

Maurice Baring's Understanding of Dostoyevsky and of the Prevaricating Press

[This article by Dr. Robert Hickson was posted on www.apropos.org.uk It was written on the Feast of St John the Baptist, 24th June 2013. Subheadings have been inserted by the editor of Apropos.]

Epigraphs:

*“During the war in South Africa [the Boer War], the Continental press [in Europe], not satisfied with dwelling on the blacker side, painted it blacker still. I resolved, therefore, when I went to the war [the 1904-1905 Russo-Japanese War], that if I wrote about it then or afterwards I would try and eschew the methods of the Hamburger Nachrichten, which seems to be incompatible with the manners and morals of what is called a civilised country. **It is not, however, so very easy for an impartial voice to obtain credence in the face of strong prejudices.**” (Maurice Baring, *With the Russians in Manchuria* (1905)—from the Preface, pp. xiii-xiv—my emphasis added)*

*“It [The Russian Middle Class] not only exists, but it is enormously important, since it calls itself the 'intelligentsia,' and does in fact number among its constituents nearly all of the 'intellectuals' of Russia and all that is most advanced in the world of science, literature, and philosophy. Dostoyevsky [d. 1881] belonged to this class; but perhaps its most characteristic and representative spokesman and portrayer is an author who died last year [in 1904], and whose death was mourned with sorrow by hundreds of Russians even in the wilds of Manchuria, namely Anton Tchekoff [Chekhov]. He is famous as a writer of short stories portraying the life of the middle classes in Russia with the same accuracy and insight with which Tolstoi depicted the upper classes and Gogol the officials of a past generation. Some of Tchekoff's most successful work was written for the stage [like Uncle Vania]; it has been acted with care and exquisite art; the result is that it has been triumphantly successful; and **it has given voice perhaps more than anything else during the last ten years to the feelings, aspirations, disappointments, the hopes, fears, and disbelieving of the Russian educated classes.** For that reason it [especially the entire collection of “Tchekoff's plays”] is important to anyone who is following Russian affairs at this moment [in 1905]....The class of events in them is subservient to the human figure, and the human figure itself is subservient to **the atmosphere** in which the figures are plunged....**His plays faithfully reflect,** with far greater fidelity and less exaggeration than is the case with Gorki, **the soul of the Russian people at the present day.**....His importance is, as I said before, **more than artistic; it is political—although politics are never directly mentioned in his plays.** Their importance lies in the fact that no influence can be more effectual than that of the stage, especially in troublous times [thus, also in the 1904-1905 Menshevik revolutionary time]. (Maurice Baring, *With the Russians in Manchuria* (1905), pp. 1-4—my emphasis added)*

“Tchekoff never mentions politics; **but what he leaves unsaid, what he suggests is far more potent and effectual** than any number of harangues or polemical discussion. **He shows the Russian soul crying out in the desert; he shows the hopelessness, the straining after impossible ideals, the people who have been longing for the dawn, and condemned to the twilight chiefly owing to their own weakness.** He shows **the difficulty** of solving questions **and the heart-sickness** of those who think about it. (Maurice Baring, *With the Russians in Manchuria* (1905), p. 5—my emphasis added)

“To the student of Russia, **Dostoyevsky’s books are valuable as a revelation of the Russian soul.** The phrase “reading history by flashes of lightning” occurs to one. **Dostoyevsky 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.** That is perhaps why, when Tolstoi died [in 1910], they felt they had lost a great man, one of their national glories, but when Dostoyevsky died [on 24 February 1881] they felt (from Tolstoi, who said so, to the man in the street) **that they had lost a friend and a brother.** A friend of mine who lives in St. Petersburg told me that when Tolstoi died he asked his cook (a woman) what was the opinion in the market about Tolstoi’s death. She said, ‘We think he ought to be buried like a dog.’ There was no such dispute over Dostoyevsky’s death; and **no Russian ever had a funeral attended by so many different classes of the population, linked by so deep a common sorrow.** That is why **Dostoyevsky is supremely important in the history of the Russian people.** He was the people’s friend and he loved what they loved. He expressed this love better than Tolstoi or Turgeniev, or than any other writer, since the death of Pushkin [in 1837].” (Maurice Baring, *The Russian People* (1911), p. 279. Baring’s book was fittingly dedicated to his beloved and magnanimous friend, “Gilbert K. Chesterton.”)

The Russia of transition

In 1927—some twenty-three years after the Menshevik Revolution and a decade after the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia—Maurice Baring published an anthology of his earlier writings, entitled *What I Saw in Russia*.¹ Lenin had died in 1924, and Stalin was on the verge of securing his own rule, which was largely consolidated by 1928. Therefore, Baring chose to report on those earlier things he had observed in Russia which had once seemed more enduringly illuminating and thus perhaps still of special interest to his fellow Englishmen in the changed circumstances of 1927.

Baring’s short Preface will help us to understand what he chose to include, revealing thereby also what he chose to exclude for various reasons, though largely unexplained. He is modest, as always:

This book is a hotch-potch. Three separate books went into the making of it: “With the Russians in Manchuria”: impressions of the Russo-Japanese War, 1904-1905 (reprinted with only a few omissions); “A Year in Russia” (the record of a momentous year in the political history of Russia, 1905-1906); and “Russian Essays and Studies”: impressions garnered during the following years [up until

¹ Maurice Baring, *What I Saw in Russia* (London: William Heinemann LTD, 1927), 386 pages of Text and no Index, with a short, one-page Preface written in 1927.

the summer of 1914, thus just before the outbreak of World War I]. *It has been my object to collect in one volume such records of things seen in Russia which might still be of interest to the English reader, and to string them on one thread. The Russia which is described (a Russia of transition) is now a thing of the past. Possibly it may not be less interesting on that account, for, as someone said, it is only out of the past that the future is made.*²

The omissions of which Baring speaks, which, in 1927, he somehow thought expedient or fitting to make from his 1905 book *With the Russians in Manchuria* are his final two Chapters XI and XII, and his six-page, framing Preface: Chapter XI was entitled “Notes on the Russian Army” (11 pages); and Chapter XII was entitled “General Impressions” (10 pages), and is still very much worthwhile to read carefully and consider, especially about the nature of modern war as he then grimly saw it.

The jottings of a bewildered civilian

Because Maurice Baring thoughtfully discusses the proper function of the Press and the fitting contribution of the honest War Correspondent, we shall first consider what he wrote freshly in 1905, before going on to consider his deeply appreciative understanding of Dostoyevsky and why he is cherished also by the Russian people, as well as by the larger world.

Baring captures our attentiveness and benevolence by his unassuming way, from the outset, with his modest introductory words:

*The following notes [in 11 Chapters and 205 pages!] will have no value for the military expert or the serious student of war. They are merely the jottings of the fleeting impressions of an ignorant and bewildered civilian who drifted for a little while like a piece of weed to and fro on the shifting eddies and currents of the great stream of war. More competent judges will explain the causes and effects, the true value and signification of the historic events, of which I was to a certain degree a spectator.*³

Modestly saying that he will at least “be satisfied if the play of life [amidst his travels and the war] is in any way caught and reproduced,” (ix) he then speaks of his conversation one day in September of 1904, as he rode “with an escort of Cossacks”: (ix)

*The man who rode beside me asked me if I was a doctor. I said I was a war correspondent. He remained pensive for a while, and he then explained to me the nature and first cause of war correspondents in the following terms: “War correspondents,” he said, “are people who are sent to see that neither side add anything.” He meant that war correspondents were there to check the military authorities, lest either side should invent a spurious exploit or an imaginary battle. This, I suppose, is the ultimate cause of war correspondents. It is **the reason why they are received, if not why they are sent**; because if this were not so, it is inconceivable that the military authorities would be bothered with them. (x—*italics in the original; my bold emphasis added*)*

² *Ibid.*, p. vii.

³ Maurice Baring, *With the Russians in Manchuria*, p. ix—the Preface. All further references to this Preface, and to the fuller 205-page text of this edition of the book, will be placed above in parentheses in the main body of this essay.

The presence of an impartial witness

Taking a longer view of the presence and missions of war correspondents in earlier wars, and the changed conditions which seemed then (in 1905) to obtain and alter the older mission, Maurice Baring tries to articulate the rationale for his own fitting mission in Asia, for his presence there still seems even somewhat desired, after all. Thus, he again draws us, *a fortiori*, to the even greater need for truthfulness and impartiality:

*Formerly **the main object** of the [war] correspondent was **to transmit news**. Owing to the conditions of modern warfare, the rapid circulation of news, and the institution of censorship, **this**, the correspondent's ostensible object, shines before him more like an Utopian dream than a concrete ambition which can be definitely realised. If, therefore, the military authorities are averse to the publication of news, **and at the same time encourage or tolerate** the presence of correspondents, I imagine the only reason of this can be that **they desire the presence of an impartial witness**. In the case of war such a thing **is** to be desired. A war between two modern nations can scarcely help being the subject of much **embittered** controversy. **This controversy is carried on more by invented and embellished fiction in the cities than by facts from the front.** (x-xi—my emphasis added)*

Grave concerns about the corruption of language

Aiding our deeper understanding of these matters, Baring speaks of his own maturing duties (in his late twenties) of translating some of the Continental German newspapers during the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902; and how and why he came to see many of the falsifying presentations coming out of Continental Germany, even though the Germans had good reason to oppose the British war policy in South Africa, right next door to their own Colony of German Southwest Africa (modern "Namibia"). Here is how, with his modest autobiographical references, Baring now illustrates his grave concerns about the corruption of language and the corruption of power, both denying one's **access** to reality and also thereby disallowing an undistorted **communication** of truth to another:

*During the South African War [1899-1902] it happened to be my duty to read daily [in German] the news and opinions of a venomous newspaper called the *Hamburger Nachrichten*, **which used to be the official organ of Prince Bismarck** [and the newspaper was later still coming out of the north German city of Hamburg, once one of those energetic commercial cities of the old Hanseatic League]. **This newspaper**, with an infinite capacity for taking pains—which in this case **certainly amounted to genius**—whenever the facts seemed to favour the British arms, **distorted them** [the facts] **until disgrace oozed out of them**; it, moreover, attacked the British **with all the weapons of envy, hatred, and malice, with cheap ridicule, snarling sarcasm and subtle misrepresentation.** (xi—my emphasis added)*

This reiterated and cumulative offensive not only shocked young Baring, but made him wonder why this was so: what were the real aims and purposes, and who was the main "target audience"? Indeed, he said:

*One wondered **whether** such stuff as this was to be **the only record of the***

war to be made for the consumption of the German public. This was not the case. In spite of the fact that the German press was unanimously hostile and bitter towards England **with regard to this question**, during the last year [1904] **the German official report of the war** has appeared translated into English by Colonel Walters, **in which the fancies of the German press are deprecated as baseless calumnies, and the facts are dispassionately revealed in their true shape.** (xi—my emphasis added)

And how does one account for this disparity, or at least for the bracing corrective? Baring then introduces us to the institution and personal presence of the Military Attaché:

*This [encouraging corrective or restitution] was owing to the presence during the war of **impartial witnesses, namely, the military attachés.** Such men, it may be objected, are sufficient for the task of seeing **that nothing be superadded to the facts.** No doubt; but it is not always possible that their reports can be given to the public; they are, to a certain degree fettered by various considerations [such as “secrecy”]; whereas the war correspondent at large—is free. (xi-xii—my emphasis added)*

The same in kind

Resolved as he was to specify and pass on to us some lessons to be learned even from this dubious Phenomenon of the *Hamburger Nachrichten*, Maurice Baring would also have liked my Special Forces Team Sergeant, I believe, and especially the words he used to say to me as a young officer in his inimitable manner: “Sir, no one is completely useless; you can always serve as a bad example.” Baring, too, will show us the utility of another bad example, despite his onerous and distasteful obligations:

*To go back to the *Hamburger Nachrichten*. When it was my misfortune **to be obliged** for professional reasons **to soil my mind by** reading **offensive arguments it expressed in a style unredeemed** by any saving merit, I used to wonder **whether**, in the event of a Continental power being engaged in a similar war, our press would adopt **such an ungenerous course of action.** **The occasion arose**; it found us the allies of Japan, and naturally inclined to regard their side of the question with favour and that of her enemies from a more critical standpoint. Moreover, the exploits of the Japanese soldiers excited here [in England], **as they did in the Russian army**, and in the rest of the world, an enthusiastic admiration that was justified and natural, **but if it be asked** whether our press—the press of a great nation, who had just come through a struggle with a small power, **in the conduct of which** there were episodes and incidents which **proved** that we had at least several motes, if not a beam, in our own eye—**and during which** we had learnt to realise **the unfairness and venomous falseness** of foreign criticism [as in the *Hamburger Nachrichten*]—**if it be asked whether our press**, fresh from this lesson, **eschewed the bad example, and showed a more generous and impartial spirit to a great power [Russia] fallen on to evil days and evil tongues**, just as we had done [to us]—the answer, I fear, is that **the attitude** of our press towards Russia was **the same in kind** as that of the Continental press towards us, if more sober and moderate **in degree.**(xii-xiii—my emphasis added)*

Not dwelling on bad things

We now come better to see the consequences of all of these above observations and distinctions for Maurice Baring's own modest sense of mission and dedication as a war correspondent in a foreign war:

*Therefore it is perhaps as well for the enlightenment of the purely unprejudiced and inquisitive minds who have no violent bias, who belong to no political or other kind of party, who are affected neither by **Russophobia** or what the Shanghai [China] newspapers call "**Nippomania**," that there should be on either side such things as war-correspondents, **whose only object is to state what they saw and to point out the good as well as the bad side**. Before starting for the war [Russo-Japanese War] I went to the War Office at St. Petersburg to obtain my papers, and had an interview with General Tzelebrovsky. "You will see bad things and good things," he said to me, "as happens in every war, **but do not exclusively dwell on the bad things**." (xiii—my emphasis added)*

The non-existence of any liberty of thought

To reinforce his considered view, Baring then quotes a paradoxical statement by a contemporary writer:

*A great living thinker [G.K. Chesterton himself, perhaps?] once said that **the worst of a free country like England was the non-existence of any liberty of thought**. You could **do** what you liked, but you could **not** express independent opinions **without being labeled** as a faddist, or a pro-Boer, or a bimetallist, or a vegetarian. **I think this is profoundly true**. If one were to state that you do not necessarily see why England should necessarily be the enemy of Russia **one would be labelled a pro-Russian, and it has been repeatedly explained by most newspapers that a pro-Russian is the same thing as a pro-Boer, an enemy of the Empire** [of the British Empire]. (xiv—my emphasis added)*

A comparative estimate

Baring will thus conclude his important and elucidating Preface with a sort of Apology, that is a statement and implied defense of his position and attitude, rendered with a little ironic salt, and with a bit of tongue in cheek:

*For this reason [and to avoid being unjustly labelled], before I begin this short record of my experiences in the Far-East, **I wish to state that**, although I feel no inborn hatred of Russia, **and think**, on the contrary, as an English merchant who had lived forty years in Russia said to me in the train on my way home, that "they are very fine fellows" [i.e., "molodtzy," a very high compliment in Russian]—whatever their faults may be—I **wish to state**, in order to **reassure our rigid guardians of our public morality, the inspired oracles of our national conscience**, that I am neither a pro-Boer **nor even a liberal**, but a mere observer, who, having lived and travelled a certain amount abroad [and possessing an intimate knowledge of Greek, Latin, Russian, French, German, Italian, and Danish!], has been able to form **some sort of comparative***

estimate—however inadequate—of the relative values of foreign notions and insular prejudices. (xiv-xv—my emphasis added)

Maurice Baring's "comparative estimate" of the British and Foreign Press—from his disciplined and cultivated vantage point in 1905—will also, I think, help the contemporary reader and thinker to gain a fresh perspective on the current attitudes and methods of the Mass Media of Social Communication—which are today more technically and psychologically sophisticated (and indeed more sophisticating)—and thereby to have a better sense of proportion in our own truly prudent considerations about the truth of things.

The greatest writer who ever lived

After these comparative insights about the Press—and already knowing, a little, how deeply Maurice Baring cherished the life and writings of Dostoyevsky, and was intimately formed by them and perhaps also led to the Christian Faith more deeply by Dostoyevsky, even before Baring himself somewhat later became a Roman Catholic (on 1 February 1909)—we shall now more fruitfully consider why, in a special sense, he even considered Dostoyevsky to be the greatest writer who ever lived. (If there be enough interest in Maurice Baring's more specific writings on Dostoyevsky's varied texts, to include *Letters from a Dead House*⁴ and *The Brothers Karamazov*—which were, then even in 1905 or still in 1911, so inadequately translated into English, or barely known at all by most educated Englishmen—it may be fitting to offer another appreciative essay on Baring's own great pioneering work of introducing (and thereby illuminating) Russian Literature—also its poetry, and not only Pushkin—into the popular as well as learned, English-speaking world in England and elsewhere.⁵ With it, Baring showed his own magnanimous and unfailingly just approach to the Russian culture, and to Dostoyevsky especially, against the prejudiced mainstream of his own country, England.)

It is now fitting for us to see what, after much deeply absorbed and attentive reading, Maurice Baring himself freshly said about the great Dostoyevsky **in February of 1906** in St. Petersburg, Russia—on the occasion of the anniversary of his death on 24 February 1881:

They are celebrating the 25th anniversary of the death of Dostoyevsky, and this fact has brought to mind, with great vividness, a conversation I had with the officers of the battery at Jen-tzen-tung ["on the Mongolian frontier" (169) and

4 This work constitutes, in Baring's own words, "Dostoyevsky's record of his life in prison in Siberia." (226) In 1906, moreover, Baring also found out from his same Russian friend, a village schoolmaster, that the villagers especially liked this rather dark (but merciful and forgiving) book by Dostoyevsky, and that fact "baffles" the schoolmaster "more than all," to which bafflement Baring himself replies: "Their taste does not to me personally seem to be so baffling. **As for Dostoyevsky's book, I am certain they recognise its great truth, and they feel the sweetness and simplicity of the writer's character, and this 'speaks' to them also.**" (Maurice Baring, *What I Saw in Russia* (London: William Heinemann LTD, 1927), pp. 225-226—my emphasis added) Moreover, as far as I am able to discover, it was only in 1905—while in Manchuria as a war correspondent—that Baring himself first read *The Brothers Karamazov* as well as *Letters from a Dead House*. He read them in Russian—indeed, he even said that he "devoured them"—after a cultivated Russian officer generously allowed Baring to borrow his own Russian-language copies, which he had taken with him into war! O! How much this incident and conjunction signify!

5 In 1910, Maurice Baring first published his book, *Landmarks in Russian Literature*; and in 1914 he deepened his appreciative and critical presentation of Dostoyevski in his complementary book, *An Outline of Russian Literature*, both of which lucid and very accessible works are highly recommended to the reader. After Baring's death in 1945, there was published a later edition of *Landmarks of Russian Literature* (1960) in which a new chapter (Chapter VIII) was added on Russian Poetry, which is itself a reprint of Maurice Baring's earlier Introduction to *The Oxford Book of Russian Verse*. The publisher of the expanded 1960 edition of *Landmarks* had these succinct words to say "About this Book": "**Maurice Baring did more than any other critic of his time to spread the appreciation of Russian letters among English-speaking people.**"

“on the extreme right flank of the Russian army” (178)] last September [1905], and which I have already noted in my diary. (208)⁶

Now Baring will first give the setting of that conversation, and some other atmospheric details of the occasion, thereby also giving us a flavor of deep literary conversations during the trials of war—when the officers, that is, are well formed and cultured as were so many of the Russian officers then:

*We were sitting in the ante-room of the small Chinese house which formed our quarters....We had just finished dinner, and were drinking tea out of pewter cups. Across the courtyard, from the part of the dwelling where the Chinese herded together, we could hear the monotonous song of a Chinaman or a Mongol **singing** over and over to himself the same strophe, **which rose by the intervals of a scale more subtle than ours** and sank again **to die away in the vibrations of one prolonged note**, to the accompaniment of a **single-string** instrument. **The conversation had languished**. Somebody was absorbed in patience, **we were talking of books and novels in a vague, desultory fashion**, when **suddenly**, Hlyebnikov, **a young Cossack officer**, said: “**Who is the greatest writer in the world?**” (208-209—my emphasis added)*

There is one writer greater than them all

Then begins an initially indefinite and indistinct conversation, but which soon became an intense and even sharp exchange of opinions among the interlocutors—especially two of them:

Vague answers [to the Cossack's question] were made as to the comparative merits of Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, and Molière; but Hlyebnikov impatiently waved all this talk aside. Then turning to me he said: “He [Baring] knows; there is one writer greater than them all, and that is Dostoyevsky.” (209)

The tension starts to arise—and the challenge—but “contrast doth clarify the mind”:

“Dostoyevsky!” said the doctor [Glinka, by name]. “Dostoyevsky's work is like a clinical laboratory or a dissecting-room. There is no sore spot in the human soul into which he does not poke his dirty finger. His characters are either mad or abnormal [except, perhaps, for the women, who are so often pure?]. His books are those of a madman, and can only be appreciated by people who are half mad themselves.” (209)

The greatest consolation to poor humanity

Baring's immediately following narrative continues to surprise us:

The young Cossack officer did not bother to discuss the question. He

⁶ Page numbers to *What I Saw in Russia* will again be in parentheses in the text above, referring to the already-cited 1927 edition.” The conversation referred to (176) took place on 19 September 1905, with Hlyebnikov and with the “vehemently disagreeing” and skeptical, even apodictic Medical Doctor, whose name is Glinka. On the verge of an impending, greater altercation, as Baring reports, “Hlyebnikov [a Trans-Baikal Cossack Officer] went out of the room in disgust.” (176)

went out into the night in disgust. We continued the argument for a short time. “There is not a single character,” said the doctor, “in all Dostoyevsky’s books who is normal.” **The doctor was a cultivated man,** and seeing that we differed, we agreed to differ and we talked of other things; **but I was left wondering why Hlyebnikov was so convinced that Dostoyevsky was the greatest of all writers, and why he knew I should agree with him.** I have been thinking this over ever since, **and in a sense I do agree with Hlyebnikov. I think that Dostoyevsky is the greatest writer that has ever lived, if by a great writer is meant a man whose work, message, or whatever you call it, can do the greatest good, can afford the greatest consolation to poor humanity.** (209-210—my emphasis added)

Baring now proceeds to make many useful differentiations about literature and writers, and he wears his learning lightly, as always. For, he was widely read also in the literature of Western Civilization, and had read most of the author’s works in their original languages, to include the ancient languages of Greek and Latin. But, for ease of assimilation of Baring’s main insights, especially for those who may not have recently read these other foreign authors, I shall sometimes omit, when possible, the names he is specifically contrasting or comparing favorably with Dostoyevsky:

*If we [on the contrary] mean by the greatest writer the greatest **artist**, the most powerful **magician**, who can bid us soar like Shelley into the seventh heaven of **light and melody**; or submerge us beneath heavy seas **until we drown with pleasure**; or **set all the fibres** of our associations and our aesthetic appreciation **vibrating with incommunicable rapture** by the magic of wonderful phrases like Virgil or Keats; **or strike our very heart with a divine sword** like Sappho, Catullus, Heine, or Burns; **or ravish us by the blend of pathos and nobility of purpose** with faultless diction like Leopardi, Gray, and Racine; **or bid us understand and feel the whole burden of mankind in a few simple words** like the Greeks or Goethe; **or evoke for us the whole pageant of life** like Shakespeare to the sound of Renaissance flutes, **or all Heaven and Hell like Dante, by “thoughts that breathe and words that burn.”** If we are thinking of all these miraculous achievements when we say a great writer or the greatest writer, **then** we must not name Dostoyevsky. Dostoyevsky is not of these. (210—my emphasis added)*

The nearest approach to the supreme message of comfort

We shall now be allowed to consider a few of Dostoyevsky’s weaknesses as a writer of novels. In this context, Baring will explain his meaning a little more, but then offer his adversative additions and *a fortiori* clarifications:

*In his own province, that of the novelist, he is a mere workman, a mere craftsman, one of the worst, inferior to any French or English ephemeral writer of the day you like to mention. **But, on the other hand, if we mean by a great writer a man who has given to mankind an inestimable boon, a priceless gift, a consolation, a help in life, which nothing can equal or replace, then Dostoyevsky is a great writer, perhaps the greatest writer that has ever lived.** I mean that **if** the Holy Scriptures were destroyed and no trace were left of them in the world, **the books where mankind**, bereft of its Divine and*

inestimable treasure, would find the nearest approach to the supreme message of comfort would be the books of Dostoyevsky. (210-211—my emphasis added)

Not wanting to dilute the impact and deep implications of this sincere and well-informed tribute, it is good for us also to see Baring's candid integrity, conveyed in his further reservations:

*Dostoyevsky is **not** an artist; his stories and his books are put together and shaped **anyhow**. The surroundings and the circumstances in which he places his characters are fantastic and impossible to the verge of absurdity; **yet they are vivid in a way no other characters are vivid, and alive, not only so that we perceive and recognise their outward appearance, but so that we know the innermost corners of their souls**. His characters, it is said, are abnormal. One of his principal figures [Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*] is a murderer who kills an old woman from ambition to be like Napoleon, and put himself above the law; another is a victim of epileptic fits [especially Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot*, but also Smerdyakov in *The Brothers Karamazov*]. **But the fact should be borne in mind that absolutely normal people, like absolutely happy nations, have no history; that since the whole of humanity is suffering and groaning beneath the same burden of life, the people who in literature are 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 who are thus able to receive and to record the deepest and most varied impressions**. And in the same way as Job and David are more important to humanity than George I. or Louis-Philippe, so are Hamlet and Falstaff more important than [Henry Fielding's] Tom Jones or [“F. Anstey” Guthrie's] Mr. Bultitude [the latter two being figures from “a comic epic in prose” and a comic novel, respectively]. **And the reason of this** is not because Hamlet and Falstaff are abnormal—although compared with Tom Jones they are abnormal—but **because they are human: more profoundly human and more widely human**. (211-212—my emphasis added)*

Pity and love

Passing over Maurice Baring's more detailed discussion of Hamlet and Falstaff, in contradistinction to Tom Jones and Mr. Bultitude, we gradually come back to his consideration of the Russian novelist and his fictional characters. Baring's rising and cascading eloquence becomes now, not only long-flowing, but also intense—and we are the better for it:

*Every human being recognises in himself something of Hamlet and something of Falstaff [in their “multiplicity and many-sidedness” (212)];...[thus,] **when he hears Hamlet or Falstaff** [with each having shown “the profound humanity of the[ir] character” (212)] **philosophising or making jokes on the riddle of life**, he is suddenly made conscious that he has gone through the same process himself in the same way.*

So it is with Dostoyevsky**. Dostoyevsky's characters are mostly abnormal, **but** it is **in** their very abnormality **that we recognise** their profound and poignant humanity and a thousand human traits that we ourselves share. **And in showing humanity at its acutest, at its intensest pitch of suffering, at

the soul's lowest depth of degradation or highest summit of aspiration, he makes us feel his comprehension, pity, and love for everything that is in us, so that we feel that there is nothing which we could think or experience—no sensation, no hope, no ambition, no despair, no disappointment, no regret, no greatness, no meanness—that he would not understand; no wound, no sore for which he would not have just the very balm and medicine we need. Pity and love are the chief elements of the work of Dostoyevsky—pity such as King Lear felt on the heath; and just as the terrible circumstances in which King Lear raves and wanders make his pity all the greater and more poignant in its pathos, so do the fantastic, nightmarish circumstances in which Dostoyevsky's characters live make their humanity more poignant, their love more lovable, their pity more piteous. (212-213—my emphasis added)

Seeing the soul of goodness

Returning, after this sincere and elucidating intensity, to some further nuanced qualifications, Baring says:

*A great writer should see “life steadily and see life whole.” Dostoyevsky 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.** He shrinks from nothing. **He sees the “soul of goodness in things evil”—not exclusively the evil, like [the French novelist, Émile] Zola; nor does he evade the evil, like many of our [English] writers. He sees and pities it [i.e. the evil]. And this is why his work is great. He writes about the saddest things that can happen—the most melancholy, the most hopeless, the most terrible things in the world—but his books do not leave us with a feeling of despair; on the contrary, his own “sweet reasonableness,” the **pity and love with which they are filled are like a balm** [a fragrant, soothing, healing ointment]. **We are left with a belief in some great, inscrutable goodness, and his books act upon us as once his conversation did on a fellow-prisoner whom he met on the way to Siberia. The man was on the verge of suicide; but after Dostoyevsky had talked to him for an hour—we may be sure that there was no sermonising in that talk—he felt able to go on, to live even with penal servitude before him. On some people, Dostoyevsky's books act in just this way, and it is, therefore, not odd that they think him the greatest of all writers.** (213-214—my emphasis added)***

A channel of Grace

Such cumulative and concentrated words (less than six pages) about the Balm of Dostoyevsky—written almost three years before Baring's own grateful reception into the Roman Catholic Church, on 1 February 1909, at Brompton Oratory in London—convince us that truly Dostoyevsky was an External Channel of Grace to Baring, as was Baring's invariantly moving, sacred experiences in Russia with the Russian Orthodox Church, and not only in and through their beautiful Liturgy, but also the manifestations of their broader sacramental culture among the faithful people of Russia, to include the ceremony of the blessing of bells, even of a newly forged, soon-to-be consecrated bell in a little Russian village.

As Baring came to see his own vocation and implied mission to be a fair and impartial war correspondent, so, also, he came to see Dostoyevsky's own capacious and magnanimous heart and distinctive ethos: **seeing “the soul of goodness in things evil”—not exclusively the evil”** (213). Yes, even in modern war. Ever after the inciters “beat the big drum and appeal to St. Jingo.”⁷

CODA

I hate political parties

On 5 January 1906, while still in Moscow, Baring makes an unexpectedly revealing remark about his own desire for retaining a fresh independence of reflection, and not being, rather, in the constricting trammels or “mind-forged manacles” of an ideology, as he had also earlier said, in 1905, about his moral obligation to render impartial reporting and to be a fair witness as a war correspondent:

*From having had much conversation [in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and elsewhere] with people who defend the revolutionaries [of the Social Democratic or Menshevik Revolution] with what seems to me **nonsensical exaggeration, I feel a wave of reaction coming over me** [as earlier happened to Dostoyevsky, too]. I can never resist **the subtle spirit of contradiction when I am with people who belong to a party, and hear them express party feeling in unmeasured and exaggerated terms.** If I am with violent conservatives a subtle spirit of Liberalism rises within me, and vice versa. **Besides, I hate political parties.** (207—my emphasis added)*

These are strong words coming from the magnanimous Maurice Baring, but they come, I believe, from the depths of his sincerity and principled convictions. He again shows himself forthrightly consistent in his integrity. Like Dostoyevsky, he also knows that it is “hard to hold the Natural Man down”—and Baring's close friend, Hilaire Belloc, would winsomely agree!

DEDICATION

The author wishes to dedicate this little essay to Gary Potter and Brother Andre Marie, M.I.C.M., two Catholic friends of many years, who also cherish Fyodor Dostoyevsky and have recently been reading him more widely and deeply than I.

Having first met Gary Potter forty years ago, in 1973, while he was a staff writer with *Triumph Magazine*, I came quickly also to admire his character, and his reliable presentation of truth in his eloquent writings, and not only as a journalist and Catholic “foreign correspondent” *in partibus infidelium*. Meeting Brother Andre Marie some twenty years later, first in 1993, and at a Catholic Conference with Joe Sobran in Southern New Jersey, I have come to be closer and closer with him over these years, and to see the good and generous fruits of his deep formation under his beloved Mentor, Brother Francis Maluf (d. 2009), capaciously enabling him now to be the versatile Prior of his Order.

May they both, as well as all of us, come more and more to appreciate Maurice Baring's own deeply differentiated understanding of Dostoyevsky, as well as to apply Maurice Baring's clear and sound 1905 perceptions of certain abiding sophistic dangers which involve the abuse of language

⁷ Maurice Baring, *With the Russians in Manchuria* (1905), p. 204.

and the abuse of power. May we thus better employ his “searchlight insights”—especially so today, over a century later—in our fair examination of the powerful, and too-often-prevaricating, print and electronic Media of Social and Inter-Cultural Communication, with a worthy sustained attentiveness to their flagitious “Perception Management.” That is to say, to their deliberate, demoralizing, trust-breaking deceptions.

© 2013 Robert D. Hickson