poisons, which we have assimilated and rejected (358)”. Baring’s place in this dichotomy is not hard to locate.

So great and consistent is the discrepancy between Mirsky’s mature views and the spirit

of Maurice Baring's reminiscence of that autumn afternoon at the Svyatolpolk-Mirskys' home, that one eminent commentator cautiously wonders whether Baring's ear for Russian might on this occasion have failed him (Smith, 2000: 33-34). As an added curiosity, Baring records a heated argument which took place in Manchuria two years *before* the meeting with Mirsky: a young Russian officer, passionately advancing Dostoevsky as the greatest writer ever and sensing in Baring an ally, had locked horns with another doctor, this one openly contemptuous of any such claims (Baring, 1927: 208-209). Or could Baring's misdating of his meeting with Mirsky in *Landmarks* be symptomatic? But this is mere musing, and can as easily be countered by circumstantial or anecdotal 'evidence' tugging in the opposite direction.

It is not clear what subsequent contact, if any, Mirsky had with Baring up to the time when he wrote to Baring in 1920 from Greece. In the pre-war years, Mirsky had studied sinology, classics and history at St Petersburg University, taken a commission in the Guards and participated keenly in the avant-garde literary life of the capital. From 1914 on he was caught up in war, revolution and civil war until the collapse of Denikin's forces left him stranded in Athens. There he had re-established contact with Baring in the hope of securing advice and perhaps assistance in establishing some kind of literary career in London. Referring to "your flattering though anonymous mention of my person in your *Landmarks* (Lavroukine, 1984: 27) ", Mirsky makes no suggestion that Baring's account might have been erroneous or distorted. We cannot entirely rule out tactfulness. After all, Mirsky found himself in decidedly straitened circumstances, and this would hardly have been the moment to proffer a correction, even if one were warranted. Be that as it may, Baring responded promptly and honourably to the appeal, expending money and influence in helping Mirsky establish himself in London literary circles, before he secured a lecturing post at London University's School of Slavonic and East European Studies. So by 1921 Mirsky was in London, a balding, bearded, somewhat ill-kept figure, but with an utterly daunting polyglot cultural grounding and superb, if occasionally inauthentic, English. And it is in that same 1921, perhaps a little eerily, that the cameo of Dostoevsky's shoe-latchet resurfaces in Baring's latest novel, *Passing By*. Written in diary form it includes, under Monday, March 8th, the passage:

Louise in tearing spirits and a new man there called Lavroff, a Russian philosopher; youngish and talking English better than any of us, except that he always said "I have been seeing So-and-so today," "I have been to the concert yesterday." [...] Lavroff, the Russian, is unkempt, with thick eyebrows and dark eyes. Tolstoy was mentioned at dinner. Mrs Shamier said he was her favourite novelist, upon which Lavroff became greatly excited and said the day would come when, the world would perceive and be ashamed of itself for perceiving that Tolstoy was not worthy to lick Dostoyevsky's boots.

Licking boots or loosening latches, the image remains much the same as fourteen years earlier. Intriguing as it may be, this snippet, of course, proves nothing about the accuracy of Baring's memory of 1907. There remains, however, one more piece of circumstantial evidence that works in Baring's favour.

Mirsky's writings at the time of the *History* include sympathy for things plebeian and democratic, and he shows a critical eye for vested self-interest masked as high-mindedness, but he seems a champion of good sense and scepticism, not only against sentimentality and

pretension, but against any visionary, mystical or ideological dogmatism. Even with hindsight it is difficult to fathom the rapidity with which in the late twenties and early thirties he would move towards an increasingly Bolshevik-tinged socio-historical approach to literature and an apparently genuine appreciation of Lenin. By 1932, he had followed in Gor’ky’s footsteps, returned to Stalin’s Russia, paying his dues in moderation by elegantly lambasting his former Western literary confrères (with the honourable exception of Baring), and thenceforth succumbing gradually to the increasingly murderous cultural-political machinations of the thirties. For Mirsky they had run their course by 1939, when he died in the hospital of a Gulag transit camp, leaving his former friends and allies in the West unaware of his fate.

The assiduous excavations of M. V. Efimov and others have recently unearthed two examples of Mirsky’s later writings on Dostoevsky, both published in Western journals in 1931, one in Italian and one in German. Mirsky is fiercely analytical and strays close to what we would think of as “vulgar sociology”. He will warn us when the mood is upon him that

the idealistic reaction of the late nineteenth century was less a reaction to any clarity and specificity in the bourgeoisie’s mounting sense of its own decay than it was an expression of indignation on the part of petty-bourgeois democracy against the soulless objectivity of capitalist culture’ (Mirsky 216b: 109).

However, clarity usually prevails over jargon, for example, in his socio-psychological approach to the English reception of Dostoevsky in the second decade of the century, and to the subsequent withering of *dostoevshchina*. It is pleasing, too, in the present context to note a relatively late passing nod to Baring’s books on Russian literature, “incidentally, the first works in English to evince a thorough familiarity with Russian literature (*Ibid.*: 111)”, even if Baring’s understanding of Dostoevsky through the prism of de Vogüé is now presented as anachronistic and “somewhat inedible” to his compatriots.

Looking more widely at the body of Mirsky’s later writing, G S Smith (38), echoed by Joseph Frank (2010: 252), sees, apart from self-imposed dogmatism, a craving for some higher ideal and a curious, almost eschatological intonation creeping in, even as Mirsky’s move towards Marxism accelerated. It is a tendency which seems light years from the utterly realistic, empirical, sober and incisive manner of Mirsky’s mature writings, notably in the *History*. It is not, however, quite without precedent in his writing. Mirsky in 1931 had thought it “symptomatic of the morbidly decadent character of the Russian bourgeoisie that they should have sought ideological justification in a system at once morbidly mystical and logically ambiguous. They feared the clear light of reason (Mirsky, 2016a: 371)”. But a quarter of a century earlier, in his first published work, he himself had written:

The time has passed when with constant trust we heeded the word of Reason The worship of Utility is gone by, and Art has ceased to consider itself the slave of Truth.... we have lost our faith, we are seeking the new, the insane and the false perhaps, we love our future with our passionate natures, with our hopeless and disenchanting Love... We shall go on believing, and through the power of our belief mountains will move, the sun will stand still, and the dead will rise from their graves... We, the younger generation, dedicate ourselves to this struggle, a struggle long and stubborn, but radiant and infinitely beautiful. And our happiness, our joy in Beauty will be the prototype of the great joy that will envelop the world when that longed-for morning breaks. (Smith, 2000: 37-38)

This effusion, well worthy of the epithets “messianic”, “transcendental”, “eschatological” was published anonymously in 1906 in a miscellany, *Zven'ya*, compiled by members of the literary circle to which the schoolboy Mirsky then belonged. It thus shows Mirsky in full rhetorical flow only a year before Baring was to arrive at Gievka and claim (no longer so implausibly) to have heard him extolling the merits of Dostoevsky.

If some saw in the older Mirsky's *perestroika samogo sebya* something depressingly akin to that callow “search for the new, the insane and the false”, Mirsky himself in his “Story of a Liberation” at the beginning of the 1930s, looks down at his precocious, gifted schoolboy self from the heights of his newfound certainty and confidently diagnoses his own ideological malaise:

My ‘reason’, in fact, tormented by the aesthetic and mystical ideology of post-1905, had accepted the axiom that the modern mind was incarnated in Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Bergson and tutti quanti, and that Marxism was a primitive doctrine that an informed intellectual could only look down on. (1987: 362, emphasis added)

Whether or not some gloomy return of the repressed hangs over the later life of D. S. Mirsky, the balance of plausibility does, at least, seem to tilt back in favour of Maurice Baring's delighted account of his meeting with a young Dostoevsky-enthusiast in Gievka in 1907.

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