

Edward Sapir on Russian Culture

<...>. I shall mention, only one, but that perhaps the most significant, aspect of Russian culture, as I see it—the tendency of the Russian to see and think of human beings not as representatives of types, not as creatures that appear eternally clothed in the garments of civilization, but as stark human beings existing primarily in and for themselves, only secondarily for the sake of civilization. Russian democracy has as its fundamental aim less the creation of democratic institutions than the effective liberation of personality itself.

The one thing that the Russian can take seriously is elemental humanity, and elemental humanity, in his view of the world, obtrudes itself at every step. He is therefore sublimely at home with himself and his neighbor and with God. Indeed, I have no doubt that the extremest of Russian atheists is on better speaking terms with God than are the devout of other lands, to whom God is always something of a mystery. For his environment, including in that term all the machinery of civilization, the Russian has generally not a little contempt. The subordination of the deeps of personality to an institution is not readily swallowed by him as a necessary price for the blessings of civilization.

We can follow out this sweeping humanity, this almost impertinent prodding of the real self that lies swathed in civilization, in numberless forms. In personal relations we may note the curious readiness of the Russian to ignore all the institutional barriers which separate man from man; on its weaker side, this involves at times a personal irresponsibility that harbors no insincerity.

The renunciation of Tolstoi was no isolated phenomenon, it was a symbol of the deep-seated Russian indifference to institutionalism, to the accreted values of civilization. In a spiritual sense, it is easy for the Russian to overthrow any embodiment of the spirit of institutionalism; his real loyalties are elsewhere. The Russian preoccupation with elemental humanity is naturally most in evidence in the realm of art, where self-expression has freest rein. In the pages of Tolstoi, Dostoyevski, Turgenev, Gorki, and Chekhov personality runs riot in its morbid moments of play with crime, in its depressions and apathies, in its generous enthusiasm and idealisms.

So many of the figures in Russian literature look out upon life with a puzzled and incredulous gaze. "This thing that you call civilization—is that all there is to life?" we hear them ask a hundred times. In music too the Russian spirit delights to unmask itself, to revel in the cries and gestures of man as man. It speaks to us out of the rugged accents of a Moussorgski as out of the well-nigh unendurable despair of a Tchaikovski. It is hard to think of the main current of Russian art as anywhere infected by the dry rot of formalism; we expect some human flash or cry to escape from behind the bars.



Demon Seated by Vrubel

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